

June 21, 2015

TEXT: Mark 4:35–41

TITLE: Shouting at Storms

It was a dark and stormy night. That may not be the most original way to start a sermon, but it's an accurate description for our gospel lesson. Jesus finally finished preaching to the crowds gathered along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As the day ended, the boat that had been his pulpit was loaded up with the disciples and his entourage took off for the other side. At some point of that journey, it truly became a dark and stormy night. Waves threatened to swamp the boat while Jesus slept in the stern. (That's the back of the boat. I had to look that up; having grown up in Kansas, I'm not particularly well-versed in nautical stuff.) The disciples were afraid until Jesus shouted out, "Peace! Be still!" and a great calm fell over the water. It's a great story. When taught that story in Sunday School, you learned to trust in Jesus, our Savior, who can calm the storms in your life. Like the old song used to say, "Put your hand in the hand in the man who stilled the waters." It's a great story about a dark and stormy night. But in truth, it's a story with a much deeper meaning than what you took away from it when you were first taught it by your grade school Sunday School teacher.

Imagine that if instead of your Sunday School teacher, one of the seminary professors were to lecture on this passage. She or he would make three points about this story: it was written by Mark for the early church around him using images from Jewish scripture as a way to convince people that Jesus Christ is God. The early Christian church around the time of Mark was enduring a terrible storm of persecution. Many believers had been kicked out of synagogues and their homes. Romans had invaded Jerusalem and were about to destroy the holy temple. Church leaders were being arrested and in some cases crucified, just as Jesus himself had been crucified. It would not be a surprise if the Christians back then had said, "Lord Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?"

So Mark tells them this story about Jesus calming the sea, not simply because it happened, but because in telling it, he can answer some of their questions and calm their fears. In telling the story, he used parallels to other stories from Jewish scripture. For example, long before Mark, another prophet of God got into a boat and fell sound asleep while a terrible storm arose and the sailors were afraid they were all going to die. That was the prophet Jonah. He calmed the storm by jumping into the water and living inside a whale for three days before emerging again on dry land. But Mark said, Someone greater than Jonah has come to earth. Jesus himself calmed the storm with only a few words—although he too would sacrifice himself for others and spend three days in the darkness of the tomb before emerging again into the light of Easter morning. In addition to all that, Jewish scripture taught that only God can control the wind and the waves. In Genesis God separated the waters from below the earth from the waters above the earth. In the Psalms God commands the seas; and in Job it says, "By God's power the sea is stilled [and all] are astounded at the Lord's rebuke."

So, the Sunday School lesson about this passage teaches us that Jesus is powerful and can be trusted to calm the storms of our life. The seminary lesson goes deeper and points to how the church, in times of trouble, affirms Jesus as Lord—seeing in him the one who has dominion over all things, whose power stretches from the beginning of time through the reality of death and beyond to the realm of heaven. But Mark doesn't want us to stop there and be complacent. Mark's story ends with a question—a question he put on the lips of the disciples, but one that is directed right at us. The waves were calmed by Jesus that day, but the disciples, filled with fear and wonder and confusion, asked "*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*" It's a question we are supposed to answer. It's a question all people of faith must answer. And in light of the recent events in Charleston, it is a question that Cynthia, Susie, Ethel, Tywanza, Myra, Rev. DePayne, Rev. Daniel, Rev. Sharonda, and Rev. Clementa are anxious to hear us answer.

Let's start over. On that day long ago, the crowds were so great that Jesus had to get into a boat, so that the water could amplify his voice and all who sat on the shore could hear his words. That boat became his pulpit. Later, when it filled up with disciples, that boat became the church. Here's a bit of trivia: Architects have given names to the parts of a sanctuary—the front is the chancel, the sides are transepts. Do you remember what the main center section is called? The nave—a word which means "ship" in Latin.

A boat has long been the symbol for the church, which like a ship necessarily travels over waters that at times are smooth and at times are dark and stormy. Mark's church knew more storms than smooth sailing. Peter, James and Paul had all been crucified. They had no illusion about the church being an absolute refuge of safety and neither should we. Long ago Henry VIII muttered "*Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?*" and soon after Thomas of Becket lay dead on the stones of Canterbury Cathedral. Not so long ago, Archbishop Oscar Romero finished a homily asking soldiers to lay down their guns and not carry out the Salvadoran government's violent death orders when he was shot and died at the very altar he had prepared for communion. Not long ago, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, Carol Robertson, and Denise McNair heard a Sunday School lesson on "The Love That Forgives" when a bomb in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham took all four of their young lives. And very recently, Rev. Clementa Pickney's prayer service in downtown Charleston was faithful and loving enough to place doubts within the troubled mind of Dylann Roof. But the storm within him raged and boiled over into violence, hatred, and inexplicable death.

We shout at these storms, feeling like the waves of violence are about to swamp our little boats. We shouted after the school shooting at Sandy Hook, the Amish shooting at Nickel Mines, the church shooting in Charleston, feeling how those deaths trouble us deeply in our souls. And on the days afterward, we huddle in our church boats and offer prayers for deliverance:

Thy sea, O God, is so great, my boat so small/ It cannot be that any happy fate will me befall save as Thy goodness opens paths for me Through the consuming vastness of the sea. (Winfred E. Garrison) Sometimes we even shout at God, asking “Do you not care? Do you not care about these people, these children, about all the storms, the cancer diagnosis, the lost job, the traffic fatality?”

There’s a reason why Mark told this story for his own church and for us. If you’re shouting at the storm but Christ is in the stern, behind you, then you’re facing the wrong way. Storms by definition swirl all around us—360 degrees. You may say, “Well, I was focused on the problem. I was worried about the waves, the violence, the addiction, the cancer.” But whatever you are looking at and shouting at, Jesus should be between you and it. Faith is not something for our peripheral vision; it’s a “in all times and places right in front of us” kind of thing. We are to look to Jesus first.

Second, I can’t make Birmingham, Ferguson and Charleston go away. No one can. That group of nine in the AME church did everything right and yet still evil descended on them and made them into martyrs. But if we look first to Jesus, then we will also look straight ahead and cast out anything that is not of Jesus, especially the sin of racism. We need to name how prevalent racism remains in the American consciousness. We need to look it straight in the eye and say “Get ye gone.” We need to look at the example of Jesus standing before us and ask, “Do we see a handgun in Christ’s hands? Then why are we so addicted to guns? Do we see a Confederate flag draped over Christ’s shoulders? Then why do we allow a historic symbol drenched in the blood of lynchings and violence to continue to fly in places of honor?” The storm of racism will not quickly subside or disappear without a fight. But it is only by facing it directly, loudly, faithfully, that its message can be silenced and made abhorrent in the minds and hearts of this generation and the generation to come.

The closest AME church to us is St. James’ congregation—a place where I’ve preached on occasion, where we gathered to mourn the death of Rose Pressley earlier this year. I know that many of you have plans for after worship today. There is training for Vacation Church School and a tour of our sanctuary. But I’ve spoken with their pastor, Rev. Rodrecus Johnson, and I will forego my customary time of greeting you at the door so that I can catch the last part of their worship service this morning. The church is not far from here—444 Lincoln Avenue, just off Frankstown Avenue between here and Washington Boulevard. If you are free, I invite you to join me at St. James’ church—for fellowship, prayer, sharing an offering and a mutual commitment to Christ and anti-racism. If you can’t go today, I understand. Maybe go next Sunday. If you do go, introduce yourself as a brother/sister in Christ from East Liberty Presbyterian Church. Racism must be stared down, trampled underfoot, and humbly repented. We can only do that together, in the midst of, in communion with our African American brethren.

Mark's final question was "Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?" The answer is "Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior, in whom we trust and believe." For this sermon the final question is, "Which direction are you facing as you shout at storms?" The answer's the same: Look to Jesus Christ, the risen Lord and Savior, in whom we trust and believe.

AMEN