

Storm Stories

Mark 4:35-41; Mark 6:45-53

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Storm stories – I’ve got a million of them. And so do you. Joe Richardson remembers driving up to his and Marilyn’s house in Wichita Falls in 1979 after the big tornado and discovering that his house was still standing, practically untouched while the others on the block were destroyed. Or Susan Rushing going through big Hurricane Carla in 1961 with her parents. Or Barbara Cordell snow skiing, getting caught in an ice storm that dropped the temperature to -47 degrees but was able to carve out a snow cave, which allowed her to survive until rescuers found her later. Many of you have been through other storms: hurricanes and tornados, floods, hailstorms, and dust storms.

My own family had a kind of PTSD from tornados. My grandmother was 13 years-old in 1922 living on a farm in West Texas near Clyde when the area was struck by a tornado, destroying their farm house, so they moved into the town. In 1938, another tornado struck Clyde killing 13 people. At the time, my grandmother was a 29 years-old mother to my mother who was 6 and my uncle who was 2. That storm further traumatized my grandmother and family that, along with the destruction of the town, forced them to move to Stamford, to what eventually became my hometown.

I learned very early that often storms were never just storms. We can analyze them scientifically and use common sense in preparing for them but there is something *more* about storms that get down deep inside of many of us. Fear,

anxiety, chaos – it is outside of us but it gets down inside of us, too. It feels as if the world is coming apart for a time.

Of course, the Bible is full of such storms. Noah and the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, Job and the whirlwind, Jonah and the storm at sea and the whale, again and again in the Psalms, and the Apostle Paul shipwrecked in a storm at sea in Acts 27, among the many.

Today, we read of two such storms in Mark, both concerning Jesus and the disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. (Remember that the boat is the ancient Christian symbol of the church.) In the first story, Jesus says to the disciples “Let’s go over to the other side.” Right off the reader is alerted. “The other side” is the opposite shore from the Jewish side. Over there are Gentiles. It is forbidden to go over there, it is crossing a boundary that is ethnic, religious, moral, and from the perspective of people on both sides, it is God’s ordained natural law, God’s will.

Sure enough, during the crossing a storm blows up. No doubt, the disciples are looking at one another with fear and concern in their eyes. This is a storm but it is more than a storm. The cosmic order is being challenged, even subverted, and when a boundary of such cosmic proportions is crossed, expect pushback, expect a storm.

My old friend Greg Mobley, who teaches Old Testament at Yale Divinity School, says that the ancient Jewish understanding, is that when God created the heavens and the earth, the chaos is pushed back and confined behind a kind of retaining wall called the firmament, which is a “thin colander-like skydome that holds back the bulk of the water but allows for rain through its perforations. This

firmament is our hedge against chaos” (Gregory Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters*, p. 21). Yet the chaos is ever ready to break free and engulf everything. All it takes is for human sin to erode the retaining dam. Sin awakens the chaos, stirs it up and leads to the undoing of creation. Proper order, proper behavior, ethical and moral structure, observing the law and liturgy are our defenses against the deluge (Mobley, p. 22).

So, when Jesus and the disciples cross over to the other side to the Gentiles, by the thinking of the time, they are breaking the proper order of creation, which provokes a storm. For the disciples, it’s not just a storm, it is primeval chaos coming unleashed, it is creation becoming undone.

So the boat begins to take on water and these disciples, many of whom are experienced fishermen, know they are in trouble. Meanwhile, Jesus is in the stern of the boat asleep on a cushion while they scream and holler, “Master, don’t you care that we’re about to sink and die?!”

We all can identify with the disciples in one way or another. We’ve sat in hospital waiting rooms, in jails, nursing homes, in bed at home staring up at the ceiling at 3:00 in the morning worrying, in anguish, crying out, “O God, don’t you care? Are you even listening? Please help! Please wake up and pay attention to my cries.” Or maybe it’s the church, “Lord God, our little church is in trouble, please hear us and save us!”

Most of us know such times. But for most of us, they are discrete experiences. They are not chronic. Most of us do not go through life constantly,

chronically, relentlessly crying to God for help. And most of us have not done so for generation after generation.

The great preacher, James Forbes, suggests that a fundamental difference between the Black church and the White church is that the Black church knows what it means to be “desperate for God.” And this desperation for God stretches consistently across decades, centuries. Every Sunday for centuries the Black church has gathered to give voice to their desperation for God: “Please God, hear our prayers, hear our songs, hear our preaching, hear our cries! We are desperate for you! Without you we cannot make it!” Every day, every Sunday, all the time, in one way or another across generations so much so that it had become part of the Black church DNA.

For the White church, there are times when we too are desperate for God, but for most White people, most of the time, the assumption is that we can make it on our own. At least, that’s a suggestion by Jim Forbes, and I trust Jim Forbes. It is something to ponder.

In the boat, in the church, the disciples are desperate for God, crying out. Mark tells us that Jesus wakes up and rebukes the wind and says to the waves, “Peace! Be still!” Everything stops and there is dead calm. Jesus then turns to the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:39-40).

Mark says the disciples are filled with great awe – or they’re afraid, full of fear – that even the wind and the sea obey Jesus (4:41). Interesting... they are more unnerved after Jesus answers their pleas and silences the storm, than they were in the midst of it. Why does the calming of the chaos evoke more fear? Is there even

more going on here? A storm is never just a storm and Jesus calming a storm is never just calming a storm.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously said back during the Civil Rights Movement, “We are not all guilty but we are all responsible.” Maybe Jesus calming the storm, also challenges our responsibility? After all, without storms, we have no excuse to cross over to the other side? There are no more excuses. We are responsible.

Jesus and the disciples disembark on the Gentile side and go about all kinds of things like exorcising the man enslaved to a legion of demons – which we’ll talk about next Sunday, and feeding 5000 people. Later, when it comes time to return to the Jewish side, Mark tells us over in chapter 6, that Jesus decides to get away from the crowds and the controversy and spend some time alone in prayer, so he sends the disciples on across without him. Interestingly, he must compel them to get in the boat. These experienced fishermen, are afraid of going back across. What are they afraid of?

With fear and foreboding they get out on the lake and sure enough another storm comes, and the winds begin to blow against them. They’re straining at the oars but not only are they not making headway, they seem to be going backwards (6:48). Here is a poignant picture of the church and of discipleship in a world dominated by the Powers of Darkness and Death. We work hard and we keep on working hard trying to make a difference, but we feel like not only are things not getting better but that we’re actually going backwards. Texas and national politics feel like we’re going back to the 19th century with Jim Crow voting laws and shoot-outs on the open streets of Dodge City. We feed people, sometimes trying to

help with utility bills or emergencies but it is as if many are being devoured by something bigger than they are and they can't get out. In a crisis, someone gets a payday loan, and then discovers that it only gets deeper and worse every day, every week, and every month. Over and over, we feel like we're rowing against the wind and can't make headway.

From a distance, Jesus sees what's going on and comes. Again, the disciples are troubled more by Jesus than they are by the storm. They're not sure he's coming to them or not, and they're not sure if it is really him or a ghost. When they face the truth that it is Jesus and he is coming to them, they are even more terrified (6:50). Mark uses a word for terrified which means that the storm rages inside of them as well as outside of them.

We all have heard or read of the chronic anxiety that pervades our society. Almost all our children are exhibiting what's called general anxiety disorder. One of the challenges before our small church rowing against the wind, is how do we raise children and young people to be strong and resilient in a time when the storms inside of us are reflecting the storms outside of us? The answer for many White evangelicals is everyone is on their own and everyone needs to wear their own guns. But what if the Way of Jesus is something different? For example, what might we learn from our sisters and brothers in the Black church tradition who have dealt with anxiety for 400 years? And what can we learn from sisters and brothers across the centuries and from other places? The Way of Christ says we're all in this boat together, so together what might we learn and practice?

As Jesus approaches the boat, he says, "Take heart, don't be afraid. It is 'I AM'" (6:50). Usually translated as "It is I" it is actually Jesus identifying himself

as the “I AM” of the Exodus (Ex.3:4). Again, Jesus stills the storm and again, the disciples are “utterly astounded” or another translation would be “they are beside themselves.” Here is Jesus calming the storm, and he has just previously fed 5000 people, and he identifies himself by the same name as Moses heard from the burning bush, “I AM,” but the disciples are so self-obsessed that they don’t get it.

In fact, they are so self-obsessed that they have come down with what the Black church taught me to call “old Pharaoh’s disease,” the hardening of their hearts, so they are oblivious to not only who Jesus is, but also oblivious to the whole purpose of crossing over to the other side in the first place.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnson wrote a great book a few years ago called *Active Hope: A.K.A. How to Face the Mess We’re in Without Going Crazy*, in which they identify what they call three primary stories that have emerged in our time, by which people seek to live: *business as usual* – which assumes our society is on the right track and that individuals are in control (or should be) of their private, individual lives. Second, there is *the great unraveling* – fueled by anxiety and despair, this narrative sees all business as usual as coming apart at the seams. It’s all chaos. Finally, Macy and Johnson suggest there is a third narrative, *the great turning* – which sees the same unraveling as the other people, but instead of anxiety over trying to return to *business as usual*, sees this an opportunity for nurturing new relationships with one another, with the Earth, and with working across old divisions participating in a new future and a new way.

Every Sunday we gather amid these conflicting stories. We are rarely, if ever, are completely clear which story we’re living in. Most of the time it’s all three at the same time. Yet, we gather each Sunday to hear once again our version

of the Story that we are participants in the *great turning*. Romans 8 tells us that God is working for good in all things... and therefore, if God is for us, who is against us? And that nothing, nothing can separate from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:28-39).

We all have our storm stories – there’s a million of them. I remember when I was a 24-year-old pastor sitting on the front porch of church member and someone I came to love dearly, Wilson Yoakum. We sat on his porch as he told me of sitting in the bottom of his foxhole in North Africa during WWII and being caught in an artillery barrage. He said that you’d be surprised that you can pull your entire body underneath that small steel helmet. Wilson recounted his fear and how intensely he prayed and prayed and those prayers of trusting God sustained him then, and they were still sustaining him forty years later. That’s a storm story.

Or Joe Richardson’s story of his intense fear and grief while his and Marilyn’s daughter, Carin, went through brain cancer and surgery. Joe had memorized the Bible verse “Jesus wept,” (John 11:35) as a smart-alecky junior high boy in Sunday School, but that verse came back to him again and again as he wept, and knew that Jesus wept alongside of him. That’s a storm story.

We all have storm stories. We lost a child, we lost a spouse, we lost a marriage, we lost our job, and so many other stories. Yet somehow or another, the great “I AM,” God in Christ came to us, was with us, and brought us through.

That’s our story and we’re sticking with it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.