

That Awe-full Feeling
Job 38:1-11; Mark 4:35-41

Jesus is tired. For days he has been surrounded by people, crowds of people, expecting him to perform miracles and healings - at the very least there have been expectations of him to offer words of wisdom and teaching. So many people have been following him that at one point the crowd prevents him and his disciples from even being able to sit down and eat a meal...

Jesus remains willing to preach to these crowds, but such a huge crowd gathers around him near a lake, that he is forced to get into a boat and drift slightly offshore, preaching to the crowd on the shore from the boat with a buffer of water around him. That is why, when we encounter him our scripture selection from Mark today, we find Jesus already seated in a boat.

It is from this boat that he has just preached about the reign of God being like seeds scattered in different types of soil and how they may or may not be able to take root; and like a sower who scatters seed but doesn't know how it grows, yet witnesses its growth and participates in the harvest; and that the reign of God is like a tiny mustard seed planted in the earth that springs up to become the largest of garden plants.

Jesus is finished preaching for the day and wants to rest, so he says to his disciples, "let us go over to the other side." Let's get a little more distance between us and this pressing crowd. Let's make some space so we can all rest and prepare for whatever is coming next. And so, the boat that Jesus is in and several other boats with Jesus' closest followers set out across the lake.

As they are crossing the lake, Jesus, finally having a moment of space in which to breathe, heads to the stern of the ship, finds a nice soft cushion, and settles down for a much needed and well deserved nap...

The lake in this story has been known by many names depending on what country is in power at any given point in history (Lake Tiberias, Lake Kinneret) - the most familiar name in a church setting would probably be the Sea of Galilee. It is a very large lake nestled down in the Jordan Rift Valley. It is the lowest freshwater lake on earth and it is fed both by underground springs and its main source: the Jordan River.

Being geographically nestled so deep in a valley means that this lake is naturally subject to violent storms that can swell up unexpectedly due to (what my simplistic research tells me) cool air masses from the surrounding mountains colliding with the warmer air in the lake basin, or winds being 'caught' and funneled through the valley.

Speaking of funneled winds, I remember in 1956, when I was around 9 years old, I was with my grandpa, my father, and my older cousin Leon putting away hay in the barn. We were all standing on the barn bridge when Leon said, "Hay, look at that black cloud!" My father said, "Uh, I think that's a tornado." Leon came back with, "Nah, that's just a strange cloud formation". My grandpa, the lead minister at Indian Creek said, "You are both right - because, on one hand, a tornado is indeed a strange cloud formation - but it is still a tornado"! As we watched it get closer to our farm (it came within a quarter mile) and then it just disappeared. I would like to say that we were all frightened - it would fit the message better - but we weren't since had no idea what a tornado could do!

Let's go back to that boat we were talking about, in which Jesus is sleeping so calmly on a cushion. That boat is on the Sea of Galilee when all of a sudden one of those fierce gales arises and sends waves breaking into the boat so badly, that the boat is almost swamped. Jesus, in his tiredness, keeps sleeping on through the storm.

But the others in the boat - they are not so at ease with the situation. They knew what this storm could do! In fact, they were terrified for their very lives...Remember now, some of these disciples are seasoned fishermen. People who have spent their lives on this very

lake, people who have, most likely, come up against rough waters in this place before and yet, in this moment, something is different - the storm has a strength and ferocity that fills the disciples with an incapacitating fear...

Fear can do that - it has the ability incapacitate us. And even if fear doesn't totally stall us, it can overload our system circuits and allow us to make less than helpful choices. I have been thinking a lot of about the pervasive/prevalent presence of fear that the church will either make a move towards being more inclusive and that it will demand inclusion from those not fully ready for it yet...or fear that the church will not make a move towards being more inclusive and that it will instead strengthen statements of exclusion...Fear that the church as an institution cannot survive the pounding waves of this debate without capsizing.

For the disciples, the fear of the storm waves threatening to capsize their boat moves them to wake Jesus and ask him how he has the nerve to keep sleeping in a moment such as this saying: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" ...

This Mark text isn't the only story of people, in trying circumstances, crying out in bewilderment for answers from God that we heard today. The text from Job 38 is the voice of God finally reaching out to Job after 30-some chapters of back and forth between Job and three of his friends bantering with each other about the decrepit state of Job's life. Job's friends clearly think he has done something unrighteous to have earned the treatment he is receiving...Job knows that he is a righteous man and has been declaring that it is not his character that should be in question, but God's.

Job is in a situation where his understanding of God and the order of the world have been torn apart - up to this point in his life, he has lived in a world where the righteous are rewarded and the evil face punishment, but here he is a righteous man suffering,

suffering, suffering...who is this God that allows this to happen? This is not the God he thought he knew...who could it be?

And Job, like the disciples who wake Jesus up to ask him how he dare sleep when their lives are on the line, directly asks for God's account of these actions. And when God shows up to answer Job's call, it is from the heart of a storm. God speaks through a whirlwind and God's answer is not one of comfort and peace.

Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.

This is a declaration that the cosmic perspective of God is far beyond human understanding. But also tucked into this speech is assurance that God is a creator that cares for creation and sets limits - humanity may not always readily see, understand, or comprehend those limits, but the Creator who has set limits on the sea and prescribes boundaries for it, is a creator that does not let chaos go totally unchecked.

Of course when we are caught up in the midst of storms, it can be hard for us to choose to step fearlessly into the unknown and remember that chaos doesn't own control. In the midst of what feels like total chaos, as waves are pounding against their boat, the disciples cry out to Jesus for help. And Jesus, moved by their call for help, wakes up and says to the wind and the waters, "Quiet (Peace), Be Still!" and the wind drops and everything becomes perfectly calm. And it is then, after calm and order have been restored, that Jesus turns to the disciples and asks: "Why were you so frightened? Have you no faith?"

For sure you have heard sermons or Bible studies on this story where Jesus is portrayed as: 1) an improv artist, someone who takes unbelievable situations and makes them even more extreme; or 2) in the context of God as a source of protection and comfort; or 3) as an acknowledgement that storms happen in our lives and that God is with us in the midst

of those storms. All these are good and important messages. We need to know that God is with us and cares for us, and there is a time and a place for that message.

But, as I again studied the text, I began to imagine that in this moment, Jesus wasn't chastising the disciples for lacking a faith that believes God will swoop in and make everything okay, Jesus was directly asking them why, in a moment of need, they themselves didn't take action. Why they didn't take this opportunity to give their place in the reign of God a trial run. Jesus has just spent the day teaching them about the secrets of the reign of God - a reign that calls for participation from those who choose the path of faith, and here are his nearest and dearest followers not getting it.

Jesus calls us to a faith that takes action in stormy moments of disturbance. A faith that remembers that chaos isn't truly in control. A faith that moves beyond our fears. A faith that takes a stand against oppression and chaos by calling forth peace - not simply so that whatever is causing the current storm just temporarily blows away - but so that space is created for true justice.

Storms of injustice, racism, oppression, violence, displacement, grief, and fear are swirling all around us. As we sit in our boats in the midst of these storms, may God grant us the grace and courage to be people of faith who choose to take action beyond our fears, knowing that it is in part, in and through us that God moves and acts in the world. May we be people of faith who confess that sometimes we cocoon ourselves in the safety of denial because it is more comfortable to call something a strange cloud formation than to deal with the reality that we may be encountering a tornado. May we be people of faith who walk in the footsteps of Jesus readily willing to speak up for others when circumstances have left them incapable of taking action on their own. May we be people of faith who boldly acknowledge that many times we don't have a clue as to where to begin or what we can actually do to call for peace and bring about change. In spite of

that, may we be people of faith who choose to live into the mysterious reign of God, trusting that even the smallest seeds of action that we sow, have the potential to grow into more than we can imagine.

Through our actions, may we be people of faith who bear witness to the reality that when God is given space to move in the world, the results are awe inspiring. Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

June 20, 2021 Hatfield Church of the Brethren