

Sermon – June 20, 2021
“Why are you afraid?”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Mark 4:35-41

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Have you ever been afraid? Not just startled or shocked as when we watch a horror movie or someone jumps out unexpectedly. I am asking about the fear that comes when we realize our situation is dire, that we might die and be in paradise with Jesus. Have we experienced the fear that comes when our life situation suddenly changes and we go from joyful living in what we might think is abundant life, to a situation that is beyond our control and opens our mind to the realization that without divine aid our life on earth will end? This is not the fear that comes when some close call has our life flash before our eyes, but the fear that builds when we have more than an instant to understand our situation and anticipate the outcome of events that surround us. Many of us will be able to identify such moments in our lives or the life of a loved one. Let's look at the experience of the disciples and Jesus as they cross the Sea of Galilee and encounter a great windstorm.

Let me help place this boat trip with Jesus in its context. On this same day, Jesus has been teaching the crowds with parables. The list of parables starts with the teaching that a lamp is not made to be placed under a bushel basket but to shine its light into the darkness. Jesus has also

taught the crowds that the seed sown in the earth grows and matures abundantly, producing grain. And he has also introduced the idea that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, growing into a large plant that can provide a place for birds of the air to nest. Jesus has explained these parables to his disciples, giving them new revelation about who he is and insight into his kingdom. Even though Jesus explains the parables to his disciples, the parables alone do not provide a clear, complete revelation of who Jesus is. There is more that his disciples need to know. And so, at the end of this busy day, while Jesus is still in the boat from which he has been teaching the crowd, he asks those in the boat with him to cross the lake. We should catch from the text that those with Jesus take no time to seek provisions or even a change of clothes for their journey. They simply obey Jesus and head out on the Sea of Galilee.

A point of background we should have to help us understand the events of this journey is that the Sea of Galilee is somewhat of a bowl-shaped lake with tall, steep sides. The bowl shape when mixed with the sun's heating of the land around the lake often results in violent windstorms. The storms tend to occur more frequently during the day and this contributes to night time being the preferred time to be out on the sea, allowing the fishermen to avoid these sudden storms. Even with this precaution, seasoned fishermen will have encountered these storms and go to sea prepared to navigate them. I understand the Chesapeake Bay has its own storm characteristics and will build large waves very quickly in the thunderstorms that occur over it. Like the fisherman of the Sea of Galilee, those who fish the bay are also attuned to the coming of such storms and prepared to weather the storms that occur on the water.

I also want to point out the level of detail included in this account about the storm. Notice some of the details again: it is evening as they leave, the crowds are left behind, they go without a trip to their homes for dinner or provisions, there are other boats on this trip, and the windstorm is not just a windstorm but is a great windstorm, a detail that would have to come from one who had experienced a range of windstorms and knew this one to be greater than the norm. The narrator also tells us that Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the stern. These are the details that come from someone who was present, and they lead us to the idea that this account has been shared by an eyewitness, one who was on this journey with Jesus and experienced the events, and every detail that they encountered was locked into their memory. These details lead us to think this is not just a story to make a point, but a memory from someone who was present.

Now we have set the stage for the trip. Those in the boat obey Jesus and put out to sea. All is well. Jesus goes to sleep, tired from the day or perhaps trusting in God and peacefully resting. The wind rises quickly, catching the experienced fisherman in this group off guard. This tells us this is an exceptional storm. Within moments of the arrival of the violent winds, the boat is being filled with water from the crashing waves of a sea rapidly stirred up by the force of a great wind. Those on the boat recognize almost in the same instant that they are in a situation that has as its end point the boat sinking and them trying to survive in the churning water. They have come to that moment when they realize their lives are about to end unless their situation is changed immediately. Without help they have realized the boat will sink and they will be in the water. They need every hand to help and as they look around in desperation, they see Jesus asleep in the stern on the cushion still peacefully resting. They are afraid, afraid unto death, and the words that spring from them all to Jesus are unusually harsh for disciples to their master. Mark does not soften their words as the other Gospel writers do when they write of this event on the sea. Mark writes as if he were there and spoke the words of desperation to Jesus, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Now the account that has been so full of details does not tell us that Jesus gets up, looks around, calmly assesses the situation, holds out his hand, prays to God for strength, or does anything else to claim power over the elements. Mark tells us that Jesus wakes up, rebukes the wind, and speaks to the sea, saying, “Peace! Be still!” I have heard the words “Peace! Be still!” all of my life, but John Wesley, among many others who write about this event, point out that the words are closer to “cease” and “be gagged.” The point is that when Jesus speaks the word, the wind stops and the sea becomes dead calm. In fact, it is a great calm. Just as there was once a great chaotic sea, now with Jesus’ word there is suddenly peace. I have a mental picture of this moment that follows Jesus’ speaking. There is Jesus in the stern still on the cushion looking at the disciples who are all around the boat. Some are holding bailing devices, some are holding lines for the sails, some are holding oars, but all are standing in a water-filled boat that needs only one more wave to sink it, and all in the boat are looking back at Jesus. They are frozen in time as their minds try to process what has just happened. The next wave, the one that would have sent the boat to the bottom of the sea, the very wave that had already crested and was beginning to break over the side, is gone. The wind is quiet. And they all are still full of fear and looking at Jesus. Jesus asks them “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The water drips

from clothes and skin into the still water of the boat from those looking at Jesus. Among those looking at Jesus are seasoned fishermen who have weathered storms before and they know how storms come and how long it takes for them to leave. They know how the wind will die out slowly and the waves are stirred for a very long time after the winds of a storm have stirred the water. It takes time for the chaos such wind brings to settle, but in an instant, following Jesus' word, it is calm, dead calm. They know something has happened that they have never witnessed before, and as they look at Jesus, their fear changes to awe. They have been asked where their faith is by Jesus, and their question for each other is "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey?" Indeed, who can speak and the chaos of creation is turned into calm? Who can speak and calm a violent wind? Who can speak and change one's fear of death into the awe of being in the presence of a man whose word controls the wind and the sea? Who is this teacher they have with them in the boat? Only God, the creator who spoke and creation came out of chaos, can command the wind and sea. Who is this man in the boat with them? Who is this teacher that even the wind and the sea obey when he speaks? Can a man be God? Mark, in his Gospel, does not answer these questions directly. He leaves his readers with this question and moves on to another scene that happens on the other side of the sea where this same man will drive out a legion of demons with a command. Jesus' action on the sea is one of many revelations that opens the disciples' understanding of who Jesus is. It will take more of these revelations for them to begin to understand and conclude that Jesus, this man, this healer, this teacher, is God in the flesh. These same men who have witnessed divine power at work through Jesus will also be witnesses to his dying on the cross. This man who without prayer or appeal to God stilled the storm at sea, will without a word die on the cross, and as they watch, they will again ask, "Who is this?" and "Why does he not speak and live?" It will take the empty tomb, a resurrected Jesus, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for them to begin to form answers to their questions. This is a divine man who is sent from the one true God. This is Jesus who has saved us not from every chaotic situation that will come into our lives, but has saved us from eternal death and separation from God.

One of the first questions we need to address as we step back from this account is "Should we cry out to Jesus for help when our lives are turned from the calm way we expect and we find our fear growing unto death in a sudden, violent storm?" Yes, we should, with all of our heart, soul, and strength. You see, as it says in the words of a recent contemporary song, "He

can.” And I believe that if our cry is consistent with God’s will, Jesus can and will act on our behalf. And the more I pray for Jesus to intercede on behalf of those in the middle of great storms, the more I am convinced that there are at least two answers from Jesus to such prayers. One is “Yes, I will still the storm and restore what you have lost.” and the other is “No, I will not still the storm, but I will be present with you and give you the strength to endure.” It is easy to have faith in Jesus when everything in our life is calm and all is right and comfortable as we expect. When there is not an urgent need in our lives, we can find faith in God to deliver us from what may come. We think we have strong faith and can weather any storm. But there are no stormless seas. Storms will come into our lives and we will look for Jesus and cry out to him to care that we are perishing. But, do not forget when our lives are suddenly caught up in the terror of a great storm and we cry out for Jesus to care that we are perishing, that Jesus has already saved us and restored us to eternal life with God the Father. We want to be those who already have and live in assurance that Jesus has set us free from the bondage of sin and death. We are those who have Jesus in our boats. We already have an answer to our cry even before we look around the boat in fear for Jesus to cry out to him for help. We rest in the knowledge that Jesus is with us and has already given us the gift of life eternal reconciled to the Father. No storm we encounter can change what Jesus has done for us. No storm can separate us from the love of God. Though the sea may rage, we are safe and secure in the everlasting arms of Jesus, our savior.

We should be clear that Mark’s account of the storm at sea is not about Jesus stilling the storms in our lives. What this account is about is giving those with Jesus in the boat, and we who read Mark’s Gospel, a partial answer to who Jesus is, one who speaks the word and the wind and the waves obey. Mark is using this windstorm, the parables, and the actions of Jesus that follow in this Gospel to reveal to us who Jesus is, the Messiah, our savior, if we will believe in him. If we look back in history, we will find the church using this image of a boat being tossed on the waves as an image of the church in the world. The small boat we will find on stained glass windows represents the church tossed about in the world by persecutions and temptations, a small boat that those who are on board trust that, come what may into the life of the church, Jesus has already stilled and provided a calm that is eternal for them. With Jesus in the boat in the midst of the chaos of wind and wave, there is nothing to fear.

We today are the church tossed about as a small boat on the chaotic waves stirred up by the winds of strife that rise suddenly from the world around us. We have been in the storms of pandemic. We witness the rising waves of sinful behavior of those in the world, waves that crash into our little boat, and we also seem to be close to sinking in this chaotic world. We also, like the disciples, are looking to Jesus as if he has gone to sleep in the stern of our little boat that is our church. We in the midst of the storms are asking, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” We long to hear Jesus speak to the storm and bring calm stability and holiness again to our lives and the sea our boat travels, but we also have confidence that Jesus has already saved us from the great storm of sin and death and will bring his boat, the church, into the kingdom of God. We need to be those in this little boat who are looking to Jesus and crying out to him on behalf of those who are lost in the waves and the wind of this chaotic, sinful world. We are to be those who are looking not in fear at the crashing waves but are looking into the waves for those who are lost, those who do not have the confidence of salvation, those without the promise of eternity with Jesus. As we look, we are to be those who are seeking to pull the lost into this boat in which we journey with Jesus in the midst of the storm, so that they also may come to salvation. Are we afraid of the storms that seem to threaten our boat or are we filled with faith and trusting in Jesus and courageously reaching out to the lost?

Pray with me: Lord, come and do a new work in us. Let us be transformed by this glimpse of one who speaks and the storm is stilled. Lord, open our eyes to see not the crashing waves but instead to see those lost in the storms of life and to welcome them into the boat we enjoy with you. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Take away our fear and calm the storms in our lives and if not, give us joy to endure. Amen.