

“A DOUBLE REPROACH”
Mark 4:35-41
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
June 24, 2018

Back in 2011 I spent an entire month studying and sightseeing in the Holy Land. One day our group took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a large lake in the north of Israel. I learned from our guide that the Sea of Galilee is as dangerous as it is beautiful. It's located 680 feet below sea level and has a fertile climate that is almost tropical. The hills surrounding the lake are carved deep with ravines and gorges which act like giant funnels drawing the winds toward the sea. In a matter of seconds, the calm surface of the water can become a raging, churning cauldron.

This, of course, is the experience of Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel lesson. Their day has been full of people and activities. Jesus has preached his message to the multitudes using many parables. The people listen attentively but few understand. Jesus is exhausted, so he leaves the crowd, takes his disciples with him, and gets into a boat. On my own boat ride seven years ago, I learned that the boats of Galilean fishermen in Jesus' time were quite large and a little unwieldy, with only one mast and one great triangular sail. At the stern of the boat, just in front of the helmsman, there was a little deck with a cushion on it, and it was the custom for distinguished guests to sit there while the boat sailed.

And so, in today's story Jesus goes to the back of the boat, stretches out on the cushion and goes to sleep. Suddenly a strong wind blows up and the waves are so high they begin to spill over into the boat. The disciples panic and rush to rouse the sleeping Jesus. Jesus awakens, stills the storm, and all is well. On the surface, then, this is a miracle story not unlike other miracle stories in this section of Mark's Gospel. The sea is raging; Jesus acts; and the sea is calm. But much more is going on here than meets the eye.

Our text offers us one of those rare stories of Jesus exercising power when the only ones present to see it and benefit from it are his disciples. The boat scene is removed from Jewish crowds on one shore and Gentile crowds on the other. What we have here is an occasion of Jesus alone with his followers. Or in terms of Mark's situation forty years later, this is Jesus directly addressing and ministering to the Church, to those who are supposedly people of faith – in other words, to people like us. What, then, is Mark trying to emphasize?

First, he confronts his readers with the disciples' fear and lack of faith. The disciples are on a trip, not of their own choosing, but at Jesus' command. They are not alone, but they act as though they are alone. The world around them is one enormous storm of wind, wave, and rising water. Jesus is asleep, the picture of quiet confidence in the power of the God who made both land and sea.

The activity that changes the situation is framed upon a double reproach. Most of us have participated in this kind of tit-for-tat in our closest relationships. She says, “Honey, you're an hour late getting home from work. Our dinner is cold.” He says, “Well, honey, you're one to talk. You always make the rest of us late for church by taking an hour to get ready.” There you

have it: accusation and counter-accusation. One reproach is answered by another reproach, and the scene turns ugly. Do any of you here recognize this scene?!

Well, we have a double reproach in today's story, but it follows a different pattern from those you and I typically engage in. First, the disciples reproach Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Then Jesus reproaches the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Notice, Jesus' response is neither defensive nor vindictive, as our responses often are; but his response is honest and confrontational. He calls attention to the cold, raw emotion of fear in the hearts of the disciples. Indeed, this is what grabs us by the throat as we read this story. You and I may never find ourselves about to drown on a storm-tossed sea, but we can still identify with and sympathize with the fear of those first disciples.

These are days in which fear is in the very air we breathe. Has there ever been a generation as frightened as ours? Not long ago, reading at random, I came upon a passage which, in the light of current events, makes for melancholy reflection. It came from a book written in 1902 by a man named George Coe. The author was praising the achievements of modern science, and had this to say: "Human beings have ceased to be afraid. We have our own unsolved problems, as our forebears did, but they awaken little sense of foreboding and no fear. We do not catch our breath at the thought of what may be, but boldly take to pieces every new phenomenon, certain in advance that it harbors no hobgoblins."

Can you imagine writing those words in the year 2018? Over the past century, we have endured two world wars and many other wars on a smaller scale. We have lived with the threat of nuclear destruction and, more recently, random acts of violence and terrorism. Today, parents are afraid for their children's safety at school. Workers and retirees are afraid they won't have enough money to make ends meet. Many American citizens are afraid of foreigners and even neighbors who are simply different. Let's bring this matter even closer to home: committed Christians are afraid for the future of their local congregations and the Church as a whole. Everywhere there are people who are fretful, nervous, depressed, irritable, sleepless, physically under par; and the basic reason is because they are victims of fear. Who was it that said that the first thing from which we have to be saved is fear?

Psychologists remind us that there are two kinds of fear, natural and neurotic. If I were tramping through the heart of an Amazon jungle I would very naturally and properly be afraid of snakes. If in my home next door I were living in terror of snakes under the furniture I would be at the mercy of a fear that is neurotic. The distinction can be a helpful one. Natural fear, like the experience of pain, is one of the sentinels of life. Its function is to warn us of the approach of danger so that we can be on our guard. If we had no fear at all we would probably pay for the lack of it with our lives.

This is why you and I sympathize with the disciples' fear. What they are afraid of is no figment of the imagination. They are confronted with a real storm, with the real threat of death. It is no wonder that they reproach Jesus with the words, "Do you not care?" They have every right and reason to be afraid.

So why does Jesus answer their reproach with a reproach of his own? Why does he chastise them for their natural fear? It is because he is with them and they are still afraid. It is because they lack faith. Now, when Jesus uses the word "faith," he isn't referring to a set of

doctrines or a formal creed. You know, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth . . . I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church.” You and I can believe all these things in our heads and still be immobilized by fear in our hearts. When Jesus tells the disciples they lack faith, he’s saying they lack trust – specifically, they lack trust in him. The storm is frightening, to be sure, but they are in the presence of a power greater than the storm.

Friends, if you and I can school ourselves to remember that we are in God’s hands – if more and more God becomes a personal reality to us, not just an abstract idea – we can get on top of our fears and achieve victory over them. The supreme remedy for fear is not courage; it is faith. The pictures that our anxieties paint for us in days like these are not imaginary. We are confronted with real problems and perils, with serious challenges and crises. Unstable, unpredictable world leaders are a reality; the proliferation of gun violence is a reality; government budget deficits, church budget deficits, and family budget deficits are a reality. If you and I had to face tomorrow and the problems of tomorrow unaided and alone, depending solely on our own reserves and resources, we might well be driven to despair, as some have been who possess no invisible supports to turn to. But we are not alone. Beside us and within us can come the Presence that is beyond the universe and yet fills the universe, with wisdom to guide us, strength to protect us, love to keep us to the end.

Let me ask you: do you believe that? If you do believe it, do you put your belief into practice? When fear is plaguing you, do you pull yourself up and say quietly, “I have faith in God”? With all due respect to psychiatry – because I have benefited from it personally – a simple trust in God can be worth as much to you as a hundred hours of therapy and a life-time supply of Xanax.

So the first thing Mark wants us to see in this story is the disciple’s fear, which is rooted in a lack of faith. Faith is the antidote to fear. Then the second thing Mark wants us to see is that there is power in Jesus’ words.

This may not be immediately apparent to the casual reader, but Mark presents Jesus’ stilling of the storm as an exorcism story. The story assumes the sea to be the abode of forces hostile to God. Jesus rebukes the wind and commands it to be silent, which is the same formula he uses in casting out demons. The power Jesus wields over the storm is that of the “Teacher.” Jesus is the teacher who exorcises and the exorcist who teaches. Mark is locating Jesus’ power in his words, a matter of great importance for a Church suffering in a persecuting world. Jesus’ word is still present, and it is a word of power.

Twenty-five years ago, I was serving as a hospital chaplain in Houston, Texas. I was called late one night to the room of a patient who had died suddenly of a brain aneurism. The patient’s widow was sitting at his bedside. She was inconsolable with grief, and she was not inhibited by the fact that I was a clergy. She expressed her anger toward God. She told me she felt betrayed by God, abandoned by God. Underneath her anger was the emotion of fear – the fear of being alone, the fear of not being able to make it in the world without the companionship of her husband, the fear that this one she so cherished had disappeared into oblivion.

I mostly listened, allowing her to express her feelings without making any kind of judgment. Then my pager went off (do you remember pagers?!), and I was called to another part

of the hospital. I was gone perhaps a half-hour, then returned to visit with this widow again. This time, her demeanor was completely changed. She was still sitting beside her dead husband, but now she was noticeably calmer. I saw that she was reading a Bible, so I asked her what she was reading. She told me she was reading the words of Jesus from the 14th chapter of John: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

On that boat on the Sea of Galilee, the words of Jesus have power: “Peace! Be still!” Friends, the promise of the gospel is that the words of Jesus still have power in a world that is paralyzed by fear. The storms of life are frightening, without question, but we are in the presence of a power greater than the storm. The words of Jesus can still calm the storm. Are you and I listening? And do we believe what we hear?