

Sunday, June 20, 2021
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7 (Year B)

Mark 4.35-41

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1156832114728481>

(Sermon begins at about 18:45)

“We’re All in the Same Boat . . . with Jesus”

The event in today’s Gospel reading is often described as a nature miracle, in which Jesus demonstrates an ability to control such natural elements as the weather. Clearly an indication that he is not just any mere mortal, but highlighting his divinity as the Son of God. And to reveal these attributes to the disciples, as evidenced by their awe and exclamation, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mk 4.41).

The context of the story is that Jesus has had a very long and busy day teaching the crowds along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. At the end of the day, he and the disciples decide to set out in a boat for the other side of the lake. Jesus is wiped out, so immediately falls asleep in the back of the boat. Then a violent storm whips up threatening to capsize the boat and endangering the lives of all on board. And Jesus manages to sleep through it. Until the disciples, naturally panicked, awaken Jesus, who, seemingly a little irritated, rebukes the wind and the sea, resulting in the storm abating.

I find it interesting that some commentaries are critical of Jesus and the disciples for getting in the boat in the first place. They argue that some of the disciples were fisherman, so should have been able to tell that a storm was brewing. Those commentators have obviously never been to the Sea of Galilee. One of the things you are told upon visiting this area is that there is something unique about the geography of the Sea of Galilee and the surrounding area. Because of this geography, it is not unusual for storms to develop with little warning. And many of these unexpected storms can be quite violent, as demonstrated in our story today.

Now, with many of the disciples being fisherman, or at least being from that immediate area, they would have known that such things happen. But knowing the potential dangers does not make the situation any easier to deal with should danger arise. Besides, the story is not meant to be about the competency of the disciples. It is meant to reveal something of who Jesus is—that he is the Son of God. But perhaps more importantly is what goes along with this understanding of who Jesus is—a lesson indicated by Jesus’ comment to his disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mk 4.40). This story is meant to be a demonstration of faith vs. fear. And the fact that Jesus expects faith of his disciples, and indeed, all who follow him. Faith in Jesus’ abilities to calm the storms of life and to protect his beloveds. This is demonstrated not only by Jesus’ words to his disciples, but also by his own activity as the storm began raging. We are told he was asleep in the stern of the boat, seemingly unaware of what was going on. His sleeping being an image not of apathy, but rather an image of trusting in God. Trusting in God even in the midst of—particularly in the midst of—stormy conditions.

Many religious education programs use a process called “theological reflection” to help us look at what is going on in our own lives and to place those events in a theological or spiritual context. One of the common ways of doing this is to think of a story from scripture that can be used as an image for whatever is going in our own life. And to use that scriptural image as an entry point to go deeper into our own life’s events and see where and how God may be operating. This is a useful approach because particularly when we are dealing with something that is difficult or traumatic, it is difficult to see just where God is, to see just how God might be working through whatever it is we are experiencing. Using a parallel scriptural image can help to draw us out of a situation that we may be too close to so that it is hard to see what God is doing or how God might help us through it.

Today’s story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee seems as good an analogy as any for what we have been through over the last 15 months. How early in 2020 we were happily going along our merry way, trying to get to wherever we thought we were going. And suddenly, unexpectedly, a storm developed. A global pandemic that took us by surprise. An event that rocked our societal boat with such violence that we were collectively crying out to God in words not unlike those used by the disciples: “do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mk 4.38). Literally, as deaths mounted, as businesses shuttered, some never to reopen. Figuratively, as we were required to go into lockdown, potentially threatening us financially, certainly threatening and changing the way we operated on a day-to-day basis. All the while feeling overwhelmed with figuring out new ways of living our lives while locked down; feeling anxious about how long this would go on; feeling scared about the possibility of us or loved ones getting sick.

Then, as we were still reeling from the collective impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, our societal boat was hit with wave after wave of violence and death, not due to the coronavirus but due to human actions that were racially motivated, raising the centuries old specter of systemic racism to our collective consciousness once again. A societal storm that played out in constructive ways with demonstrations and calls for our governments to evaluate discriminatory policies, and in unconstructive ways as some took advantage of the situation to riot, loot, and engage in senseless violence for violence’s sake. And in the midst of this, we again cried out to God in words not unlike those used by the disciples: “do you not care that we are perishing?” Literally, as the death count increased: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Daunte Wright, and way too many others. And figuratively, as we struggle to figure out how to put an end to systemic racism and all forms of “othering.” All the while feeling overwhelmed with figuring out our own part in making needed changes; feeling anxious about the state of our society and what change might mean; feeling scared for our own safety.

And just when we thought we couldn’t possibly handle any more waves swamping our societal boat, we were hit with the political storm surrounding the 2020 election. A political storm unlike any other in the history of our nation which saw unprecedented divisions between our major political parties, allegations of widespread voter fraud, distrust of elected officials, and an armed insurrection by fellow citizens against the seat of our federal government. And in the midst of this, we again cried out to God in words not unlike those used by the disciples: “do you not care that we are perishing?” Literally, as five people died during the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol. And figuratively, as our political system seems to be severely damaged, if not irreparably broken, resulting in difficulty, if not downright inability, of our government to

engage in some of the most basic duties outlined in our Constitution. All the while feeling overwhelmed with trying to sort out the truth amid the competing narratives being put forth by our major political parties; feeling anxious about what this might mean for our own liberties and freedoms; feeling scared for the future of our democracy.

These are just the storms that made the front page of the local paper and the nightly news. Our Gospel story need not just be an analogy for the pandemic or racial unrest or the 2020 elections or any other societal storm we might have to weather. The same image can be applied to our own personal storms. Perhaps dealing with a medical condition or diagnosis. Perhaps dealing with a tumultuous relationship. Perhaps dealing with difficulties at work. Perhaps dealing with stormy family dynamics. Perhaps dealing with the upheaval following the loss of a loved one. All of which can cause us to cry out to God in words not unlike those used by the disciples: “do you not care that we are perishing?” Sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. And always bringing feelings of being overwhelmed, of being anxious, of being scared.

At its heart, the story of Jesus calming the storm is a reminder that no matter what storms we may face in our lives, be they societal or personal, that Jesus is in the boat with us. Admittedly, he does not always make the storm cease as he did with the physical storm in the Gospel. Because a lot of the storms we must weather are of human making, the result of human action, the manifestation of freewill. But even with those storms, Jesus is nonetheless present, bidding “Peace! Be still!” If not to the storm, to us. Assuring us that he is present, offering his peace, offering his calming presence in the midst of our stormy emotions. Gently asking us, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Not in a judgmental way. Not chastising. But rather in a gentle way that serves as a reminder. That allows us to look at where we are. That allows us to see that even in the midst of the storm, he is there with us. Allowing us to realize for ourselves that, no, we don’t need to be afraid because he is with us. Helping us to realize that our faith sustains us even in the midst of our storms. And that in our faith, we can call upon Jesus whenever we need his calming presence, whenever we need his arm around us to steady us and support us, whenever we need his strength and guidance to help us continue on.

Of course, one of the ways Jesus comes to us is through the church, the Body of Christ in the world. One of the earliest symbols of the church was as boat or ark. The church being the vessel that carries us through the storms of life. I firmly believe the way we have weathered the storms of this past year—the pandemic, racial injustice, and political, as well as our individual, personal storms—is because our church has continued to be that vessel which has carried us safely through.

What we have been through will not be the last storms we have to deal with in our lives. But we know that we have a vessel that can carry us through whatever storms arise in our lives. That when those storms do arise, Jesus will always be there, bidding “Peace! Be still!” Bidding, “Do not be afraid; I am here in the boat with you.”