

Pentecost 4 – Cycle B: Mark 4:35-41

Most of us, I would guess, have a healthy fear of water – be it lake or river. At this time of year, especially, when we often set aside time to go to the beach, a cottage, or a resort, we are mindful of the weather before setting out from shore in a boat; we make sure that there are enough life jackets for everyone on board; and we may consult maps or discuss routes with people familiar with the area where we want to do our boating. These days, we often take a GPS with us which, among other things, can add to our sense of security when we are far from shore. We may not check our life insurance policy before going out on the water, but for those of us who do not have a watercraft we use each weekend, “cautious” is probably the attitude that best describes our relationship with large bodies of water.

For the ancients, even the people of Jesus’ day, fear of sailing was not unfounded. We take swimming skills for granted, but most people knowing how to swim or having access to personal flotation devices is something characteristic of the modern era. In antiquity, chances were good that if you went overboard, you would not be able to save yourself. Navigation for most people meant staying near shore, rather than heading out into open water. Boats of the time were not universally seaworthy. A bucket was the technology at hand if the vessel began taking on water. And it is probably true that because what lay underwater was by-and-large a mystery, people imagined all kinds of horrors and wonders beneath the sea. The biblical story of Jonah is, among other things, a product of such imagining. Awe and fear would probably best describe the regard most people held concerning what we call “the water.”

Through this lens, then, we can relate to the desperation of Jesus’ disciples when the windstorm arose on the Sea of Galilee, the account we read in today’s Gospel. The storm was a defining moment for the disciples, not only as a personal survival story to pass along to their children and grandchildren, but more as a turning point in their growing understanding of Jesus as their teacher and friend. It is still early days in Mark’s gospel when this happens. So far in the narrative, Jesus has called the disciples, established himself as a healer, done some preaching, and then begun teaching people about God and the Kingdom of God through a series of remarkable stories the disciples came to understand as parables. And so, there is an element of revelation in this account that is significant both for the first disciples and for us as those who are first coming to know Jesus in Mark’s story. Little by little, Jesus has been revealed as one having authority – chosen by God to continue the proclamation begun by John the Baptist; he has been revealed as a gifted healer for individuals suffering from physical and mental illness; he has been portrayed by Mark as a wise rabbi, understanding God’s law to such a depth that he can teach according to the law; and finally, his parables nurture the hunger people have for the meaning of existence and the relevance of faith and religious teaching. He teaches, preaches, and heals as one with authority. And so, in time of crisis, when the disciples themselves are up against the wall, so to speak, they now turn to Jesus in their hour of need. And through this development, this turn of events (we might say), Jesus’ authority is enlarged both for disciples and readers. Mark has the disciples voice the question we ourselves are meant to ponder, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

It is interesting to look at Mark’s story-telling technique and see the integrity of his narrative. But as so many artists do, I believe that Mark uses his art as clothing for his own ideas and convictions; and this testimony is, perhaps, the most important message in this morning’s Gospel – the message that Mark, himself, understands Jesus as one to whom he can turn and to whom we can turn in our hour of need; when our backs are up against the wall; when we can do nothing but cry out in lamentation “does no one care that we are perishing?” As the late Delton Glebe once put it, times such as this, times when all our faith and understanding are put to the test, can best be described as times when the rubber hits the road. Everything looks good on paper; the design work is elegant: now the test drive; the practical application. Mark has his answer already and, through the gift of today’s Gospel and his whole account, really, wants us to discover what he has discovered: Jesus is not only the one for others, Jesus is also the one for me! The one to whom you and I can turn; the one who is present with us wherever we are (in the boat, as it were); the one who can give deep peace, even and especially as we are in fear of perishing.

I find it fascinating that we know nothing much about Saint Mark the Evangelist. His gospel is considered by biblical scholars to be the first of the three synoptic gospels – that is, both Matthew and Luke use Mark’s gospel as their primary source. But Mark, himself, is not part of the story he tells – he is not the beloved disciple John reveals himself to be; he is not like Matthew, worried that his Jewish readers might discount Jesus’ importance. He is not like Luke, revealing the prominence of women in the Jesus story. But Mark, for all his hiding and anonymity, does, I believe, *know us* as people very much like himself; as people whose life has known no shortage of trial and difficulty; and yet, as people who are also prepared

to hope because of the integrity of our shared question “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

It is such a fine point that Mark takes us to with this question; and yet, it is exactly the place in our faith journey where we must stop and put up our tent and spend some time in sojourn. “Who is Jesus? Who are we – both with and without Jesus? Why do we turn to him? How does he meet our great need?”

Mennonite pastor Michael King suggests that this somewhat mystical relationship we have with Jesus, the relationship that Mark signals to us with this account of Jesus and the disciples in the storm, reveals a kind of spiritual immune system which faith in Jesus provides. He writes, “I remember a dear, faithful widow telling me, just after her husband died following years of stroke-weakened living, that everyone had long asked her how she could keep going. She said that *before* living through his stroke, the years of caring for him and those final months of never knowing whether tomorrow he would be alive or dead, she too would have said that she could not endure such an experience. But once the time came, there also came resources – from “beyond,” as she experienced it through her Christian faith – and she had strength enough to sail in peace even across that sea of troubles. ‘I witnessed this miracle,’ Michael confesses.” For me, Michael is in the same place as Mark; is in the same place as the disciples in the boat; is in the same place you and I can be as we allow our faith to lead us through life.

Julia Child is credited with having said, “Life is unpredictable: eat dessert first!” Mark would say to us, “Life is terrifying – as terrifying as being caught in the middle of a huge storm in a leaky boat, having no life preserver, and not being able to swim.” But he would also say, “Jesus is with us and remains with us and counsels us to faith.”

“Why are you afraid?” he asks.