

Sermon Series #4, "Walking with God- Calming the Storm"
Lent C4, March 6, 2016
Central Presbyterian Church
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Mark 4.35-41,

³⁵*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."*

³⁶*And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

1.

"Peace, be still."

That's what Jesus says. But to whom or to what does he say it?

Over the last several Sundays we have walked with Jesus to his baptism in the Jordan River and then journeyed with him into the wilderness where he was tested. Then we walked with him to Nazareth and then to Capernaum where he healed many, called his disciples, and established his new home. Last week we climbed a mountain with him and heard him preach about the kingdom of God and how those who are poor and meek and humble and rejected are blessed. If we're looking, we can find Jesus with them, because that's who he chooses to be with.

Today we go out onto the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and his disciples. Up until this point Jesus has been teaching the crowds, but they have understood little. And even when he explains to his disciples in detail, they, too, don't grasp his meaning. This voyage in the storm is no different.

Jesus is tired. He has healed and taught all day long and he asks his disciples, some of them veteran fishermen, to take him across the sea, a distance of about 10 miles, to the other side. They put out, and before long he is fast asleep on a cushion at the back of the boat.

And then a sudden storm erupts, the wind and the waves rock the boat and water pours in, threatening to swamp it. But Jesus is asleep on his cushion. The disciples are frantic, the veteran sailors fear a disaster, perhaps they will die in this storm. But Jesus can save them. He has saved so many already. With a touch of annoyance they awaken him and ask, "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

"Do you not care?" That's not just fear talking. That's not just hoping to survive. "Do you not care" is filled with anxiety—does Jesus value them or not? If you're sleeping in the back of the boat and we are in crisis, they were saying, then maybe we aren't important enough for you to save us.

2.

A child wakes up at night after a nightmare, believing there is a monster under the bed. A tired mother hears her child calling out in fear and rushes into the bedroom, scooping up her child in her strong arms, whispering words of assurance, caressing the child's body. She says, "Don't worry, honey, there's nothing to be afraid of."

But that's not the whole truth. There are very real things to be afraid of. Fear of failure and embarrassment. Of disease and war and sudden violence. Of family fights and estrangements. Of loneliness and insignificance. And of course, we're afraid of death.

And sometimes in our storms, we wonder if Jesus is sleeping. We're afraid, we hurt, we need help. Where is he? We cry out, but some storms overwhelms us anyway. We lose a loved one, we suffer failure, we are lonely. What are we supposed to think? What are we supposed to do?

3.

Jesus quieted the storm that day. He stood up tall, to his full stature, the words literally say, and he faced the storm and spoke, "Peace. Be still." And it was.

There are several stories in the Bible just like this. God sent the Spirit over the waters of creation, waters that were chaotic, out of control. God sent the Spirit out over the waters and they were stilled, and creation began.

Psalm 107 tells the story of sea travelers who were caught out on the water in the midst of a great storm. They too cried out to God and God rescued them, bringing them to land and to safety.

This is great. God has power. Jesus has power. The Spirit has power.

4.

But it also raises a question that we Christians are confronted with by a skeptical world. If God has the power, how come God doesn't use it all the time?

God didn't calm the storm in my family, we might say. My marriage dissolved. I don't speak to my sister anymore.

Or a loved one died despite your crying out to God. A disaster tore your life apart. A crisis just won't seem to go away.

It's a difficult question for us. Why our cries are not answered and our crisis averted as it was for the disciples. But when Jesus said, "Peace, be still," he was not only hushing the storm he was speaking to the disciples, to you and me.

There are lots of things that worry us, that frighten us, that may very well overwhelm us. And Jesus says, "Peace, be still."

Nancy was a friend of mine in another congregation. She was a force of nature, bigger than life. When she was in the room you knew it- her alto voice was strong and clear. And she had opinions. And a great laugh. And she was sick.

A lifelong illness had finally landed her in the hospital. There was no road to recovery this time. She was on a breathing machine. That was all that kept her alive. She invited the whole family to come see her one last time. In her hospital room they gathered and there were tears and hand holding and even some laughter. Only Nancy could do it that way. She had been saying she trusted there were better things ahead for her, that she was in good hands with Jesus. He would lead her. And when the right time came she indicated to the nurse to turn off the machine. And she slipped away in peace with her Lord.

Jesus is telling us to have confidence when chaos threatens us, to have faith when we are fearful. He wants us to be able to confront situations that seem overwhelming with a trust in him that will allow us to live out his love and his mercy, despite the danger.

Jesus does not promise us, and does not promise the church, to eliminate all threats and suffering. He does not promise to stop the storm every time. But he does promise to be present, to lead us, to be at work in ways that are quiet, but powerful.

My wife has a longtime friend back in Detroit who faced one storm after another over several years. The first was with her children. Her oldest daughter is smart and talented. She became a professional ice skater, performing lead parts in those family friendly ice shows that travel across the country. Her second daughter is also lovely, but in different ways. She was born with Down's syndrome and needed special care. That meant her mother had to go to bat for her time after time with the school district to get her an appropriate education. At the same time my wife's friend's husband, a celebrity in Detroit, was developing a drug addiction.

She has a strong faith. She trusts that God is near and that is at work for good in her life and in the world. She read her Bible regularly. She prayed and worshipped at her Presbyterian church. She did what she could but the marriage did not survive, yet she believed God was there. She fought for her younger daughter's development and growth. Today that daughter lives semi-independently. And she reinvented herself, developed new skills, got involved in the community as an advocate for the disabled. She met a wonderful man and remarried.

Today we come to the communion table where Jesus promises to meet us. Perhaps you are in chaos today, the waves of a storm threaten to swamp your boat. He wants to be there with you. He wants to lead you through the storm. You matter to him. "Trust in me," he says.

"Peace, be still."

We read these words of Jesus from Mark's gospel today. Mark's gospel was probably written for Christians living around the year 60 somewhere in the Roman Empire. They were being persecuted. There was a storm brewing and they were about to be hit. Mark's gospel tells them to Be Still, to trust that their lives are in Jesus capable hands.

Jesus is telling us to have confidence when chaos threatens us, to have faith when we are fearful. The antidote to fear is faith. He wants us to be able to confront situations that seem overwhelming with a trust in him that will allow us to live out his love and his mercy, despite the danger.

Jesus does not promise us, and does not promise the church, to eliminate all threats and suffering. He does not promise a miracle every time we need one. But he does promise to be present, to lead, to be at work in ways that are quiet, but powerful.

Think about it. God's understated power has worked that way from the beginning:

Abraham and Sarah- One insignificant and desperate couple in a sea of humanity, but with God's presence...

David- the young, slight shepherd, facing Goliath, but with God present in him....

And Jesus himself- died on a cross, a humiliating death, but with God present.....

The waves of a chaotic economy threaten hardworking people with uncertain jobs and health care and retirement and even threatens their homes. Relentless, sometimes subtle, racism and discrimination dominate people and keeps them down. Illness throws life into anarchy.

We aren't meant to say, "Oh well, that's what life is like." No, God is present in us and with us and we are meant to stand up and to offer positive alternatives that calm the storms and lead toward the love and justice and peace and abundance that God has in store for all.

When 90 of us took part in hosting homeless families over the Christmas holiday God was leading us, strengthening us, to oppose the chaos of homelessness that grinds so many families down.

When you serve lunch at the Salvation Army, God is present with you, providing a positive response to the overwhelming poverty, loneliness, and hunger that scores of people experience here in Montclair.

In your own life, whatever is