

Faith Through The Storm

Mark 4:35-41

June 21, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel describes the familiar story about Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee. But this is not when Jesus walked on water. That comes later. And my sermon will be shorter today because when I finish I will ask (James DeDeaux) (Patty Hourin) to come up and share the results of our recent Vestry retreat, and some plans and needs for the future.

But first, today is Father's Day, when we honor and recognize the men in our lives who were examples for us and helped set us on the paths to where we are today. Someone once said that Father's Day is a lot like Mother's Day, except the presents don't cost as much.

I'm reminded of the story of an elderly man in Los Angeles who called his son in New York and said, "I want you to know that your mother and I are getting a divorce. Call your sister in Chicago and tell her." The son immediately called his sister, and they both agreed they had to do something. The daughter called the father and told him that she and her brother would be arriving the next day. The father hung up the phone, winked at his wife, and said, "Okay, honey, the kids are coming for Father's Day, and paying their own expenses."

Today's Gospel describes another mode of transportation, a boat trip across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had been teaching the crowds all day on the Jewish side of the sea, and when evening came he told the disciples they all should go over to the other side.

And we should recognize that whenever Jesus told the disciples they should go somewhere, something important usually followed. This was to be no exception. The other side was enemy territory, so to speak. It was the land of the Gentiles, and this trip could have been the first indication that Jesus' ministry would extend beyond the Jews to all people. In coming weeks we will hear several important biblical stories about Jesus when he was on that other side.

But first, Jesus and the disciples had to get there. They had to cross the sea. And we should know that the Sea of Galilee is no ordinary body of water. It is over six hundred feet below sea level. It's long and narrow, with steep cliffs at the southern end that act as a funnel for the wind. And it's susceptible to sudden violent storms.

II.

Well, we know what happened. Sure enough, a storm came up, and the disciples began to worry. And remember that several of the disciples were fishermen who were familiar with the Sea of Galilee and its weather patterns. They had seen storms before and were used to unusual weather. So for them to be concerned, it must have been a serious storm.

But Jesus was sacked out! Snoozing in the back of the boat. He didn't seem worried about anything. The disciples, however, seemed a little irritated. As we will see, they were allowing their fears to overcome their faith.

So they woke him and spoke to him in an accusing way. They suggested that he was unconcerned about what happened to them. "Teacher," they said, "Don't you care if we drown?"

And to digress for a minute, isn't that an echo of millions of prayers and pleas and cries of anguish over the last twenty centuries. "God, where are you, don't you care."

When we consider the scope of human suffering throughout history, calamities for nations, adversity for entire races of people, and individual tragedies that change our lives, we can only

imagine how many times people have called out in fear, or anger, or heartbreak to a God they thought had forgotten them. "God, don't you care?" Put brackets around that thought. I'll come back to it.

But going on with the Gospel, Jesus spoke into the storm, calmed the wind and the sea, and then asked "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Also hold this thought. We will see that this question of faith is linked to the previous question about whether God cares.

III.

So, a lot just happened in these few short verses, didn't it? Danger arose on the sea. The disciples were in fear for their lives and called for help. Jesus saved them and told them to have faith. That's sort of a mini-version of the Gospels.

And in that sense today's gospel lesson can be more than an historical account of a once upon a time event. It also is an example of God's continuing encounter with humanity through Jesus Christ. And it shows how God acts in Christ to deliver those who call upon him.

But we know from experience that questions and doubts can arise when deliverance does not seem to come, or when it might not take the form we expect or want, or when we do not understand how God is working. That's where faith becomes important.

At times our boats sink in the storms or we fear being overcome by the waves. We remember a few years ago when this was a real fear, not just a metaphor. And they can be great tragedies or only small problems. We might wonder what God is doing. But God still calls us to have faith. And that faith proclaims that God will be with us and comfort us.

And that all sounds great, doesn't it? This story from Mark's Gospel about calming the stormy sea is encouraging. God will be with us in times of trouble.

But does that answer seem to come too easily? What about people who suffer and ask, "Why does God let these things happen?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "Why should we even need a prayer list at St. Thomas?"

These are some of the most troubling questions we can encounter. At times it can be hard to reconcile the existence of evil in the world with God's love and the beauty of creation. And how do we explain the burdens of grief and pain and suffering when the Bible gives us such uplifting promises about the Christian life?

Some people say there is no answer. This can be a stumbling block for nonbelievers. People who see only bad news in the media sometimes are reluctant to accept that there can be good news in the church. And when even we, as believers, are personally affected by the storms in our own lives, we can be led to doubts.

Volumes have been written about this. Theologians have debated it. Seminaries offer courses about it. A brief sermon will not do justice to the subject. But there are some basic things that can be said, and the most important is that God does not cause bad things happen to us.

God is not up there somewhere watching us on a computer monitor 24/7 and then whenever we make a mistake he hits the smite button. There is no smite button on God's computer. He wants to love us, not to zap us.

But even though there is no simple answer, another thing also seems obvious. If only good things happened to good people, then God's kingdom already would be here, and we know that is not yet the case.

The fact is that we still live in a broken world, and broken things happen. You have heard the old saying, "If it isn't broke, don't fix it." Well, the world is broke, and God is fixing it. But he is doing it in his own way, and in his own time, and we don't always understand it. That's what faith is about. If we could understand it, we wouldn't need faith.

IV.

The reality is that we all are in this world and its storms together. The community of disciples in the boat had a lot in common with all of us today as a community of faith. They, like us, were called to follow Jesus' teachings, and they, like us, sometimes falter. And they, like us, sometimes just didn't understand.

Tradition says that a symbol of the early church, perhaps the first Christian logo, was the image of a ship in a storm with a cross for the mast. In those days the early church's stormy seas were persecution by Rome and sometimes violent opposition from those who feared that Christianity was growing too fast.

Today the storms are different. We don't face persecution or violence, but we might be facing some rough weather in our lives. There could be some big decisions to make, or something pretty scary that causes us to fear for ourselves or loved ones. We worry about any number of things that seem beyond our power to control.

Jesus can calm these storms and enable us to deal with our problems. And if we believe that God is with us as we make our way through the wind and the waves, then our faith is real even though we have doubts or fears. We all have been launched into the storms that trouble this fallen world. And to complete the voyage we need God's sustaining power.

V.

And so there are two points in today's message. The first is that the disciples were not alone in dealing with storms. There are storms in our lives, and being in the boat with Jesus is not always easy. But through faith in him, strengthened by prayer, he can dispel our fears and show us the way.

The second point is that we also need each other. Certainly we are called to have a personal relationship with God. But we also are called to relationships with each other here in a Christian community at St. Thomas. Here is where we can find help and support. When someone asks, "Lord, don't you care," the answer often can be found in the love and encouragement from those around us that strengthens our faith.

When I came to St. Thomas three years ago I was struck by a sentence in the church's mission statement that describes both of these points. It proclaims that we not only are united in Christ's love, but also are drawn into relationship with God and with one another. That is a beautiful vision for our church, and a wonderfully reassuring message that has the power to help us through the storms in our lives, no matter how they arise. *Amen.*