

CHRIST CALMS THE STORM

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 25, 2016
Based on Psalm 107:23–29; Mark 4:35–41; Mark 6:47–51***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” There are a number of Biblical stories which unfold on boats that are in the midst of storms; the stories are not only dramatic in their own right, but they tell us a good deal about how to journey through the storms that we encounter in our world today. This morning we are looking at two very memorable accounts from the gospels which took place in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In the Scripture we heard this morning from Mark chapter four, we are told of how the disciples along with Jesus were on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, when a storm blew up. The Sea of Galilee is a large freshwater lake, about seven miles wide on average by twenty miles long, and it can become quite rough in a storm. A small boat a few miles from shore in a big storm could get in very serious trouble.

Mark gives us a good description of what was happening: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was being swamped." [Mar 4:37] I've been out sailing with my kids in big wind and waves, and when water starts coming in over the side of the boat it is a bit unsettling. The disciples were in an ancient wooden craft with limited maneuvering ability, and they were in a raging storm on a big lake at night—our passage says that they had departed from shore in the evening. [*When evening had come, Jesus said, "Let us go across to the other side." Mark 4:35*] You can imagine what the disciples were feeling as the wind was blasting, the boat was lurching, and the waves were pouring in over the side. They were terrified.

Fear gripped the hearts of the disciples, and it is precisely at this juncture that the story connects with life today. Fear is at the center of much of modern life, because we have so many reasons to be afraid. Health concerns, relationship problems, financial stress, job worries all can make us afraid, and our fears get expanded when we look at the world at large, where terrorism, rogue nations, and the political situation in our own country give us multiple reasons for real fear.

The fears of the disciples, and our own fear, were classically depicted by Rembrandt in his famous painting of the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. Those of you who have taken Disciple Bible Study will remember this picture from one of the sessions. The most interesting aspect of this particular painting is that if you count the disciples in the boat, you come up with thirteen, plus Jesus. It is hard to imagine that Rembrandt would have lost track of how many disciples he was painting. But on close examination you discover that the thirteenth disciple is Rembrandt, who has painted himself into the picture. His face is full of fear. It was his way of saying that we are all in the same boat with the disciples—facing very

threatening storms, wrestling with fear.

So where is Jesus in all this? Mark says that “he was sleeping in the stern.” (Mark 4:38a) You begin to get the message that Jesus can lead us to an inward calm, even in the midst of a tempest. But the disciples are not calm. They shout out, “Master, do you not care that we are perishing!” (Mark 4:38b) And Jesus gives a most pointed response, as he says, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” [Mark 4:40]

It is a question Jesus might ask of us. But how can we come to a faith that would bring us beyond our fears when we have no many good reasons to be afraid? The story shows why and how we can have such faith. In the midst of the storm, Jesus turns toward the raging sea and shouts, “Peace, be still!” [Mark 4:39a]

Now I have been out on a lake in a sailboat in the midst of a storm, and I can testify that you can shout all you want at the wind and the waves and it does no good. But somehow the results were quite different with Jesus. Mark reports, “Then the wind ceased and there was a complete calm.” [Mark 4:39b] The disciples, Mark says, “were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him.’” [Mark 4:41]

This brings us to the heart of the matter. There is One who is with us who has power over the storm. The words of Jesus have a clear background in the Old Testament. In the opening sermon of this series, we heard the words of Psalm 89, which said, “O Lord . . . You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves surge You still them.” {Psalm 89:9} Likewise in Psalm 107, which we heard this morning, where the Psalmist was describing sailors caught in a fierce storm on the sea, the Scripture says, “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.” [Psalm 107:28-29]

God is the one who rules over the seas of life and who can calm the storm. So when the disciples ask concerning Jesus, “Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?” (Mark 4:41) it is a question for which there is one clear answer—Jesus is God present with us. And if God is with us, we need not be afraid.

These themes are expanded further in the second story we heard from the gospel of Mark, where again the disciples were on a boat in the sea of Galilee in the evening, while Jesus had remained on land. (*When evening came, the boat was out on the sea. Mark 6:47*) Why they keep crossing the lake at night is unclear; but it appears it was for the same reason that you and I drive a car at night—because we’re busy with something during the day and now need to get someplace else. At any rate; on this occasion the disciples were not in a big storm, but they were having a very tough time. As our passage explained, they were “straining at the oars against an adverse wind.” (Mark 6:48)

If you are familiar with sailboats, you know that modern sailboats have a keel, or a centerboard—an extension into the water which holds the boat’s position in the water and makes it possible to sail into the wind. You can’t sail straight into the wind, but you can sail toward the wind in a forty five angle going one way, and then the other way, in a back and

forth pattern called a tack, which enables you to sail towards the direction from which the wind is coming. But in ancient times they had not yet come up with the idea of a keel, so the only way you could sail was with the wind. If you were trying to get across the lake, and the wind was coming straight at you, you just had to ditch the sails, and reach for the oars.

Have you ever tried to row into a stiff wind? It is tough going. You pull and pull and it seems you are getting nowhere, because every forward motion gets pushed back by the wind. It is a good picture of what we may experience at times in life. You work and work at something and seem to get nowhere. Like the disciples, we can find ourselves in situations where we are "straining at the oars against an adverse wind."

Mark continues the story and says, "Jesus came toward them early in the morning, walking on the sea." (Mark 6:48a) It is interesting that Jesus never tells his disciples straight out who he is. Rather he engages in an extensive series of teachings and a great variety of actions and lets them conclude from the evidence who he is. The gospels take the same approach with us. The gospels simply tell you what Jesus said and did, and let you draw the conclusion. Of all the things that Jesus did, surely one of the most striking is this occasion when he came to the disciples walking on the water.

Our passage says that Jesus intended to "pass by" the disciples. [*He intended to pass by them. Mark 6:48b*] The way this is phrased can leave us a bit confused; it sounds as though the disciples were struggling at the oars, and Jesus was just trucking across the waves and intended to walk on past them. But the phrase "to pass by" has a special meaning in the Bible. In the Old Testament, this phrase is used on more than one occasion to describe God coming near to people. In Exodus 33, God says to Moses, "I will make my goodness pass by you" [Ex. 33:19]; and in one of the stories of Elijah, Elijah is told, "Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." [I Kings 19:11] What this means is that God was drawing near to reveal himself to people. So when the Scripture says that Jesus intended to pass by the disciples, it means he intended to come near the boat, and that this would be another occasion when God would reveal himself to people.

But when the disciples saw Jesus on the water, they were understandably unsettled. They thought maybe they were seeing some sort of ghostly apparition; and, as Mark says, "they were terrified." (Mark 6:50a) Again the basic human condition at the heart of the story is fear. But the story continues: "Jesus spoke to them and said. 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' Then Jesus got into the boat with them and the wind ceased." (Mark 6:50-51)

This climax of the story illustrates, in concise fashion, the key elements of how we can journey in faith through a storm. The first element is to recognize who Jesus is. We have already noted that Jesus reveals his identity as Son of God through his actions and the words of his teachings, and you have both in this story. His action of walking across the water says plainly that he is more than just a human teacher. And then he drives the point home when he says to the disciples, "Take heart, it is I." (Mark 6:50)

That, at least, is how English translations generally render the original New Testament Greek; but this is misleading, because it sounds as though Jesus is just saying, "Hey guys, it's me." In the original New Testament Greek, what Jesus actually says after "Take heart," is the phrase , *Ego eimi* , which means **I AM**.

If you remember the story of Moses and how God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, you will recall that when Moses asked what God's name is, God answered "I AM." [*Moses said, "When people ask, 'What is God's name?' what shall I say?" And God said, "I AM." Exodus 3:13-14*] So when Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water and says, "I AM," it is a clear revelation of who Jesus is—He is God come to humanity.

Here then is a key step for us in being able to journey through stormy seas—we need to recognize who Jesus truly is. If we think of Jesus simply as a human teacher, then we can take some of his teachings and leave others, and the direction of our life remains unchanged. But if we recognize Jesus as the Son of God, then we become receptive to his saving power and how he can set our life on the right course.

This brings us to the next key element. After Jesus clearly reveals his identity, he gets into the boat with the disciples. [*Jesus got into the boat with them . . . Mark 6:51*] This is a marvelous picture of what Jesus essentially does with all humanity. In Jesus, God gets into the boat with us—God joins in human life. But on an individual level, what is crucial is that we receive Jesus into our own life. We need to welcome Jesus into the boat, so that His Spirit can shape our personal lives.

The final element occurs after the disciples have received Jesus into the boat and are trusting in him. The story concludes, "and the wind ceased." [*... and the wind ceased. Mark 6:51*]

What can we do when the seas of life are rough and the winds are against us? We could try to just pull at the oars all the harder. But sooner or later we likely recognize what St. Augustine observed: "Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide." But along with the disciples, we can move finally out of fear and frustration into faith when we look to Christ, and put our trust in Him, and find that He is the one who calms the storm. We can join then with Augustine as he prayed, "But You, O Lord, have set our course; so steer the vessel of our life toward the quiet haven of Your presence, O God."