

"Peace! Be Still"
July 26, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Mark 4:35-41

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?"

As y'all know, I've been preaching on Kathleen Norris' excellent book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* for the past several weeks. I plan on continuing to do that for a few more weeks at least, but I am going to take a break from her today. Instead of our usual focus, I feel the Spirit calling us to hear a word of peace today.

So I picked this passage from Mark chapter 4, which culminates in that very invitation from Jesus, an invitation to peace, and invitation to stillness: "Peace, be still!" Jesus says to the disciples. And he says it to us.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's take a moment to situate ourselves in what is going on here.

We're at the beginning of Mark's gospel, where Jesus and the disciples have been hard at work all day. From early in the morning until late in the evening, Jesus – accompanied by his disciples – teaches the crowds about the kingdom of God. All day long, the sick, the afflicted and the demon-possessed have pushed and shoved and clamored for Jesus' attention, and for the attention of his disciples.

Now night has fallen. The crowd has finally trickled away. Now the disciples can *finally* have some peace and quiet. They sit wearily around the campfire, broiling some fish for dinner, too tired even to talk. But, suddenly, Jesus steps into the firelight... and the disciples' hearts sink. He's got that *look* on his face, the look that means that the peace and quiet they feel now will prove short-lived. "Don't get too comfortable," Jesus says to them, as if they already don't know. "We're going over to the other side."

Every one of the disciples begins to groan. The other side? Really? Tonight? Don't you *know* what's on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus? The unknown. Gentiles. Foreigners. People who don't speak our language or sing our songs or eat our

food. Why would we want to go there? And besides, Jesus, the crossing is going to be dangerous, especially this time of night. There may be storms, bad ones. Are you sure you want to do this?

But Jesus has made up his mind. So with moans and groans and even a few curses, the disciples untie their boat and shove off for the other side, into the darkness, toward the unknown.

The Sea of Galilee is treacherous. At 700 feet below sea level, surrounded by high hills, it's a natural funnel for sudden and violent winds... and tonight is no exception. The storm comes out of nowhere. Gale-like winds jerk and tug at the disciples' tiny boat as tall waves toss it too and fro.

Now, remember: most of the disciples are experienced fisherman. Peter and Andrew, James and John have fished the Sea of Galilee all their lives. These guys have seen their fair share of storms; they know the difference between a passing shower and a life-threatening squall. *This* is a life-threatening squall. As the waves toss them higher and higher, the disciples come to realize that they are fighting for their lives.

And... where is Jesus in the midst of all of this? Sound asleep. Jesus is curled up in a little seat in the stern of the boat with carpet and cushions, sleeping like a baby.

The disciples are not amused. After all, it was *his* idea to take this little sea cruise in the first place. Now here they are, battening down the hatches, baling out water and wondering if they will live to see the dawn. Jesus, meanwhile, is snoring. Desperate and frustrated, they shake him, and plead, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

It's not really a question. It's more of an accusation. The disciples are panicking. Jesus is sleeping. It's enough to shake your faith to its very core. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus does not answer the question. He blinks a couple of times, stretches, and yawns. He slowly pushes his blanket aside, stands up and looks out on the raging storm. "Wind!" he says, "Be quiet. Waves! Knock it off."

The wind dies down to a whisper. The waves fall still. A deep hush descends upon the Sea of Galilee. After the clamor of wind and waves, the heavy silence now beats on the disciples' ears. Jesus turns to them. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

And then I like to think that he lies back down, rolls over and goes right back to sleep.

When I was a kid, I loved sleeping in cars. On our family vacations, for example, I remember laying my head back on the soft headrest of our station wagon, closing my eyes, and dreaming. I remember darkness, endless tree branches overhead, the soft

sound of the engine, the whisper of tires on asphalt, the gentle murmuring voices of my mom and dad.

But as I grew older, I found that I could no longer sleep in cars. I had become too much of a control freak. When I was in college, every time my friends and I drove anywhere, I had to be behind the wheel. On long trips, I often went without any sleep at all, but at least I could be in control. Somewhere between age ten and age twenty-one, I traded trustful, childlike sleep for adult anxiety and low-grade panic.

The disciples were panicking. Their boat was about to sink. To a person in a panic, nothing can be more bewildering than someone who is calm, someone who does not understand what the ruckus is all about. Jesus looks at his frantic, freaked-out disciples, shakes his head and sighs. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” In other words, “Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you realize who sent you on this journey, and who is traveling with you? Don’t you trust me?” In this story, the wind and the waves show more sense than the disciples do. The wind and the waves, *they* know who Jesus is. He commands and they obey. He speaks peace, and they are still. The wind and the waves could tell you: the presence of Jesus is peace, even in the ugliest of storms.

But maybe the disciples are starting to figure that out, too.

The storm is over. The disciples have survived. They’re still pretty uneasy, though. They look at each other, eyes wide with shock and awe. In the stillness, they whisper, “Who then is *this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him?... I don’t know about the rest of you, but I *was* scared of the storm...now I’m kind of scared of *him*.” The familiar Jesus – the one with whom they’ve traveled for so long – has been replaced by a stranger, someone with a power they had not seen before. They are no longer quite sure who it is that they have let into their boat, and into their lives. They’re starting to wonder just what they have gotten themselves into.

The disciples started out in awe of the storm; they ended up in awe of Jesus. They started out thinking peace was for those who stay comfortable and dry; they ended up learning that Jesus brings peace in the midst of the storm. Maybe that was the whole point.

This story gets at a funny thing about Jesus and storms: he calms them, yes, but he’s been known to *cause* them as well. Jesus has been known to intrude on the lives of comfortable people, and lead them – lead us – right into the eye of the storm. The disciples were just minding their own business, taking a much-deserved, peaceful break, when Jesus says, “Get up! We’re going over to the other side.” And he sends them right into the middle of a storm, and straight into the arena of God’s deliverance.

From Hagar in the bitter wilderness to Jonah in the belly of the whale; from Mother Teresa among the worst of human misery to Martin Luther King Jr. facing death threats to his family, many of God's favorite people live their lives in stormy weather. Some of God's very best work is done in the midst of storms.

Jesus never promises us a life free from storms. To the contrary, he often leads us straight into the middle of them: "Get up! We're going over to the other side!" No, Jesus never promises us a life free from storms; instead, he promises us peace in the midst of them.

This morning, I would invite you not to get too comfortable. St. Paul's Church, I think I hear Jesus calling us to get up and go where we may not want to go. God is calling us to do difficult and demanding things: to open the life of our church to strangers who might change it; to care for the poor, the struggling, the rejected, the lost and the least. There may be stormy weather ahead; we just might hear a rumble of distant thunder. Will we get up and go, or will we stay put on the shore? Will we stay here where it's safe, or will we go find God's blessing out there, in the troubled waters?

Peace is not the absence of strife; peace is trusting that Jesus is with us in the midst of our most difficult days. If we go where he calls us, if we do what he wants, he promises that he will stand up in the middle of our storms, and even the wind and even the waves will obey him. We may start out intimidated by the challenges, in awe of the fierce winds and ferocious waves, but we will end up in awe of the one who calms them. If we journey with Jesus, we will discover a peace never known by those timid and settled souls who steer clear of stormy weather.

Get up. God will give us peace when we need it. It's time to cross over to the other side.

Thanks be to God.