

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

6/25/06

Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." [36] And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. [37] A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. [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?" [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. [40] He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" [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?"

DON'T YOU CARE?

How quickly a storm can come into our lives! How does the old song go? "You're flying high in April and shot down in May." Certainly most of us know what that is like. And that's the situation described in our lesson for today.

Jesus is preaching to a crowd using a boat as a pulpit. It's getting dark, and he decides it is time to cross the sea to the other side. So these experienced fishermen head for the other shore while Jesus catches some Zs in the stern.

Suddenly a great windstorm arose. The waves were swamping the boat. And how did Jesus respond to this massive storm? He continues to snooze! Apparently Jesus and I have one thing in common. We can sleep through anything!

But, the disciples interpret Jesus' sleep as a lack of concern. They wake him and ask, "Don't you care that we're perishing?" That's the first of many questions in our lesson for today. Don't you care?

I've heard that question before. In fact, I've asked that question myself. You know how it goes. We get in the boat with Jesus intent on making it to the other side and out of the blue a storm comes roaring down the valley.

We lose our job. We receive an unexpected and frightening medical diagnosis. We are caught in a relationship that seems to be deteriorating and going nowhere. We receive a phone call in the middle of the night and all of a sudden our heart leaps in pain.

And where is Jesus when the storm hits? Well, it seems like he must be asleep. And like the disciples we want to shake him awake and ask, "Don't you care that we're perishing? Don't you care that we're going under for the third time?"

Fear can take over in an instant. Fear can make even the strongest faith seem frail. Life is fragile, and the waters can become rough in the blink of an eye.

A FRIGHTENED CHURCH

William Willimon told of preaching in a church that was celebrating its 100th anniversary. As he was preparing for the service with the minister, Willimon asked, “What is the mood of this congregation as they celebrate this important milestone?”

The minister turned, looked Willimon in the eye and said without hesitation, “Scared!”

It seems that this congregation was in the middle of a changing neighborhood. No one lived within walking distance of the church anymore, and if they did they would be afraid to try it.

The expensive alarm system that the church was forced to install had not kept them from having a number of close encounters of the criminal kind. A choir loft that once was once full now was empty except for six members that were paid from the church’s shrinking endowment.

There were many empty pews on that Sunday, and an undeniable gloom had seemed to settle over the congregation. Willimon said, “The pastor was right. They were afraid.” They had reason to be. That congregation was definitely going through some rough weather.

It isn’t the first time a church has been afraid. In fact, an early symbol of the church was a boat on a storm tossed sea with a cross for its mast. If you’re going sailing with Jesus, you better get prepared for rough weather ahead. He often leads us to places that we would rather not visit.

LORD OF THE STORM

Why does Jesus do that? Does Jesus lead us through the storm tossed sea because he doesn’t care if we perish? Or do we need to go through the storm so that we might really understand who he is and what he is calling us to do?

I think the latter is the case. I think that we need to go through the storm with Jesus in order to really understand who he is and what he is calling us to do.

Many people think that the church should be like “home on the range” where “seldom is heard a discouraging word.” If that’s what you want, try another religion. Those who sail with Jesus will always be encountering storms. But, if you want to sail with someone who can bring peace in the middle of that inevitable storm, then Jesus is your man.

In the Old Testament the sea was a symbol of chaos; it was the abode of evil forces. Only God was able to bring peace to the storm tossed sea.

In the Psalms God is praised as the one who divided the sea by his might, and “broke the heads of dragons in its waters.” (cf. Psalm 106:9; Job 38:8-11) The Psalmist described God’s parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus as a “rebuke” of the seas. (Psalm 106:9)

So the calming of the storm is more than just a miracle that happened long ago. It is a story that symbolizes the power of Christ. This story tells us that God was in Christ. The very power of God was present in Jesus. Jesus, in language reminiscent of the Creator awakens and rebukes the sea as he had often rebuked demons.

This miracle is not just about having power over nature. This miracle is about having power over the forces of chaos that threaten to disrupt our world. Jesus not only rescues the disciples from the storm; he also rescues them from the fear and disorder that threatens their soul.

FEARED A GREAT FEAR

The storm on the outside is often fierce. We need salvation from the storm. But, it is the storm raging on the inside that needs to be quelled even more. In fact that storm on the inside often rages long after the wind and the waves subside.

That's how it was with the disciples. Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves and that eliminated the danger to life and limb. But, the disciples were still afraid. Notice Jesus didn't ask, "Why were you afraid?" The answer to that question would have been obvious. They were about to drown and Jesus was asleep!

Instead, Jesus asked, "Why *are* you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40)

The disciples had more fear after the miracle than before. They were filled with awe, from which we get the word *awful*.

And in response to Jesus' question the fear level of the disciples goes up another notch. The Bible tells us that the disciples were "filled with great awe." (Mark 4:41)

Actually, that's too weak a translation. A more literal translation of that phrase would be, "they feared a great fear." Facing the life threatening storm was nothing in comparison to facing the one who could control the storm.

You think you're afraid now; wait until you meet Jesus. Then you will really know fear.

We think about Jesus in many ways. We sing "what a friend we have in Jesus." We think of Jesus as our Savior and our teacher. All of these things are true.

But, there is another side to Jesus. It is the Jesus who awakens to command the wind and the waves. And when he tells the wind and the waves to be silent it shuts our mouths as well. I'm talking about a sense of the holy. Jesus is one of a kind, the Son of the living God.

And his presence evokes a fear that goes beyond a fear of the storm.

TWO KINDS OF FEAR

There are two kinds of fear in this story. There is the fear of the death-dealing storm. We all know that fear. The towers fall, the hurricane bears down on Central Florida, or the doctor gives us the bad news. When that happens we cry out, "Jesus, wake up! Don't you care that we are perishing?"

That's what one commentator called a Good Friday kind of fear.

And sometimes when we cry out, Jesus wakes up, rebukes the wind and the waves, and an unearthly calm settles over everything. That brings a second kind of fear, what we might call an Easter fear.

In Mark's gospel, the main emotion after the resurrection on that first Easter Sunday wasn't joy. It was fear. The women come to the cemetery, and they don't find a body. They find an empty tomb and an angel who says, "He is not here. He has risen. Go tell the good news."

Do the women go and tell? Not according to Mark they don't. They're too afraid. (Mark 16:8) It's the same kind of fear that the disciples felt when Jesus arose and stilled the storm. It is a fear born of the question that they asked,

"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41) Remember, the people believed that only God could control the wind and the waves. No wonder the disciples were astonished and frightened by what they had witnessed that night.

In the man Jesus they encountered a power that could only come from God himself. Things were fast getting out of hand. And in the passages that follow our lesson for today we read that things get "curiouser and curiouser" when it comes to Jesus.

Jesus heals a man of demon possession (5:1-20), cures an incurable disease (5:25-34) and finally raises a dead girl (5:21-24, 35-43). The fearful question that the disciples now ask in private becomes the topic of public conversation. This Jesus who does the impossible becomes the object of hope, fear and even loathing.

And the question they ask about Jesus is still being asked even today: Who is this man named Jesus? How can he do what only God can do? And what claim does He have on my life?

OUR STORY

Theologian Karl Barth wrote that the New Testament community found its own story in this story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the lake. As the disciples were seized with a holy fear, so the members of the early church were seized with fear. Following the God revealed in Jesus was no small thing.

It was an experience that changed their lives. And because of their witness we are given this story today.

Will we find our story in this story? Will we be able to respond in faith when Jesus invites us to cross over to the other side? Will we be able to trust God's salvation even when the wind and the waves look like they will overwhelm us?

Will we have enough courage to embrace the holy and go where God calls us to go?

Another church was in a declining neighborhood. In fact, this church was just about to close its doors. The bishop told the young preacher, "They've lost their neighborhood. We don't expect much from this church. Just tend to their needs."

But, this young woman was not so eager to throw in the towel so she made an attempt to revitalize the church. She found that they actually did have a neighborhood. It consisted mainly of poor families and a few street people.

So, the pastor urged the church to open their doors to the people who were there. They began a soup kitchen for the poor and served nearly 50 meals every weekday at noon. A health care cooperative took up residence in some of the church's unused Sunday school rooms, turning them into a health clinic for the poor.

Now, on Sundays, that once declining empty church is nearly half full of people. People come from six or seven blocks away to the church that has done so much for her neighborhood.

The bishop was delighted with the progress made by this church. He said that it was one of the most inspiring pieces of good news that he had heard lately.

And then the minister said, “Trouble is, many of our best, long-time members just couldn’t take it. They’ve left.

They were all prepared for our last days as a church. And then, wonder of wonders, our church was raised, given a new mission, a reason for living.

And it scared them to death.”

REPLACING FEAR WITH FAITH

Jesus asked his disciples long ago, “Why are you afraid?”

Suppose he would ask us the same question? Why are we afraid? “Let’s see Jesus. Let me count the ways. This may take a while. Fear plays such a large role in my life.

I am afraid of failure. I am afraid of losing the ones I love. I am afraid of doing the wrong thing. I am afraid of yet another hurricane …”

We would have much more to say but, Jesus stops us as he stopped those first disciples, and asks, “Enough with the fears already. Are you *still* without faith? Haven’t you learned to trust me yet? You need to replace that fear with faith.

Jesus tells us that the only antidote for fear is faith. And according to the book of Hebrews, faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is trusting God to make a way when there seems to be no way. We believe that Jesus is Lord even when the storm comes. We believe that He commands the wind and the waves, and we believe that he directs our lives as well.

There’s a reason for the storm and there’s a reason for the calm but one thing is sure; Jesus is always in the boat with us. He will protect us and guide us as we make our voyage to the other side.

And when we get too comfortable, he will confront us with realities that are too great for us to understand and a salvation that brings a new kind of holy fear.

I once wrote a sermon entitled “Fighting Fear with Fear.” It was based upon that familiar Old Testament text which reads, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Psalm 111:10)

Fear in this case refers to being filled with awe at the power and salvation of God. That’s a good description of Easter fear. And Easter fear is the antidote for all those other fears that seek to dominate and control our life.

If our life is filled with a sense of the holy, if like those first disciples can ask in wonder and awe and fear, “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey?” then the other fears of life lose much of their punch.

Put another way, the key to overcoming fear is worship, unconditional heartfelt worship. Worship is not a style or a certain kind of liturgy. Worship is being overwhelmed by the salvation and power of a holy God.

COMFORT IN A TIME OF SORROW

Roberta Hestenes, a Presbyterian minister tells of receiving a call from her daughter who was pregnant. Her daughter said, “Mom, the baby came early. I held the baby, but the baby died.”

Roberta said that as she got into the car to join her daughter she found herself thinking, “God, where are you?” She didn’t feel God’s presence in her pain, but she knew that she wanted to experience the compassion and caring of the God revealed in Jesus. She wanted that more than anything else. And she eventually found it. Roberta wrote,

“As I went and was with my daughter and her husband, we wept together just as Jesus wept at the grave of a friend.

And as we went to the tiny grave side and as we cried and prayed there and experienced in ways beyond understanding what the disciples experienced, we found that God gives peace—peace that passes understanding—because God is not simply a God of compassion, He is a God of power. He is a God who is capable of taking control when we are out of control.

Though our questions are not finally answered yet and are left in the mystery of God’s love, still we see His comfort, His power, His presence, and His strength. His help is there for us.”

THE OTHER SIDE

In the gospel of Mark there are three different stories about the disciples crossing with Jesus to the “other side” of the lake. (Mark 4:35, 6:47, 8:13) The disciples often struggle with the wind and the sea, and they also struggle to understand Jesus.

You see this story of crossing to the “other side” is a metaphor for the struggle to follow Jesus.

In our journey with Jesus it sometimes seems like he is asleep or absent from us. Sometimes it looks like the storm will win the day. We often have more questions than answers.

But, this one thing we know.

He is with us in the storm, and he also waits for us on the other side.

Faith will win out over fear. The salvation of God in Christ is stronger than any storm. God help us trust in that power.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

Carrollyn & Frank Allen
carrollynandfrank@earthlink.net