

“Who Are You With?”  
June 24, 2018 (Fifth Sunday After Pentecost)  
Mark 4: 35-41  
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Storms. Now this is something we all know something about. Sometimes it takes a lot of energy and imagining to place ourselves in the text, trying to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples or others in the story. But today I don't have to ask you to imagine very far to put yourselves where the disciples find themselves—in the middle of a raging storm. From Rita to Harvey, Texas is no distant stranger to hurricane force and other disasters. And besides environmental storms such as hurricanes, earthquakes, chemical disasters, pollution and global warming...we know too well about other storms: personal storms such as cancer, divorce, loss, spiritual doubts, addiction, debt; societal storms such as gun violence, family separation, child abuse and neglect, injustice and institutionalized racism and sexism; and international storms such as nuclear power struggles, war, terrorism, human trafficking. Just look again at the back of your order of worship. And pay attention to headlines and stories in the news today. Storms...everywhere.

So, who are you with in the storms? This is my question for us today as a church. And it was very much the question for the disciples in our text today. To begin, like the disciples so long ago, we must begin with Jesus—who is this Jesus, whose boat we have entered?...who is this that “even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41)

When this story in Mark 4 begins, Jesus has been teaching and preaching to crowds all day—the crowds were so large that he got into a boat a little distance from the shore and the masses gathered along the banks to listen. When evening came, Jesus somewhat abruptly tells the disciples that he wants to cross the sea. Notice, heading across the water without going to shore to prepare first or to get any food or supplies wasn't any of the disciples' idea, it was Jesus'. While in the boat, too far to just turn back, a fierce and abrupt storm began raging. And on top of that, getting into this mess in the first place was the direct result of following Jesus' request. Like it or not, following Jesus doesn't mean that we won't encounter storms, and this Jesus that we follow often heads straight into situations that will likely erupt into category 5 storms.

In other words, God doesn't avoid storms at all. Any gospel claim otherwise is not the true gospel of Christ. In fact, the moment Jesus steps out of the boat when they reach the other side he is immediately approached by the demon possessed man called Legion that lived in the tombs and could not be restrained by shackles or chains. Remember...Jesus was resolute about crossing the sea—he had demons to address, not to run from. When we hold hands at the end of the service and start the benediction by saying “hold on tight” this partially why—life is full of storms as it is, and on top of that, as a church, Christ bids us right into the midst of them when we would rather stay safely ashore.

Now to another reality about Jesus—Not only does he sleep when the boat is gently rocking him like a mother's arms, the disciples find Jesus *still* sleeping while water is pouring into their boat from all sides with great force, so they shout over the sound of the wind and the crashing water: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” This is where Jesus often disappoints us on the journey. We struggle at this point because Jesus does not operate as we expect or desire. God, even when in human form, does not flinch in the storm and doesn't offer the immediate comfort or reassurance of his presence that we want. The disciples, like we often do, feel that this sleeping Jesus is distant...even when he's just right there, and that this distance is evidence of a lack of God's care. In his book: *Facing Fear with Faith*, Samuel Wells says, “I'll tell you what I think the real obstacle to faith is. It's more in the heart than the head. Jesus seems so far away. That's it” (p. 158).

In addition, I think their agitated and desperate question “Do you not care that we are perishing” can just as easily be read to include Jesus in the “we are perishing,” not just themselves. Yes, they are doubting Jesus' care for them, but they are also doing what many of us do when we are in the midst of life's storms and when we are going up against systems and injustices, the powers and principalities and the threat of death—we grow so discouraged and beaten down that despite our best efforts and the faith we can muster, we start worrying that God is sinking too or that God's way will not prevail in the end—perhaps wondering if God too is giving up, losing heart, or losing the fight. Not only were the disciples sinking...they were watching Jesus, the one that they believed could save their people, go down too. All seemed lost, and Jesus seemed to be content just letting it happen without a fight.

So when Jesus responds to them, “why are you afraid, have you still no faith?” and then rebukes the wind and calms the waves with his words to bring utter peace, he is addressing these big faith questions—will God prevail against darkness and despair...forces of death and chaos? Does God care even when God seems to be distant and the storms are raging without any sign of letting up? In Jesus, the answer to both of these are a resounding YES.

So part of recognizing that who we are with when we are following Jesus is a God that does not panic and lose heart easily or quickly. God is in the midst of the storms, and is running a marathon, not sprinting. This is long-haul presence, not quick-fix presence. Jesus’ sleeping or distance is not symbolic of God’s lack of care or God’s abandonment of God’s character or mission...rather it points to God’s confidence in the power of light over darkness, order over chaos, love over hate. Christ can rest in the midst of the storm because he knows that God’s power is at work and can subdue whatever chaos threatens. While it may seem that all is lost...God’s boat is not going to sink! When we hold on and wait, we, like those early disciples, come to see God boldly saying “I care” with no ambiguity or mixed messages. Jesus doesn’t have “I really don’t care” on his tunic while accompanying those in the storm. As Samuel Wells puts it “Jesus is God saying to each one of us, “your faith in me can be tentative, difficult, and fragile as may be, but my faith in you will never waver, not for one single second” (*Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear With Faith*, p. 166).

What seemed like the worst fear imaginable for the disciples quickly shriveled in the face of the unparalleled power of God demonstrated in Christ when he uttered only a few sounds and all became still and quiet. Fear of storms turned quickly into awe, fear, and reverence for the all-powerful God who enters, tames, and goes with us in the rough waters.

Now what about who you are with in the storms besides Jesus?

If you pick up almost any commentary about this passage, you will find the disciples getting a very bad grade on their report card in this passage. Their faith is often characterized as “dull.” The gospel of Mark does frequently reveal the limitations of the disciples’ faith as they attempt to grasp this God incarnate, but the book of Mark is also adamant that no one can truly grasp the nature of Christ’s messiah ship until after the cross.

I don't believe Mark wants us to distance ourselves from the disciples here...he is prodding us to keep reading so that we too will discover who Jesus is in full. We, like the disciples, cannot obtain true faith without going through storms and the cross with Jesus, and without their testimony, we would be sunk already! So I don't find the disciples' faith to be dull at all—and there's hardly anything dull about their confrontation of Jesus! The dramatic tension is ripe in this story, as they daringly rebuke Jesus, who turns out to be able to rebuke even nature itself. Instead, I am so grateful for the model and example that the disciples set for us in this story. What I appreciate about them the most is that while they are panicking, they do so *together*. They share their fears openly and honestly with one another. With all that crashing and flooding, you know they pulled each other up, kept each other in the boat, and accompanied one another in the moments that they felt uncertain about God. And it is together that they muster the courage to confront Jesus, and together they got to witness his awesome care and his awesome power.

Maybe God even hopes we will disturb him...perhaps it was not their sharp words that led to Jesus' response "do you still have no faith?" as much as the fact that they waited longer than necessary to wake him up. Think about the personal, societal, and international storms I mentioned earlier...how often do we wait too long to ask for God's help or to really open our eyes and acknowledge the problems around us, the needs of others, and the severity of the storms that we are in or are threatening others around us? So Jesus challenges them and pushes back on their limited perspective...but more in the way of correcting and re-aligning them. If you've ever had your back adjusted by a chiropractor, you know it isn't exactly pleasant in the moment, but is sure does pay off later. Even though their faith was faltering, it was the kind of faith Christ can work with. Think about it, if Jesus was really that upset with them, he could have just let them drown and walked across the water to another boat and chosen 12 new disciples. No, Jesus did not reject them...he chose them, over and over again, just like he chooses us and continues to say, "follow me." And God gives us companions for the journey, knowing that we need others when the storms are at their worst and when we would otherwise lose heart or lose our faith. This is what the church is and who the church is called to be. Faith is something we only fully learn, re-learn, and practice *together*.

In 2005 when hurricane Rita left Nacogdoches without power for days and overwhelmed with people fleeing South Texas, Austin Heights was a boat revealing the awesome grace and peace of Christ in the storm.

Several of you came and ate, slept, and encouraged each other here. Meanwhile, across the street, the gas station became a battleship. One man flaunted his guns at anyone who dared try and keep him from getting gas. The contrast cannot be overstated. For this man, his only security was in *guns*, for the church is was in *gathering*. For this man it was *me against you*, at the church is was *me with you*, for the man it was *I'm on my own* in this storm, for the church it was *God is with us*. Before we judge this man and his alternative way too harshly, let us remember that any of us could become this man in isolated desperation without the accompaniment of the people of God, for there is a storm for each of us that could be our undoing. Each of us handle different kinds of storms better or worse, and that is why together we keep each other on the path of faith. We participate in a greater faith—the faith of the church—when we combine our fragile, individual faiths into one, unified faith that dares to love against the odds and in times of darkness and confusion dares to wake up Jesus and then stand in awe.

So let me ask you, who are you with in the storms? Who helps you hold on, stay in the boat, and who helps you voice your deepest doubts, fears, and anger to God? If you don't have anyone come to mind, I urge you to look at the persons sitting next to you right now. There...you need not look any further.

Another interesting detail that only Mark's gospel includes in reporting this event is that when Jesus and the disciples set out to cross the sea, "other boats were with him" (Mark 4:36b). This detail is often overlooked or passed over, but I think it is of vital importance, especially if we are going to truly face the big storms out there without losing heart, getting isolated, or becoming burned out, to ask: who are those other boats in the storms with us?

John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, essentially asked this question in his spiritual quest. Wesley didn't always have the kind of faith that starts denominations. He struggled for a long time with faith questions, doubts, and didn't really put his trust in Christ until after several encounters with a small group of Protestants called the Moravians, whom he often called "the Germans." They were along with the many other English passengers on his 1736 seaward journey to America. While in reality they were on the same ship, in practice and attitude it was as if the two groups were on different ships. The contrast between John's fellow Englishmen and the Moravians was dramatic from the beginning.

He observed that they accepted...even signed up...for duties of service on the ship that none of his English companions would accept. When the Moravians were treated harshly or unfairly, he witnessed that they did not complain or retaliate. He was so impressed that he began practically studying them...watching them to see if they really had the kind of faith that he was looking for, faith that could “deliver them from fear” as he worded it. In his journal, he wrote about Sunday January 25, 1736. In his curious observation, he joined them for Sunday service at 7. They had just begun their worship service, and in the midst of their opening psalm, which would be like our call to worship, he wrote “the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up.”

(<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.html> ). The English aboard began screaming in such a way that John called it a “terrible scream.” And that is when it started on...calm, quiet, steady singing. The Moravians kept singing through the storm, never breaking their peaceful cadence of worship through a 5 hour storm. Here were two groups, both traveling to the same destination side by side. John paid attention to this “other boat” if you will, and it became what Methodists call “a little-known big influence on John Wesley” (umc.org).

Last week while attending the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship gathering in Dallas, I was encouraged and reminded how many other churches are crossing the turbulent seas of our times too and following Jesus’ lead in peacemaking. Last Sunday when Stephen Reeves was here he spoke about and pointed us to resources about what other churches are doing about Payday Lending, a predatory enterprise that takes advantage of the working poor and minorities. Kyle, Jane and I got to hear about the many different ways that other congregations similar to ours, some bigger and some smaller, are involved in multi-faceted social justice efforts, outreach to refugees and immigrants, racial reconciliation, and ensuring religious liberty for all people and all faiths in our country. The sea may be turbulent, but at least some of the waves are also due in part to the many other Christians and fellow seekers of peace and justice that stir the water in another direction. Austin Heights, we are not alone!

So being a *people* of faith in storms means that we put our trust in Jesus who is in the very midst of the storms and calls us to come alongside him...not just to save us, but to complete the work of cosmic peace-making.

It also means that we don't try and face the storms of life alone—but instead surround ourselves with the body of Christ, the church, who help us to stay in the boat when we feel like jumping out, to call out to Jesus, even in our despair and anger and doubt, who hold us up or hang out with us when we are in the midst of waiting, hurting, and confusion, and who remind us that it is not our fight alone...but that we are a part of *God's work* to bring peace. Finally, it is to learn to look out beyond our small boat and to see that there are many others out there...many that are battling the same storms that we are and could use some support or encouragement, and that can lend us the same. Sometimes these are brother and sisters of another religion or nationality that may have different beliefs or ideas, but that too are striving for peace and hope.

My closing prayer for us are words from Paul Duke and Grady Nutt's hymn (1981), *We, O God, Unite Our Voices*, which we will sing in full together as our closing hymn:

*“Not our choice the wind's direction, unforeseen the calm or gale.*

*Thy great ocean swells before us, and our ship seems small and frail.*

*Hands beneath us, arms around us, and, above, Thy shining face.*

*Praise for saints whose love has stirred us, friends who taught our hearts to sing,*

*From their laughter, love, and anguish, hope will never cease to ring.*

*With one spirit let us labor toward the bright horizon far.”*

Amen.