

Into the Storm - 2

July 23 - "Into the Storm" - Mark 6:45-52 -

On our pilgrimage with Jesus this summer we have responded to His call to join Him; we looked at the landscape ahead of us; we stopped at Martha and Mary's home for dinner; and last week we walked with him into Samaritan territory where Jesus engaged with a woman with lots of baggage. Today we are passengers on a boat that will carry us across the lake to more villages, more needs to be met, stories to be told. But now a few hours of rest on a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is an important part of Jesus' life. It is really not a sea at all, but Israel's largest fresh water lake fed by the Jordan River. The lake is situated about 700 feet below sea level with mountains to the west and east. When cool temps from the western highlands meet the humid warmth of the valley rift in which the lake is situated it gives rise to strong winds that are funneled down onto the lake. The storms that come on the Sea of Galilee are notorious for their suddenness and ferocity!

Jesus and disciples spent a lot of time together by and on the sea. Their boats were not the fishing trawlers that you might see at Pacific City in the Dory Fleet. They were rather small and they were often patched and re-patched to keep them and the fishermen on board afloat.

Some of the disciples were career fishermen who knew the lake and what to expect. - Peter, Andrew, James and John, to name four. No doubt this wasn't their first storm! We can imagine that they were busy doing what fishermen do when a storm arises on the water: rowing into the billowing waves, trying to keep their craft from capsizing, baling water out of the hold as fast as they could. I assume that all of the disciples, fishermen or not, were hard at work trying to make it through the storm. Where is Jesus?

We find Jesus asleep in the back of the boat on a cushion! That little detail is so human and real. He is exhausted from the non-stop ministry of preaching, healing, teaching, traveling on foot around the region bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Of course, the disciples had been on the same schedule as Jesus, but without the responsibility that rested on his shoulders. Mostly they were behaving as observers. They've listened to his teaching; they have been on tour with him from village to village; they've seen a centurion's slave returned to health; a widow's son restored to life. They have heard it all, witnessed it all. All the ingredients for a robust faith were theirs. And they were seaworthy, yet...

Yet, in the storm all they knew intellectually about Jesus and even what they had observed in person seems to have flown out the window or better yet been tossed overboard. In this storm all they know to do and are able to do is not working. When everything you know to do isn't working, what do you do next - Panic!

The disciples do just that. We can hear the terror in their voices - Wake up Jesus!! How can you sleep through this storm? Our lives are at risk here - we are going to drown!!! Don't you care???

Jesus awakens, rebukes the storm - the winds die down, and waves go flat. We mustn't miss this point, Jesus has been there with them all along. When he is awakened by these terrified disciples he calms their storm. Then he asks a probing question - Why?

His "why" isn't about the storm - storms are normal, it isn't about them working hard to keep afloat, that's what people do when in danger... But it is His question - Why are you so afraid? That gets to the heart of our life of faith in the presence of our life storms.

I think of this storm for the disciples as kind of an object lesson for life, a lived experience for them to chew on, to remember when future storms would get wilder and more intense and yes, their very lives would depend on whether Jesus was in the boat with them. This event can become an object lesson and metaphor for us as well.

So we look at the nature of storms: The fact that storms will come into every life is a given. In the book of Isaiah ch. 43, the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you... For I am the Lord your God." "When" means that storms are coming!! Jesus also assured his disciples that troubles would come...Not that he would cause them but that this is how a broken world behaves. Those who know Him will experience storms just like everyone else. Life is like that. It feels unfair, but it is what it is. Storms are inevitable . Sometimes they just come upon us. We were minding our own business trying to be responsible people and wham! A storm hits. A sudden job loss, a run-away child, a life-threatening illness, a loved one dies, bankruptcy, a flash flood, a wild fire.

Some people meet their storms by depending on the boat of their own making: money in the bank, great insurance, a good job, lots of friends, being a good Christian who reads His Bible every day, prays all the time and even gives money to the church!! Those things aren't bad, but they are not meant to carry us through the storm. The boat the disciples and Jesus were in wasn't bad - it just wasn't adequate for the storm! It couldn't stop the storm and it wasn't going to outlast the storm. Neither will so many of the things we rely on. A nasty storm can destroy them all.

No matter the source of our storm, many times there isn't much we can do to stop it but simply pray and endure. People have all kinds of ways of enduring...working harder,

running faster, blaming others, denying, withdrawing, controlling everyone and everything around them, and finally when all else fails, panicking.

When faith isn't central to our personal way of handling our difficulties, we tend to revert to the way life has programmed us to respond. What is programmed into us in early childhood is like an old tape ready to be replayed when we are at our weakest - in the storm. The bible calls it "the sin that so easily entangles us". Why is it sin? Because we take over the job of being God in our lives - and maybe trying to play God in other's lives as well.

Let me get personal for an example: I am a recovering control freak!! I grew up trying to control every possible outcome - especially the scary looking ones, like a dad who comes home drunk. When I saw the white waters begin to rise and winds begin to blow, I did everything I could to control all the people around me. It isn't pretty when you are a control freak. And all this done while being a true and devoted follower of Jesus. What I needed was a come to Jesus moment brought to me via friends who lovingly held up the mirror so I could see what I was doing to myself and others. I would love to tell you that I am recovered, but not yet and maybe not until heaven. I'll try not to boss you around!

Faith asks us, "Where is Jesus during your storm?" At first it can seem he is not around, but here is the truth: He is in the boat. In the midst of every trial, every terror, every storm, He is right there with you, with me. He has promised to never leave or forsake us. As he left his disciples to finish their pilgrimage without his personal, physical presence, he said, "I am with you always - even to the end of the ages." We begin to take Him at His word as we experience our storms.

The disciples cry out to Jesus and Jesus asks His friends this question: WHY are you afraid? "Why." It asks us to explore what is behind our fearful, or frantic, or panicked response to crises. For instance when I looked behind my fearful controlling response to difficulties, I found that what I believed about God was pretty much in my head - rhetorical: I believed that he is all-powerful, in control of all things, that he loved me. What I wasn't sure about was if he was more powerful than the elements of my storm, that he could and would control my destiny, and most importantly that he not only loved me but liked me. So my lived faith was not as strong as my head faith.

The disciples maybe had the same problem. They still didn't know Jesus very well. The disciples response is so honest - "Who is this man?" Who indeed!! Their understanding of Him, His power, His compassion, His mercy, grace and love were as yet unbelieved by them at the heart level. They had seen His power before, but belief was still in its infancy. Maturity of faith takes time and lived experience.

And perhaps this is the most important part of this story for us. To increasingly and with greater assurance be able to answer that question - Who is this man? I am not sure anyone's faith is truly Mature, if by that we mean that they never question, or doubt, or fear. But we can intentionally get to know this one we call Savior and Lord through life's

pilgrimage. And the pilgrimage I speak of is the daily walk, the consistent time spent with Him, the intent to learn His ways, to see His hand, to know His voice. This does not happen mainly at church. Church is kind of a way station - like the hydration stations on a marathon run. We come here to get some refreshment, to perhaps learn something new, to gain from the strength, the energy, the longevity of our traveling companions, to worship and cry and laugh together with our God the three in one. But church attendance alone doesn't begin to provide what the daily walk does. In the daily walk we live out what we are learning, we see Jesus at work in our personal world and grow in faith. We walk and stumble, get up, and walk some more all under and within His mercy and grace. It is the lived experience that helps us grow more mature.

Looking at the disciples, I see how their dailiness with Jesus transformed them. In this event they are asking who is this man? A few months from now they will be in another boat, Jesus will come walking on the water and although the group is terrified, Peter will leave his boat of safety and step out onto the waves - he falters but again Jesus is there with him. Peter will go on to declare Jesus to be the Messiah, but falter when it comes to standing up for him while he is on trial. As often as he falters, Jesus is there to pick him up and assure him that he is loved. Perfection is never required on our pilgrimage. Just perseverance and growth.

Jesus says to the men in the boat "You of little faith." He will say it again several more times that are recorded in the gospels. I see that as a gentle reminder not a pejorative, that there is room and reason to keep on walking in faith - even the faith of the mustard seed. This is the call to us this Sunday.

Who is this man who calms the storm in me and sometimes around me? How well do I know Him? What am I learning about Him? Do I believe that He is for me, He loves me, His grace and mercy cover me? Am I gaining new perspectives through the storms in my life? Am I learning to trust him, to love him, to rely on Him in every trial, struggle, storm.

Paul says in Romans 8 - "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any power, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation - No storm - will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

May each of us find that to be so. Amen.