

“Have You *Still* No faith?”

Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Sermon:

As a young teenager living in northern Nigeria, we had an opportunity as a family to visit Lake Chad, which is situated at the south side of the Sahara desert. This is not as exotic as it sounds, because this shallow body of water was rapidly drying up. The resultant drought was drastically altering the lifestyles of communities that were dependent upon the Lake. On the trip we had the unusual opportunity to go on to the Lake itself in a borrowed rubber inflatable craft powered by an outboard motor. This was an exciting adventure for my father and I, along with our guide, to undertake - and was most unusual because this was the only significant lake or river for hundreds of miles. Everything went well at first; the motor propelled us away from the shore and the cooling breeze made a big difference in the desert sun. Now hippopotami live in that Lake. On land they are slow and cumbersome, but in the water they are surprisingly agile and quick. Like many animals, they can be docile, but when frightened or separated from their young, can become aggressive and violent. I had heard stories of fishermen losing limbs to a hippopotamus bite and having their wooden canoes destroyed by their powerful jaws. They were regarded as the rulers of the lake. To our delight and surprise we saw hippopotami that were surfacing not too far in the distance, eager to get away from the noise of our outboard motor. Our guide reassured us that as long as the motor was running we would be safe. However, the boat and its motor were rarely used, and before long the engine stopped working. Aware of the danger, I was in a state of panic and kept urging my father to keep pulling on the starter rope and get that engine going again! This he tried repeatedly, but nothing happened. As they checked the fuel tank and engine, I was scanning the muddy water for signs of impending doom. I was overwhelmed with fear and helplessness. After what seemed an eternity they got the engine running again and, obviously, we safely made it back to shore. While I enjoy swimming, owning a motor boat is not a high priority for me! I wonder why?!

The miracle of the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee is recorded for us in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus had had a long day of teaching the crowds while sitting in a boat. When

evening came he asked the disciples to take him to the other side of the lake. There was more than one boat, and several of the disciples were expert fishermen who were familiar with these waters. The Sea of Galilee is noted for its sudden storms and one, we are told, quickly arose on that journey. The three gospel writers tell us that the boat was being swamped by waves and was in danger of sinking. Even experienced sailors were afraid.

Stories of rescue from imminent danger are captivating, because the word “rescue” tells us that there's going to be a happy ending. Oddly, perhaps, in the incident we read of in Mark's Gospel we discover that in a life-and-death crisis “Jesus was sleeping peacefully” in the stern of the boat. That scenario conjures up another image in the minds of Mark's audience, namely the story of Jonah. Jonah was also asleep in the bottom of a boat in a ferocious storm which caused the crew to fear for their lives. There is, I suggest, an implied contrasting connection between Jonah and Jesus; Jonah was un-willing prophet running away from his God-given responsibilities. Jesus had been faithfully fulfilling God's mission through his teaching the crowds using parables. Jonah, in a sense, sacrificed himself by getting the crew to throw him overboard in order to save the sailors. Jesus also sacrificed himself and died on the cross to save the whole world. Jonah 1:6 tells us the ship's captain wakes up Jonah with: “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” The disciples wake Jesus up with a similar: “don't you care that we are perishing?” These and other parallels in two rescue stories are evident. But what happens next in the gospel account is as shocking and as terrifying to the disciples as the storm itself.

Jesus does not answer the disciples' question, but simply addresses the trouble with two simple commands: “be still” and “be silent.” Jesus speaks in rhetoric that is similar to casting out a demon – the command to “be quiet” could be interpreted as “be muzzled”. And in the Old Testament we read many texts in which the feared sea is chaos - often embodied as a monster with various names. Everyone knew that no human can tame chaos except God alone. Listen to how the psalmist praises God for his deliverance (Ps 107:1;23-31):

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.”

What happens on the lake after Jesus gives his command? We read “Then the wind ceased, and there was a *dead calm*” – what a contrast, and just like in that psalm! Yet the disciples' panic is now replaced by fear, to which Jesus asks: ‘Why are you afraid; have you still no faith?’ Much has been

written about Mark's tendency to show the disciples in a poor light, and this is one such example. Matthew and Luke paint a slightly different picture, with softer tones. Nevertheless in the face of life's chaos, Mark challenges his readers, who are *already* followers of Jesus, to *persist* in their faith and to trust in him.

In this unusual case, Jesus turns the situation on its head not by rescuing the ship but by calming the storm. It is a teachable moment that points to the presence of the kingdom of God in a new and powerful way being manifest in Jesus Christ. It's not a publicity stunt that commands allegiance, he already *had* their allegiance. Rather it was an unforgettable moment which revealed to the disciples exactly *who* it was they were following.

The question that the disciples asked at the end was: "Who *then* is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And Mark need not give an explicit answer, because the events themselves reveal the identity of Jesus as one who is *intimately* connected with God, namely his Son (Mark 1:1). It might be possible for other miracle workers and sorcerers to duplicate Jesus' healings and exorcisms – but not mastery over the sea. Jesus, the Son of God is the Ruler of all nature and the Lord of history.

The story's shift to the question of identity at the end points us back to Jesus and asks us today, since *this* is who Jesus is; will you and I trust him?

In my crisis on Lake Chad, my panic reaction was like that of the disciples: "Dad, don't you care that we are in peril?" Of course my own father cared, and he was doing all that it could to rectify the situation. After all he was literally in the same boat as me. And in that case, it may well have been that the crisis was more imagined than real. Isn't it true that when others don't panic as we do in a crisis, we sometimes accuse them of not caring about our suffering? Panic reactions can divide us from others who might help.

When our lives are in turmoil or grave danger today, our natural human reaction is to doubt God's love and care for us, even to wonder whether or not there is a God - and if he does exist, is he even aware of our problems. We cry out in the midst of our storms of life: "God, don't you care?" The suspicion that God doesn't really care for us will corrode away our religious life, if we let it. We will give up praying. We will *believe* in God but we won't have a *relationship* with him. At such times, today's text speaks to our condition. God *is* present with us and is deeply concerned for us even when we do not recognize his care and activity. ***Merely repeating the confession that Jesus is the Son of God means little if Jesus does not represent God for us.*** In today's reading, Jesus was in the *same* boat with the disciples; of course he cared what happens to them! Jesus is still in *our* boat with us today, and in each of our family situations.

I leave you with these thoughts:

Who here is in a crisis and needs to hear Jesus speak the commanding words of "be still" and "be silent" to the situation? Jesus is now the Risen Cosmic Christ, who is in the process of bringing all the

forces of chaos into account. We still serve a God of miracles, the God of the possible, and in light of *that* we are encouraged to pray, confident that our prayers are heard and make a difference.

“Have you *still* no faith?” Mark urges us all to have faith, because Jesus – the Lord of Everything – is with us. Let us become more aware that Jesus Christ is in *our* boat and so with us on our journey. AMEN.