

Jesus in the Boat: Mark 4:35-41

I confess, I am not a fisherman or a sailor. But I have spent enough time canoeing and sailing to know that when a storm blows up and you're in a little wee boat, things can get a little scary. Several years ago, some hard-core sailing friends of mine invited me to come along on a 12-day sailing trip from Port Credit in Mississauga up to Manitoulin Island. My job on the trip was to be an extra set of hands to help look after their 6 month old daughter. Having sailed as a kid and having canoed most of my life, I figured 12 days out on the Great Lakes in a 40-foot sailing boat wouldn't be a problem. I spent the first four days flat out on my back feeling so sick I thought the world was ending. Occasionally I would stumble about trying to be useful (that was why I was there after all), but most of the time, I couldn't even turn my head without being sick. There was serious talk about putting me off at the next stop. And then a miracle happened. I woke up on the 5th morning and felt glorious! The turnaround from being green and immobile to feeling just fine was amazing. Something equalized and I was finally able to function and help out like I was supposed to.

Then came the storm. About two nights later a storm blew up. It wasn't the kind of storm that you'd experience out on the open seas, but it was a Great Lake storm that felt bad enough to me. We put on our life-jackets and lashed ourselves onto the boat. Rain, wind, thunder, lightening, more rain and more wind. Water crashed over the deck, we were tossed and heeled over to one side and then the other side and then up in the swell of a wave and then plummeting back down into what seemed like a bottomless trough. The baby cried and cried. And it was dark. Very, very dark. It was a long night.

Eventually the storm passed and we picked ourselves up and spent a few moments just breathing. We had been blown off course significantly, but thankfully the GPS still worked and we were quickly back on route.

When the disciples found themselves swamped by a violent storm, they cried out to Jesus to wake up and show some compassion. Their fear was rooted in the feeling that not only were they in mortal danger, but perhaps even more profoundly, that they had been abandoned by their miracle-working, demon-destroying, Kingdom of God-teaching friend. When they woke him up they were certainly looking to him for something, but the last thing they expected was for Jesus to calm the storm. Healing miracles and great teaching they were coming to expect. But power over the elements of nature wasn't exactly on their radar as far as Jesus was concerned.

This is a powerful story that lends itself well to metaphor and analogy. A great many sermons have been written about it. Sermons about life's storms, about feeling abandoned by God, about Jesus' power to save us from the storm, sermons that explore where God is in the midst of terrible distress, of making the turnaround from fear to faith, about the metaphor of the boat as the place of God's salvation, and sermons that remind us that sometimes a boat is just a boat, intended to get us from A to B.

Today I would like to make a couple of observations. The first is that Jesus' response to the disciples' fear is immediate. He didn't admonish them for their lack of faith. He didn't chastise them for their fear, or correct their poor theology, or draw attention to the saving work of God throughout history. He just got up and spoke those three powerful words: 'Peace, be still'. Often we get stuck trying to do things to get God to respond to our predicaments. We try to pray in the "right" way, we try to be better people so that God will listen. We try to have faith instead of fear, or at least to convince ourselves that we have faith instead of fear (we aren't fooling anyone). But in this particular situation, Jesus responded immediately to their cry for help – without making them jump through any spiritual hoops, or come to a proper understanding of God and how he works. He just got up and acted on their behalf. If we look throughout scripture, we are confronted with a God who hears the cries of his people and acts, despite their lack of faith, their lack of courage, their poor understanding of God and how he works in the world. God is a God who hears and responds.

Having said that, however, he isn't a God who is content to let us remain with our fear, our cowardliness, or our stinking thinking. Jesus didn't go back to sleep after he calmed the storm. After having given the disciples evidence for faith, he then challenged the disciples to make that transition from fear to faith. He admonished them not because they were afraid, but because God's care had been proven to them time and time again, and yet they were *still* afraid.

The second observation is that this story sets up a 'before' and 'after' scenario and points us to what repentance looks like given the paradoxical nature of the world (s) we live in. 'Before' Jesus calmed the storm, the world the disciples lived in was one of fear and chaos, where they felt orphaned, alone and without the power or presence of God. They were living in a world that was quite literally controlled by the powers and principalities. We can all relate to that world. We can all look at our lives and recall feeling abandoned, in the midst of chaos: trying to hold too many things together: work, school, exams, relationships, future uncertainty, loss and grief, pressure to succeed. Or perhaps the chaos takes the secret and hidden form of mental illness, depression, anxiety, paralyzing fear or paranoia. Whatever way you look at it, we seem to spend much of our lives in 'before' world.

The 'after' world however, is the world that is full of the promise of Jesus, in whom the kingdom of God has come into our midst and who offers a new future and a new hope for our world and our lives. It's the world with Jesus in the boat. It's the world where the storms rage, but we aren't alone in them, we are not abandoned in them, and we are sustained through them by the presence and power of God. As I have reflected on my sailing trip, particularly in light of our scripture passage today, it has been a comfort to know that Jesus was in that boat with us. He didn't miraculously calm the storm for us, but he sure wasn't asleep. I was afraid of the power of the storm, I was worried we would get so off course that we would be lost at sea. But at no point did I ever think God had abandoned us. Jesus was in that boat with us. Which made the fear bearable.

Maybe the miracle for the disciples wasn't that Jesus proved his power over the elements of nature, but that Jesus was in the boat in the first place. We believe in a God who enters the human condition by becoming one of us. We believe in a God who comes alongside his people and suffers with them, grieves with them, perseveres through trial and challenge with them, and ultimately is so *with* us that he carries us *with him* into the presence of God the Father.

The line between these two worlds, the world of chaos and the world of promise and hope is a fine, shaky, and risky line. Sometimes it's a line that seems to keep moving. And sometimes those two worlds look the same on the outside. Sometimes the world of promise and hope looks just as scary as the world of chaos. Crossing the line from fear to faith, from cowardliness to courage is an act of repentance – it is a turning from the world of chaos to the world of hope. It is a turning that is possible when our fearful panic is transformed into a holy fear.

It is obvious that the disciples were afraid during the storm – they cried out in despair. But the only time Mark specifically tells us they were afraid was *after* Jesus calmed the storm. They looked at Jesus and they were “filled with a great fear.” They weren't filled with relief or excitement or joy or wonder. They were filled with a great fear. We have to ask what is more terrifying: to be found in the middle of a stormy sea or to be confronted with the sheer power of God. At least the storm doesn't ask anything of us. The storm doesn't require that we respond in any particular way. The storm doesn't care what we do, it's just a storm. But not so with God. When it is the power of God that we are confronted with, we can't remain the same. There is a person we need to respond to – with holy fear, with worship, with obedience, and with faith. And that response, enabled by the Spirit of God, is what moves us over that line from the 'before' world of chaos, to the 'after' world of hope and promise.

When it comes to life's storms, I'm not suggesting we turn to platitudes about God having everything under control, or about God having a plan, or about trusting in the strength and power of God to save and heal. These are most certainly true, but not always helpful in the middle of the raging wind and waves. What I'm suggesting is that we cling to the simple and faithful promise of God – that God is with us and that God does not abandon his people. And that whatever side of that thin line separating the world of chaos from the world of hope we happen to be on at any given time, we are still in the boat, and so is Jesus, and we are not alone.