

Yr. B, Proper 7
June 25, 2006
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1628 Words

Lessons:
Psalm 107
Job 38:1-11, 16-18
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
Mark 4:35-41

Today's Gospel reading gives us the Biblical account of the perfect storm. Jesus and his disciples are in a small, wooden boat. You will recall that they were *not* members of the Galilean Yacht Club—in other words, this was most likely a crude fishing vessel, not a big boat for pleasure cruising. It was pitch, black, dark. No navigational lights, global positioning satellites, or two-way radios to help find the safety of the shore.

The NRSV describes the storm as “fierce.” The Greek term is the equivalent word for a hurricane, and yet Mark further adds the word “mega” –a Greek word that we all know means BIG—to further emphasize the fury and fear of the experience. So we have twelve guys crowded inside a small boat in the middle of a furious storm, being tossed about the sea in the middle of the night. They are clinging to the boat, holding on for dear life, fearing the worst...and feeling abandoned by their leader, who—of all things—was taking a nap.

Under the circumstances, they expected more of Jesus. I believe under the circumstances, we would also expect more of Jesus. When the phrase WWJD—(What would Jesus do?) was coined, I can only imagine that sleeping through a crisis was not what the bracelet manufacturer had in mind!

How could Jesus do this? It is obvious that the disciples don't understand, because Mark records their very pointed question to Jesus—“Do you not care that we are perishing?” Listen carefully to the despair in their words—“Can't you see that we're about to die, here? For God's sake, would you just wake up and DO something?”

It was pointed out by a colleague this week that the disciples who were fishermen were the seafaring experts. Jesus' expertise was in carpentry and teaching. It is tempting for us to overlook this as post-resurrection followers of Christ. From our distance and perspective, we breeze right past the tension in the boat and want to rush to the happy ending where Jesus saves the day!

But it was not that clear or easy for the disciples on that night. Let's recap Mark's narrative leading up to this point. Jesus has only taught, preached and healed the sick. Taming the chaos of the waters—that is to say, intervening with the cosmos—was an entirely different matter.

In the Jewish mentality, controlling the seas fell within the purview of only one being—YHWH! According to our Psalm this morning—and many other psalms that these disciples would have prayed—God was very, very big and very, very powerful. But he was not understood in terms of being a passenger in a small watercraft.

Remember also that the disciples had only recently been appointed,¹ just in time to see Jesus' *own family* restrain him and describe him as having “gone out of his mind.”² And they had just finished listening to him teach in parables that they did not even understand (recall from last Sunday's Gospel that Jesus had to explain *everything* in private to his own disciples.)³

The disciples are scared out of their wits, afraid they are about to die, shouting above the howl of the wind—“Somebody ought to do something about this!” Naturally, they direct their question to their

¹ Mark 3:13

² Mark 3:21

³ Mark 4:34

teacher—which is to say, their leader. Frankly, their question is disrespectful. It is not a helpful question. Rather, it is purely and simply an expression of their fear.

How often do we cry out, “Somebody ought to do something about this!” as an expression of despair rather than a sincere prayer calling upon our Lord’s everlasting loving-kindness. Sadly, I experienced it this week. A fellow graduate of my seminary, lamenting the election of our new Presiding Bishop, exclaimed in a broadcast email: “God help us.” Perhaps he was being sincere, but it sounded a lot like despair.

Too much of our talk—on all sides—about our politics, our Church, our parish, and even our families and friends is just like the talk in the boat on that fearful night—it is reactionary. It is rooted in fear, anxiety, frustration and anger. As disciples of Christ, we are called to a higher standard in our conversations—and especially in our prayers.

Like those disciples, we know that being faithful to Jesus while standing safely on solid ground is one thing. Being faithful in the middle of your darkest night and fiercest storm is an entirely different matter. When the going gets tough...and scary...we might reflexively cry out, “Lord have mercy!” But how often do trust the presence and promise of Christ with us and in us?

After Jesus calms the wind and the sea, he turns his attention to the other guys in the boat and asks them why they are afraid, and calls them up short by asking if they still have no faith. All they can do is look at one another and ask, “Who is this guy?”

It was a moment of epiphany for them. The fact that they were saved from the storm is a minor point in this story. The major point of this story is that Jesus is yet again revealed in a new and clearer light. This episode is yet another epiphany about God and what it is like to be with God.

The epiphany—for them and for us—is three simple words. Do not fear. Simple to understand and very difficult to live.

In one of my first seminary classes, a professor helped highlight this truth for me. He observed that “the Gospel message is ‘Do not fear!’ This does not mean that there nothing *to* fear, just that fear is not the right response.”

Think about it! The angel Gabriel says to a pregnant, unmarried teenager at risk for being stoned to death, “Do not fear, you have found favor with God!”⁴ Another angel of the Lord speaks to a crowd of shepherds, saying “Y’all are quite obviously terrified by what is happening out here in this field tonight, but do not fear, go check out what’s happening over in Bethlehem!”⁵ When Jesus called Simon away from the security of his day job to be a full-time disciple, he assures him, “Do not fear, we’re going to go fish for people.”⁶ In the midst of their lingering doubts, Jesus later reassures his disciples, Do not fear, God is taking care of the birds the lilies, and you as well!”⁷ The messengers at the empty tomb try to calm Mary Magdalene and her friends, saying, “Do not fear. He is risen.”⁸ And when the resurrected Christ shows up to see his disciples again, he says, “Do not fear, I’m here for some of that broiled fish you’ve got on the grill.”⁹

⁴ Luke 1:30

⁵ Luke 2:10

⁶ Luke 5:10

⁷ Luke 12:27-29

⁸ Luke 24:5

⁹ Luke 24:37-42

We all know that fear is more than a concept. Before you can understand it, you must feel it. True fear—the kind of fear one has in a sinking boat—is experienced first and foremost in your bones!

In a similar way, the Gospel is most deeply understood when it is experienced. And Good News can be experienced most deeply when we are exposed to darkness and despair.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Monk who has been a popular author in this parish community, writes about this idea in his book, *Hope Against Darkness*. He observes that darkness is part of every culture, though we tend to do our very best to avoid and deny that reality.¹⁰ You will not be surprised to learn that darkness does not sell, nor—in a democratic society—does it attract many votes.

Yet, Brother Rohr points out that darkness is a “good and necessary teacher. It is not to be avoided, denied, run from or explained away.”¹¹ Think back to those examples of Mary, the shepherds, and the disciples. Their temptation was to avoid, deny, or run like crazy in the other direction. One of the reasons these forebears can be such powerful examples and icons for us is because they stopped, listened and accepted the profound and frightening risk of trusting God.

What do you fear? Violence? Hurricanes? The state of the Church? Disease? Losing your job? Losing someone you love? Death?

Let’s be honest with ourselves: It is as true right now as it was in the boat on that stormy night, there is a lot to be afraid of. Terribly tragic things happen in our lives and in the lives of people we love that we cannot understand or even accept. That is the *bad* news.

The good news is that we are not in the boat *alone*. Not only is God very, very big and very, very powerful; but God is also very, very near. In the words of the Nicene Creed we proclaim, “For us and for our salvation, he came *down* from heaven.” In other words, he got in the boat with us!

The Good News is repeated in the words of our Collect today—“O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you—never—fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness.”

The Gospel, the Creed, and the Collect do not promise that we will avoid fear, tragedy, sickness, heart break, or even death. They do offer us the assurance that none of these things is final.

They also speak those simple and challenging words—“Do Not Fear” because God is supremely powerful, God’s will is always love, and God’s presence is always very, very near.

Amen.

¹⁰ Richard Rohr and John Feister, *Hope Against Darkness*, (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001), p. 164.

¹¹ Richard Rohr and John Feister, *Hope Against Darkness*, p. 165.