

June 20, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [Jonah 1:1–10](#); [Mark 4:35–41](#)

TITLE: **Stormy Weather**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today we've heard two boat stories. One boat has a crew of sailors plus the prophet Jonah; the other boat has a crew of disciples plus Jesus. Both boats hit a patch of stormy weather, and in both boats their famous passengers are asleep. Both crews are terrified and try to fix things on their own. In one story, cargo is thrown overboard including Mr. Jonah; in the other story, everyone panics and wakes up Jesus, who calms the storm before their amazed eyes.

There's a lot to unpack in these stories: faith and fear, storms and a Savior, human actions, divine interventions. Let's start with the two sleeping passengers. Jonah was running away from God—trying to avoid where God had sent him. So it is not surprising that he made himself scarce on that boat and found some dark corner below deck to curl up and hide from God and man. In the other boat, Jesus wasn't hiding from anyone; he was likely just exhausted. He'd spent the day preaching to a huge crowd along the seashore. As evening set, he told the disciples they should head to the other side of the sea. I can well imagine that the start of that journey, with the gentle rocking of the boat before the stormy weather began, lulled Jesus to sleep back in the stern.

Now, with the main characters both asleep when trouble emerged, we get a clear picture of how humans handle things on their own—and it's not a pretty picture. Both groups panicked. Both crews are filled with fear. And both groups looked around for someone to blame. Jonah's crew even cast lots to pinpoint who was at fault and when the die was cast against Jonah, over the side he went. Jesus' crew wasn't going to throw anyone overboard, but their high anxiety prompted them to accuse Jesus of not caring whether they lived or died. In response to this bad behavior, Jesus didn't lecture them but turned to the storm and calmed it with a few words: *Peace, be still!* Then he gets to the heart of the matter, asking two questions: *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*

Fear and faith. Let's be clear—Jesus never says there is nothing to be afraid of. Jesus isn't calling for false bravado. The storm was very real. In this life, there are many things of which we can and should be afraid. Violence, disease, war; pollution taking away safe air and clean water; blind prejudice leading to cars mowing down innocent families on the sidewalk or white police officers kneeling on the necks of African American fathers. Given the very real storms in this life, fear is a reality we all face. Yet, as preacher Joanna Adams has said, "faith is not the absence of fear but the courage to walk through the fear—to act in spite of the fear." We can't control whether we'll be visited by fear, but we can control if we invite fear in and let it determine our actions and reactions. That's why Jesus doesn't say "Don't be afraid." Instead he asks them to take a breath and ask themselves, "Why are you afraid? What have you forgotten that allowed you to be captive to blind, unmoored, irrational fear?"

Now the complexity and power of this story starts to come into focus. When you were a child, you might have heard this story and with the faith of an 8-year old, you took away the message: Jesus works miracles, like calming storms. When you were a young adult, perhaps with the faith of an 18-year-old, you took in a larger message: Jesus is Lord of all creation, beside us when ever stormy weather strikes in this life. Both those perspectives have value, but neither one says much about you or me. Jesus calms storms; Jesus is Lord—but what is our role in this human drama? What about us?

As the good book says: *When I was a child, I thought like a child; I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.* In the mid-1960s Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book called “The Social Construction of Reality.” They argued that much of our social life is actively constructed by each of us. Think about traffic. There are not enough traffic officers to ensure that every car in the world stops at every red light. Yet in orderly societies, we know that red lights mean stop and green lights mean go. We act on that belief and trust others will also do so. We’re not just obeying rules; we are creating order together.

At one point in their book, Berger and Luckmann say “all societies are constructions in the face of chaos.”¹ I like that phrase, but then again I’m a Presbyterian. We profess that there is a reality to original sin; that all fall short of the glory of God; that our human limitations keep us from doing all that is good and virtuous in the world, which is why we are saved by grace and our good deeds are only possible by God’s grace and loving-kindness. For us, life is actually like a ship sailing on a sea during times of both calm and stormy weather. Chaos is ever close at hand. And when it does erupt—when the waves of our common life grow turbulent and threaten to swamp our boat, how do we react? Do we panic? Do we throw everything overboard? Do we cast lots and cast blame? Or do we trust in God, and navigate the storms faithfully?

Back in the 1830s, the noted French visitor to America, Alexis de Tocqueville, said that “only the surface of American society is covered with a layer of democratic paint.”² The truth of that statement is part of two important social movements we are remembering this weekend. Yesterday was Juneteenth—a time to remember and decry our long American heritage of racism and slavery, of allowing a caste system to divide our society along artificial lines of racial identity whose structures of inequity still stand today. Yesterday a group of clergy and people of faith gathered in the lower Hill, on the site where Bethel AME church, a thriving African American congregation, had their building taken by the city of Pittsburgh by eminent domain and destroyed in 1958 in order to build a hockey arena. But now, working with the Penguins, people are pressing for reparations and rebuilding that historic church.

Today we are also lifting up the value of full inclusion and celebrating the God-given gifts of LGBTQ members, friends and allies. This movement has also known many years of stormy weather—from the 1969 Stonewall riots, to the groundbreaking 1993 court case of *Baehr v. Lewin* in which the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that two women had a basic civil right to marriage, to the 2008 uproar when Proposition 8 made gay marriage illegal in California, which was ultimately overturned by *Oberfell v. Hodges* in

2015. These stormy waters also rocked the church's boat for years until finally our denomination recognized that calls to ordained service come to Presbyterians of all gender identities and the gift of marriage is to be offered to all couples who seek the Lord's blessing. Though progress has been made in civil rights and full inclusion, at times it still feels like a thin layer of democratic paint over a chaotic, troubled social reality in America.

That's why today's boat stories are so important. Both involved ships sailing to different lands. In fact, when Jesus told his disciples that they should sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, he was directing them to the land of the Gentiles, the "others" whom his followers had avoided for far too long. I imagine both literal and figurative storms arose over that decision. What was not helpful was for the crew to fight among themselves—to cast blame, to pick scapegoats, to worry more about self-survival than the common good. For what was true then remains true today. We will never successfully, faithfully, navigate stormy weather unless we do so together. That is true regarding what it means to be a nation with borders, what it means to be a diverse society of different heritages, traditions, and unpaid reparations, and what it means to be a people who know that love is love is love is love, now and forevermore. To sail to new lands—to sail into the unknown future—requires us to row together, work together, and trust that the same God revealed in Christ is with us in every storm and acting to calm every patch of stormy weather if we will only trust and believe.

I'll close with one last true story. For almost twenty years, one writer's family lived together in a big sprawling house that held three generations under one roof – grandparents, their multiple children, and all their many grandchildren. One little girl, when asked by a teacher who might be available in case of emergency, replied, "Oh, there's always somebody home at my house." A touching moment happened one day when the author's four-year old nephew was in some sort of jam and needed help, so he simply shouted out, "Anybody! Anybody!" Quickly three adults and one teenager appeared on the scene and soon all was well.³

What if, when traveling in our boats through life and stormy weather emerges, we were less quick to save ourselves—less prone to blame someone else—less anxious to toss someone overboard—and more open to shouting "Anybody! Anybody!"? We would learn to see that we're all in this together and that our best answers to problems will be communal answers. We would see the foolishness of blind fear and discover the courage of living faith. For Christ is in the boat with us. He still provides what is truly needed—order in place of chaos, justice in place of inequity, peace—a great calm—in place of every stormy weather. Sailing together then, let us keep the faith.

AMEN

¹ Shoshana Zuboff, "The Knowledge Coup," *New York Times*, January 31, 2021, p. 4 SR

² Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*, 2020, p. 79.

³ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, 1996, p. 81.