

“Are You Afraid?”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 20

New Testament Lesson: Mark 4:35-41

When Yuri and I go out of town for more than a day or two, we can tell when we get back that our cat Zeke has missed us terribly. Lately, though, it's been more than just missing us. He's gotten so used to us being around that when we're not, he begins to show signs of real anxiety and upset – even though we have someone feed and play with him once a day. And I think it must have been the same for the disciples with Jesus – all calm and collected when Jesus was with them, and increasingly agitated and even fearful when he slipped away from time to time. Like the time they were on that lake (which we just read about) and Jesus disappears for a little nap in the stern of the boat, perhaps even tucked in under the afterdeck. Jesus drops out of sight, and the disciples feel abandoned. This, despite what Mark reports about Jesus in earlier passages – that he saves people from unclean spirits, heals their paralysis and cures their diseases. Despite seeing how Jesus has had their back in the past and could handle anything that came their way, when things begin to get rough, the disciples fall to pieces. As Mark recalls it, “A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat so that the boat was already being swamped.” And even though Jesus is with them, the disciples panic. So he says, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Jesus knows how much their faith is going to mean to them. He knows that he will not always be with his disciples; that his earthly ministry must give way to a greater presence, a more universal presence and protection, a presence and protection not confined to space and time. And he knows that when he is enlarged in such a way as to hold all the world in care and protection, Jesus knows that, from that day forward, our one-on-one experience of Jesus will have changed.

In that day – which for us is today – ***our limited vision and thinking won't be enough; it isn't enough.*** It's just too limiting and self-centered to imagine that all *our* desires and needs must be met, that all *our* illnesses must be cured, that our loved ones must be kept safe from *any and all* harm, that our wealth always has to be protected and if possible growing, that all our conveniences are *really* necessities: cars that are the best money can buy, constant access to emails and the internet, all those things we think we can't live without 'cause we'll just shrivel up and die); it's just not enough to think only of ourselves and our immediate needs and desires.

If we are going to tap into who Jesus Christ really is, then our limited vision and thinking must be expanded. We need to enlarge who we are as a people, as a community, as a church, a family, as a follower of Christ – ***enlarge our sense of the world.*** And we need to at least get a glimpse of who God is and how God's universal presence and protection keeps the world in one piece – and at peace – and all the more so if we open our eyes and ears to the truth of Jesus Christ, if we proclaim the saving work of God Almighty, and do so especially when the storms of life hit the hardest. I mean, we really think life's troubles are going to kill us, don't we?

(Contemporary Q&A: When was a times in your life when you thought you just wouldn't make it; when things got really stormy? What if anything has really shaken your faith? There's a poem called The Seafarer that captures the despair we can feel in life. It's a little lengthy – about 6 minutes and a little loud at times – but I think it's worth a look. A think if really captures what it might have felt like for the disciples in that storm on the Sea of Galilee, what it feels like for us when it seems life is just out to get us. Let's watch.)

We all have times when we feel that God has abandoned us, left us to fend for ourselves, to suffer through our troubles alone, no one there to help us get out of the mess we're in. This happens to us because we forget who to turn to in life; we forget who God is. We forget what God has done for us in the past, how God has always been there for us, even at the roughest and messiest times of our lives. And at those times like the disciples in that boat, we panic. It's like the Dad who came home to find the house just a wreck – toys all over the living room, dirty dishes stacked in the sink, clothes piled in the laundry room, beds unmade, and the kids still in their pajamas. Worried, the Dad rushes upstairs to find the Mom reading a book in bed. "Are you OK? he asks; "what happened?" The Mom turns to him and says, "You know how you always ask what I do all day? Well today I decided not to do it?"

If you think you have it bad, if you think the world is in real trouble, just imagine what it would be like if God really did abandon us. If God decided not to do it; not to be there for us. I mean, that's what the disciples were feeling, isn't it, out on that lake amid a raging storm? They felt abandoned to forces beyond their control.

Let's look for a moment at what they experienced and see if it might actually help us to expand our vision of who Jesus really is.

The disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee and a storm hits and they cry out to Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Well, you can imagine what they're thinking. "Hey, Jesus, you helped everyone else and here we are out here getting beaten by the waves, whipped by the wind, about to drown in the sea and you don't even care. And yet, really, what did they expect Jesus to do? Think about it. I don't think they knew. I mean sure, Jesus had cast out demons and healed the sick. He withstood attacks by all manner of earthly power and authority, but this was different. This was a force of nature. No one on earth can truly control the wind and the sea, not even a prophet or healer or spiritual leader. No, the most they could hope for was that God would intervene on their behalf and save them from the storm. And I guess who better to pray for that than Jesus, right? I don't blame them, wake the man up and get him on his knees praying. But, what does Jesus actually do? "Peace!" he says. "Be still!" That's not a prayer; that's a command; and not to a person but to the forces of nature. Here, Jesus shows for the first time that he's not just another prophet, healer, or spiritual authority. His power goes beyond proclaiming truth and justice in the face of oppression; beyond healing the sick and empowering the helpless; Jesus' power goes beyond restoring us to wholeness, beyond casting out the demons that lay claim to us in our weakest moments. Jesus displays the **power of the creator**, the power of the One who has all things well in hand, the power of the One who said in Genesis:

"Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so."¹ And when Jesus displays a similar God-given power, the understanding that the disciples have about who Jesus is expanded. It's as if Jesus was laying claim to – and displaying – the power once thought only possible with God, the power we read about in the Psalms where it says (Ps. 104: 5-9): "You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight ... to the place that you appointed for them ..., that they might not again cover the earth."

In our reading today, the disciples watch as Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be Still!" and the wind ceases and there is a dead calm, and the disciples says, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

¹ Genesis 1:9.

And from that moment on, they have a greater understanding of who Jesus is. Throughout the rest of Mark's gospel account, the disciples slowly but surely begin to understand that Jesus is the Son of God, equal in all ways to God the Father, and as ever present in their lives as the Spirit of God itself. And this is a good thing for them to know, because before all is said and done they'll see Jesus die on the cross. They're going to need the assurance of who Jesus is in order to get through life. And, so do we. We need the assurance of the power and presences of Jesus in our lives – just like the disciples. And Jesus knows this. So, when the disciples fail to trust in the Lord amid the danger of that storm, Jesus turns to them and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith." And yet, aren't you afraid, sometimes? Aren't we all? Let's face it, Jesus demands a lot of his disciples us included. But, in the power of his death and resurrection, we, like his earliest disciples, can rise to the occasion. They went forth, doing miracles of their own and so can we – feeding the hungry, curing the sick, restoring the broken and downtrodden, proclaiming the Gospel, and transforming the world. Those who take on being a disciple of Jesus are called to do these things without letting any fear get in the way. But how? How did those earliest disciples lay claim to and employ such power in their lives as to transform the world?

The story is told of a seeker who met Jesus on a lonely road. "Lord," he inquired, "after all the people had been fed with the bread and fish, you said to you disciples: 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost (John 6:12).' What are the fragments that must be gathered up so that nothing will be lost?" Jesus gazed at the person a long moment and then answered: "The fragments are your fears, which multiply like the loaves and fishes and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost; instead, they must be brought to me, so that I may bear them with you. In this way, nothing that is part of you will be left unfound."² Nothing that is part of us – and particularly no fear or danger or trouble we may face – is outside of Jesus' grasp. When we feel lost and abandoned, tossed around by the storms of life, we get afraid and that's OK – as long as we hold on to our faith even in the midst of our fear. It's OK to be afraid as long as we take our fears to Jesus in prayer and trust that he is with us and will protect us no matter what. It's OK to be afraid as long as we turn to each other as a family of faith and together seek a solution in keeping with God's word.

In quieting that storm on an evening some 2,000 years ago and all the storms that he encountered in life, Jesus shows us that no power on earth – and not even the power of death itself – is beyond his reach. Jesus showed us that he cares for us so much that we can always count on his presence and protection in our lives, no matter what we're facing, as long as reach out in faith.

Can you do that, as hard as it gets sometimes, can you trust in God no matter what you're facing? In order to know for sure, ask yourself now – ask yourself every morning – who are you going to turn to the next time life gets a little stormy – or even a lot stormy. The next time your life is in an upheaval – the next time my life is in an upheaval – who are you, who am I going to reach out to? That's one question you've got to answer for yourself; that's something you have to claim for yourself, everyday. Who are you going to trust, with all your heart, come what may?

² John Mogabgab, "Fear Not," Weavings, March-April 1999, 2.

And where are you going to turn, in order to be reminded of just how much Jesus loves and protects us, everyday. Ask yourself: who are you going to turn to; where are you going to go for a true sense of peace and protection?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, how grateful we are that you care so much for us. You lovingly provide lead us to those times and places we need to meet you again and again, week in and week out, in our daily lives. You protect us at all times and in all places – and we pray your protection on the youth of our church and their advisors this week. And keep us safe here at home, O Lord. For though we have the best of intentions, we too easily get caught up in things that drain our sense of peace, or kill our love for life. We never know when we might be hit by such a circumstance. Help us to hone in on your signals, Lord, those inner thoughts that let us know when we should pass something up, or when we ought to just take a different course in life.

There are times, too, Lord, when we loose touch with the Spirit's strengthen and guidance. We just can't find our way back to you, to the place of familiarity and safety that you provide for us. At such times, awaken us to your presence so that we might follow you to our spiritual house of safety. Help us to rejoin our faith community with such a sense of encouragement and energy that it is not only our soul that is refreshed and restored, but the souls of our brothers and sisters as well. And let us use our strength, our time, our talents to the betterment of our community – meeting the needs of any who lack basic necessities, providing encouragement to those who are downtrodden, comforting our loved ones, neighbors and even the stranger among us who is troubled or lost. And let us do all this, Lord, in the assurance of your presence with us, and the strength of your Word for us. Let us do all this in the Spirit of the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. **Amen.**