

June 23, 2024 - Mark 4:35-41 Bishop Larry Kochendorfer - Alberta and the Territories

There is danger in the water. There is danger in the water. That's the point of today's text and of this sermon, and on at least one level, we understand that point well.

Oh, sure, there's also beauty in water. There's a fascination with water whether it be the mud puddle in the back yard stomped in by a two-year-old adventurer, or the sound and sight of the rolling of ocean waves toward the shore. There's something about water that beckons us—especially at this time of year!

We make our plans to go to the beach, we head for that mountain getaway and a familiar canoeing spot, or we get our fishing tackle ready for that fly-fishing trip at a favourite stream. That's the beauty in the water! We love it. Even the domesticated water of a swimming pool has its appeal, it is inviting on a hot, sweltering day. Or think about water that comes in a gentle summer rain—we watch it and smell it and listen to those big, beautiful drops falling out of the sky to nourish the parched earth!

And yet, for all its beauty, we know enough about water to be cautious—to have a fear of it—for we know that there's danger in the water, too. That's why we build fences around pools and put life jackets in our boats and fortify our children with swimming lessons. There's something dangerous about the water that we ought to fear.

So, we are sure this morning that we understand the fear of those disciples when we hear, once again, this familiar story. They are crossing the Sea of Galilee—an area of water some 700 feet/213+ meters below sea level where unexpected, violent storms develop quickly

on the warm surface of the lake and where waves can easily reach thirty feet/9 + meters. The danger is not moderate, it's deadly.

The disciples are afraid because they know something about the danger in that water—the danger of what can happen in a storm: the danger of capsizing, of being overwhelmed by the wind and the waves, of drowning.

And we know the story backwards and forwards, we tell ourselves, so we are sure that that's the danger in the water that they fear. As a result, we often spiritualize this danger in the water—applying this story to all the things about life that we fear. We look at this fear of the disciples and we relate that fear to the fear we have of the storms that surround us. The storms of life, the storms that trouble the church.

This is how we are often tempted to interpret and apply today's reading. So sure, of what it's saying to us in fact, that we go tramping around in it until it is thoroughly sanitized of its—real—terror.

To understand the disciples' fear only in this way, it seems to me, is to misunderstand the text. It's not just the storm that blows up on the open water that causes the disciples to fear—because the storm, after all, isn't the real danger in the water. You might be surprised, but I don't think this is the real danger at all. No, the real danger in the water is Jesus!

Look at what happens in this text: Jesus travels with the disciples out to sea, "Let us go across to the other side," he says, a storm blows up, he wakes up and he rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!", and the wind ceases, and there is a dead calm.

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus asks. Unfortunately, the English translation masks the disciples’ fear. “And they were filled with great awe”—would perhaps better be translated— “they feared a great fear.” They feared a great fear.

The real danger in the water is Jesus!

“‘Who is this,’ they question, ‘that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” They sense that there’s something about this One that is dangerous. For if Jesus can do what he did with the great windstorm and the beating waves, then what might he have in mind to do with them? It’s an important question: “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

It’s the kind of force—of authority—that can turn not just a storm inside out but can also turn us—you and me—inside out and upside down. And who wants to be turned inside out? Who wants to be turned upside down? This is the kind of power that makes people tremble down to their toes, however seaworthy the boat they’re in.

No, there’s something about the power of God that calls for distance. And it’s not a lack of faith, but rather a sign of faith—of trust—when you recognize it.

Pastor and teacher, Fred Craddock, tells the story of a pastor who went to visit one of his parishioners in the hospital. The congregational member was suffering from a terminal illness, and the pastor went to visit her knowing that, at the end of that visit, he would pray one of those prayers that acknowledges the desperation of the situation, and that accepts, as fact, that not much is going to change. These are honest and pastorally sensitive prayers, and often they are the only appropriate kind of prayer to pray.

The pastor went there prepared to pray that kind of prayer, but the woman prevailed upon him to beg God to heal her. And so, against his better judgment, the pastor, as Craddock tells the story, prayed a different kind of prayer altogether. He prayed fervently, even while he understood what a long shot that prayer was. And then when the prayer was over, he left the room.

A few days later he was back for another visit. The woman was sitting up in the bed. The tubes had been removed, and the curtains were open. She said to him, “You won’t believe what has happened. The doctors noticed some changes the other day, and called for more x-rays, and they have told me that they can no longer see any sign of a tumor! I’m going home tomorrow.”

The pastor said later, “When I got out to the parking lot, I looked up into the skies and said, ‘Don’t ever do that to me again!’”

There’s something about the power of God that ought to make us fear because it’s that unmanageable.

Maybe the disciples knew that—there in the boat looking face to face with Jesus—looking at the danger in that water. Jesus Christ, that mysterious One, that disturbing One, that demanding One, had done the unlikely thing with that storm, so what unlikely thing was he about to do with them?

And what unlikely thing does Jesus desire to do with us?

We are in the midst of Synod Convention season. This weekend the BC Synod, the Eastern Synod, and the Synod of Alberta and the Territories are meeting. Already the MNO Synod and SK Synod have met.

What unlikely thing does Jesus desire to do with us? To turn us inside out and upside down.

Re-focus on faith formation and discipleship rather than holding on tightly to the institutional church? Celebration of diversity and welcome of strangers and neighbours beyond our familiar circles? Working together in interfaith partnerships for justice and peace? Living out our baptismal promises in grace widely cast?

We look at water, sitting in a baptismal font so placid and serene as it is cupped in the hand and splashed upon some unsuspecting child, and we are tempted to think that it's so tame and so comfortable. Moreover, we are tempted to think that baptism itself is so respectable and proper until being shaped by that water, being formed by it and living under its terrifying challenge, becomes a radical and necessary calling.

The Affirmation of our Baptism calls us to return again and again to this challenge: remember the covenant God made with you in holy baptism? To live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and to share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

There is danger in the water for we are called to lives turned inside out and upside down—to live our baptismal promises in grace widely cast.

Remember that wonderful conversation in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when the children are asking the beavers about Aslan—the great lion: “Is he safe?” they ask. “No,” the beaver responds, “but he is good.”

The promise of this text, the good news in this text, is that Jesus is with you, but it is not only that Jesus is with you. Notice that Jesus does not say “You go over to the other side,” but “Let us go over to the other side.” Jesus was there all along, no matter what Jesus was doing, whether that be preaching about parables or sleeping on a pillow or stilling a storm or stirring up conversation and decision-making on a synod convention floor.

The promise of this text is also that there is something on the other side that Jesus knows about—and needs to get us to. Of course, the reality for the disciples, and for us, is that the other side is unknown, unfamiliar, it will require change and transformation and letting go. It has its own set of challenges—the disciples have to see Jesus differently—see themselves differently. It means living into a new reality.

Perhaps the act of faith is not just the trust that Jesus will still the storm. The act of faith is taking Jesus' invitation to heart. The act of faith is getting into the boat. The act of faith is believing—trusting—that another side is not only possible—it is essential.