

There's a lake in Mark's Gospel. Well actually, it's in all four gospels – we usually call it the Sea of Galilee, sometimes Lake Tiberias, too. But Mark's author is very intentional about letting us know that this lake has two sides, a Jewish side, and a Gentile side, a familiar one, and an unfamiliar one. And in Mark's gospel, Jesus is determined to carry out his ministry on both sides of the lake.

Today's text announces the global, traveling nature of the Jesus movement. Yes, yes, yes, there's a great crowd on the shore right here in front of us, but there are more across the way. And God's world will not be bottled up and confined to a single village. So off Jesus goes.

The disciples and Jesus set sail, and the text tells us that "a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." (Mark 4:37).

I hear this line. And I think about Jesus' earlier proclamations in Mark's story. "God's presence is now," Jesus tells us. "And the time has come to fulfil God's world, to become the humanity God created us to be."

And I hear this, and I am ready. And I think, "Let's do this!"

But Jesus reminds us that such fulfilment means we have to go into the world, not be apart from it. That is to say, we have to leave the cozy confines of our fellowship and brave the waters that will connect us to the world. And even for skilled fishers and sailors that can be a scary thought.

As the story continues, the disciples encounter a literal storm, and not just a simple scare. Skilled sailors, with bowed backs, and tense arms, and gritted teeth wrestle ropes, and maneuver sails, and swing oars,

and hold on for dear life, all in an attempt to settle their slippery vessel. Yes, they are skilled, but are they this skilled? They wonder if this is a storm they can survive.

I confess, I've been on choppy boat rides, and experienced turbulence on an airplane, but nothing ever bordering capsizing. Still, I think the storm in today's text is a good metaphor for our congregation's experience during the pandemic.

Just like the disciples knew how to fish and sail, we know how to be Sardis. We're pretty good at it, and we've had some practice along the way. But all of a sudden, a once-in-a-century-event forced us to brave new waters. We had a meetinghouse that wasn't fit for sailing this storm. We had an Internet portal to every imaginable piece of information in the universe; but for the first time ever, EVERY. SINGLE. PERSON. IN. THE. WORLD. wanted to use it at the same time, so nobody could use it at all. We wanted to speak to one another, but it turns out we didn't know how to unmute ourselves on Zoom! We wanted to sing with one another, but it turns out there's an echo chamber that makes that next to impossible. We wanted to be a 3D people in a world that only had use for two dimensions.

We wanted to be mamas and daddies, and friends, and co-workers, and neighbors, and helpers, and partners, and disciples, and even just grocery shoppers, and errand runners, and morning walkers. We wanted to grieve for all we've lost; we wanted to love in the presence of our families, and friends, and neighbors; we wanted to scream, or smirk, or smile even if the mask hid it all. And in this dizzying storm, so many of us cried out, "We can't do this. This isn't a sea we can sail. This isn't who we are supposed to be. Help us, please! Make this stop!"

The disciples were on unsteady waters in a topsy-turvy boat, and I think they had every right to be afraid and overwhelmed. Just like I think we did, too.

And as this is all happening, Jesus is on the other side of the boat, perhaps in the underdeck, sound asleep, and not-yet affected by water splashing all around him. And I have to say, if I were a disciple, I think I, too, would say, “Dude, are you just gonna sit there? Can you please do something about all of this?”

Yes, it has not yet resonated with the disciples that Jesus helps manifest the presence of God in their midst. Yes, if they would have listened or taken better notes in the earlier parts of this gospel, they most likely would have known they were safe in God’s presence. And no, Jesus really isn’t ignoring them. Jesus might just be more confident in their sailing abilities than they are.

But the sea’s a shaking, and the adrenaline is pumping, and the emotions are high, and they say, “Jesus, do you not care that we are dying out here?”

And if we are honest with ourselves, have we not all, at some point, in our most vulnerable spaces, in the midst of our hardest days, in those times when the world seems so dark, and dreary, and hopeless, not wondered the same thing?

“Peace. Be Still.” And the waters were calm, and the winds died down, and the boat leveled, and the chaos vanished, and the clarity appeared. And the storm had passed.

Jesus asks us, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Well, I don't know about you, but I think it takes time to process being in the presence of One who can tame the chaos monster. Jesus proclaims the peace and presence of God, is proclaimed as that very peace and presence by God at his baptism, and today wields the very same chaos-taming power exhibited in Genesis, and the Psalms, and even Jonah. And Jesus is telling the disciples, and you and me, too, that we can also be instruments in calming stormy seas.

His question is pointed. His question does stir us, empower us, provoke us. But I think it's still a terrifying and time-consuming calling. I think our journey of discipleship is the coming to terms with living in a stormy and chaotic world, in which God is still present with us, always present with us, and in which the giftedness and value God creates in each of us is channeled in peaceful, calming, ordering, healing ways that renew and restore our stormy world.

The last line of today's text gives me immense hope. Though shaken, the disciples ask a great question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" For the first time, the disciples begin to realize the special presence of Jesus. By asking who Jesus is, they express a desire to understand his nature and character, and to comprehend what his presence means for the world. I think when they ask who Jesus is, they are also asking who they are, too, and how their lives might one day offer peace and healing to the world as well.

And I think we would do well to ask the question of who, too. Who is it among us, that can calm these stormy seas? Who is it among us, that can compel us to leave the security of our own shores to attend to the needs of neighbors on distant shores? Who is it among us, that can help channel our gifts in ways that help transform a broken and scary world?

Not So Smooth Sailing
Bob Stillerman
Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 7, 6/20/2021
Mark 4:35-41



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Mark's gospel tells us that the who is the God revealed in the presence of Jesus. I think, just like the disciples, if we keep asking who, we'll also become aware of the when, where, what, and how of God's presence. I think if we get to know this who, we might just find more and more courage to brave the stormy seas that will enable us to help others discover this who, too. I think if we keep asking who, we too, might also better discover who we are, as disciples, and as a fellowship.

So, good friends, let's jump in. And perhaps we can find out who God is, and who we are, and how together, we can work for the world's good purposes.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.

Mark 4:35-41

4:35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."

4:36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

4:37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

4:38 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?"

4:39 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.

4:40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

4:41 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?"