



“Ship’s Log: Stormy Weather”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

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Scripture – Mark 4: 35-41

Just a few years ago I was fortunate to travel to Israel with a group of pastors. One day during the first week, our company embarked on one of the older-looking diesel fishing boats, to motor across the Sea of Galilee. It was a beautiful day, and wouldn’t you know it, a rain storm appeared out of nowhere; and we experienced firsthand how these sudden storms can descend upon the water from the westerly Golan Heights, and catch sailing vessels by surprise. Though the storm was not severe, its dark clouds, rain and threat of lightning were enough to remind us of this story, and help us imagine the disciples’ sudden fear.

Perhaps you can relate to their peril as sailors, from your own experiences sailing the Chesapeake and encountering an unexpected squall. Even if you have not experienced a storm on a lake, we all know what it is to encounter treacherous waters on the seas of life. Consider our own panicked response

when we discover our teenager has a drug addiction;

Or learn that a partner has been unfaithful;

When we hear the doctor explain that there is a suspicious spot on the x-ray,

Or see the stock market tank and our retirement savings or child’s college tuition evaporate before our eyes;

When we feel a lump in our breast,

Or receive a “pink slip” at the office;

When we lose a loved one to death in a sudden accident, or through a slow debilitating illness. Engulfed with fear, we too cry out, “Lord, save us!”

Yet often the ominous clouds continue to gather, the situation worsens, and like the disciples, we wonder if God is deaf, or whether Jesus is even in the boat with us. But that’s what Mark was trying to make clear to the early church and to us: Christ is with us, and we need not be afraid.

In early Christian art the church is often depicted as a boat, driven hard in a perilous sea. Jesus stands in the center, surrounded by a drenched crew.¹ Some of the crew appear filled with fear as they watch the waves plunge into their boat, while others are at peace as they look to Jesus. Over the centuries architects were influenced by this metaphor for the church, as a ship plowing through the seas, and this is why cathedrals and churches are built like a ship, with the ceiling overhead mirroring the hull of a large vessel.

Imagining Jesus in the boat with us, we might tend to expect smooth sailing – but obviously from the witness of scripture and our own experiences, that is not the case. With Christ in our boat we will meet the same scary wind and waves as everybody else.

Well, with Jesus in our boat we might expect that when hard weather comes, Jesus will work the oars, bail water, fight for us. But during some of life's storms it may seem to us that Jesus is asleep or maybe not even there, and we may find ourselves crying "Where ARE you, God? We need you!"

Notice what happens when the terrified disciples roust Jesus in our story. Jesus awakens, and rebukes the wind and the sea saying, "Peace, be still!" Just realize what a powerful message this spoke in the ancient world where the sea represented chaos and all those forces which threaten to undo us. Jesus faces them down, and says, "Peace! Be still!"

We're likely here to focus so much on Jesus commanding the forces of nature that we miss his rebuke of the disciples! Listen again. After he speaks to the wind and the sea, Jesus asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

The earliest audience of Mark's gospel heard today's passage as a miracle story pointing to Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Watching Jesus calm the wind and water, the disciples' fear of perishing is transformed into awe-struck faith in this One who could be none other than God. Facing the threat of persecution by Nero, the early Christians drew strength from the message of this story – that as they sensed the ongoing presence of Christ, nothing could ultimately harm them. This is the conviction Paul affirmed so powerfully in his letter to the Romans, a passage we read last week, when he says "For I am convinced that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How does this story speak to our lives today? Like the disciples, we are also prone to fear on life's unpredictable seas. If you've endured a divorce, you may fear falling in love again and making a commitment. Perhaps a loved one is fighting an addiction and you fear they will relapse. Or maybe you are afraid of losing your job and not being able to pay your rent or mortgage. Sometimes we fear the future, having a recurrence of cancer or being diagnosed with Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or ALS. We may be afraid of pain, becoming disabled, or simply death.

Have we witnessed Jesus' power over natural forces? It seems to me that in the last few years Jesus has missed the opportunity to defuse a tsunami, to neutralize several hurricanes like Katrina and Rita, to silence some terrible tornadoes, and more recently to calm the waters on the Brandywine River for our dear Chad and his brother Chris.

But Jesus does not come to us as a magical kind of wonder-worker, waving a special wand to make cancer evaporate or help us win the lottery or keep the intoxicated person from getting behind the wheel of her car. Jesus comes to our center, to still the storms of our hearts; Jesus comes as Peacemaker for our souls. Indeed, Jesus comes as Emmanuel, God-with-us always – even in the midst of life’s storms. In Mark’s story Jesus’ words calm both the storm and the fears of the disciples. And his words and presence with us can calm us today. Consider his words, “Remember, I am with you always. Peace I leave with you, my peace, I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid.”

In her book *My Stroke of Insight*, brain scientist Jill Bolte Taylor tells of a storm episode in her life, when at age 37, while working in research at Harvard, she suffered a major stroke in the left hemisphere of her brain. While the left side of her brain was incapacitated by a sea of blood, Taylor’s consciousness floated happily in her right side, feeling one with the universe. The stroke rendered Bolte Taylor as helpless as an infant, not able to read, walk, or talk. Ultimately it took her 8 years to fully recover. But through her experience Jill Taylor learned firsthand the Creator’s magnificent circuitry of the human brain, and because of this, she believes that deep inner peace is just a thought away. She explains that our brains are wired for deep inner peace, the circuitry is constantly running and always available to us to hook into. She says it is not something we bring from the past or project into the future, but begins with the willingness to be present in the right here, right now.ⁱⁱ She notes there are tools available to us to help tap this deep inner peace – yoga, tai chi, prayer, communing with nature, singing, to name a few. Taylor describes the output, or inspired action of this deep peace as *compassion*, and the feeling of this peace as *pure joy*.

A friend of mine, Juan Trevino, has tapped into this peace in the midst of his own vicious storm: stage four pancreatic cancer. A mutual friend emailed me a month ago and asked if I’d heard about Juan a pastoral colleague from Texas (which I had not) and sent me to his blog on Caring Bridge – a website where people with cancer can keep an online journal and correspond with friends. Listen to a portion of the very page I found when I clicked on his blog: (Juan writes) I am discovering what a blessing it is to live one day at a time. I find that if I spend too much time in the past I harvest guilt and regrets. If I spend too much time in the future, I harvest fear, frustration, and anger. When I’m reminded to live today, I’m given much peace, gratitude, joy, and centeredness.

I’ve been asking myself how I want to live these days and have discovered that my life is so blessed that I don’t want to change anything about it. I want to work and play and pray and visit with folks just as I’ve been doing. I love the ordinary days. They reflect to me the reality and joy of Emmanuel.ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, we all encounter stormy weather in life – sometimes as individuals and sometimes as a church. In this vessel, this great ship the church, we journey together and Christ is with us. Show him the storm at the center of your life, and he will remind you that he is deeper still – perhaps in the eye of the storm – in the peaceful center, which is but a breath, or a prayer away.

ⁱ Rev. Bryan Findlayson, Pumpkin Cottage Ministry Resources, “Jesus Calms the Storm”

ⁱⁱ Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*, (Penguin, 2006.) Chapter 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Juan Trevino, Caring Bridge blog