

“Peace in a Storm”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “PERSPECTIVE REBORN”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
June 21, 2009

Mark 4:35-41 [NRSV]

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

³⁶And 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?”

I can't understand why I can't do some things. I know, actually that list is quite long, but I mean specifically things I can't control. Like, when I watch a ball game and I can't control the outcome, not even if I wear my lucky shirt, or yell at the referees, or send psychic messages to the coach about what plays to call. I can't affect the outcome. I've even at times thought that my power has the negative effect. You know, you come into the room and start watching the game after it has started and your team is doing pretty well, but as soon as you sit down they start losing. Has that ever happened to you? But the truth is I know I don't have that kind of power. That's what it is really all about, what kind of power I have or don't have.

That is the issue for the disciples as they find themselves out for a cruise across the Sea of Galilee. They are powerless on the sea in the midst of the great and awesome power of nature and they don't have the power to change the outcome. This passage is pretty easy to understand at one level, almost too easy. We can do the spiritual math to get the message.

Most of us hear the passage as a parable about life, and probably that is the way the early church heard it too. The church as a whole was facing a storm in those early years. There was persecution from the government, and from their own families and friends who didn't buy this new “Jesus-religion.” They were often frightened, and in some cases, for their very lives. But the story seems to suggest that if we just call out

to Jesus he will rise up and rebuke the storm and make everything better.

We know it isn't that simple, or that easy. Some of you are sitting here in the midst of this world economic storm and you or someone you know has lost a job, financial reserves, and worse and no one seems to have the power to suddenly fix everything. We know because some of you are sitting here and the storm of illness has hit and the doctors don't seem to have the power to still that storm. We know because we have storms of problems with our relationships, with our spirituality, with injustices that are a result of your race, your sexuality, or your economic class. These storms are too big and you and I can't just hit the switch on the remote and change channels and make it all go away. And we know that just because we call out to Jesus, reality isn't going to suddenly change for us either. So I'm not going to stand here and tell you to just call out, or wait, or otherwise pretend that Jesus is going to instantly calm the seas and still the storms in your life. You know better.

What then can we say about this little vignette? Let's be real, as Dr. Phil says, storms will come. They are real. We cannot get through life without going through some storms. Some of them we know won't last. Some of them we will wonder whether we can outlast them or whether we will go under. In the time of Christ the sea was a symbol for chaos. It was a frightening and unknown power that could overwhelm the bravest sailor and even overwhelm the seawalls built on land to keep the sea back. When

there is a storm on the sea it can be awesome and frightening.

It seems to me that part of what this passage affirms is that Christ is in the boat with us. He too gets wet, tossed about, cold from the wind and rain. Two of the primary affirmations of the Christian faith are the incarnation of Christ. He came bodily and experienced the physical world as a human being. Secondly, it affirms he is still with us, not in a physical body, but in spirit. He is with us, and most of us here believe in some way he is within us.

Frederick Beuchner wrote once, "Christ sleeps within the deepest selves of us all,"¹ He says we must know we can call out to him in the midst of storms. He adds, "we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way." When we know we don't have the power to change our reality we need to know we have within us one who has the power and the will to give us courage or faith or whatever you want to call it to face, endure, and overcome the storms.

As an aside there are two parts to this passage that I think are difficult. First, why did Jesus have to rebuke the disciples? It was a pretty scary situation. As a preacher it always presented a problem as to how to justify that. "Oh, Jesus just woke up grumpy and so he was a little snippy with the disciples," I've always been tempted to say. But I

¹ Kate Huey, "In the Boat Together," i.ucc.weeklyseeds, June 15, 2009.

think it is more than that. Those disciples had Christ with them right there in person, yet they didn't realize his power. So maybe the message to us is not that Christ rebukes us for our little faith. My hope is that, by comparison, Christ doesn't hold it against us when our faith is too small since we don't have him here bodily to literally stop the storms.

I also have come to believe that Christ had intended for them to keep sailing on, to discover they had the power within themselves to face the storm without him intervening. He had wanted them to find they could do it knowing he was in the boat with them. But their faith faltered and rather than ignore them, he rose up and stilled the storm. His rebuke was disappointment that they did not believe in themselves or in him enough to sail on knowing the storm would not overcome them.

The other problem is this fear thing. We tend to think of Jesus as this "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." We tend not to be too awed by Jesus, and we tend to discount the miracles for this reason. But the point is clear, if you are standing that close to divinity it just might leave you shaking in your boots. To be a witness to one who has power over wind and waves is to stand next to something or someone that might make you fall to your knees in fear. That certainly seems to be the reaction of the disciples on a number of occasions. But again, as a preacher, how do I relate that to you? What's the moral of the story? We don't generally preach, "be afraid of Jesus." We generally do everything we can do to

make Jesus pretty tame, pretty comfy. I can only say that I think the message is we must not underestimate the power of God, that power was present in Christ, and we are right to be fall to our knees in awe of that power.

I suspect the other message is this: isn't it good to know God is that powerful? We may try to harness God and limit his power by our words or actions. We may try to pretend that God isn't that powerful because we don't understand the nature of that power and why God does or does not use that power, but God has power beyond words or imagination. Isn't it good to know that this God is on our side? Isn't it good to know that this God has said he loves us and seeks to bless us? We do not have to make sacrifices to appease this God. We do not have to achieve some inner or outer perfection for this God to love us. We do not have to have been born in a certain class or race or orientation of politics, sexuality, or denomination to be loved by this powerful, awesome God. That's a message I can preach, and I believe you can hear. So when the storms come, it is good to know we have a God with this power. We do not have to assume the storm was sent to punish or penalize us. Storms come. They are part of life. But we have a God who is bigger than the storms, yet is present within us and we can call out to him.

Another detail that we might miss if we don't pay attention is that the disciples can't turn back and outrun the storm. They had to press on, and so must we. The storms don't mean we can

turn back. We must keep sailing. We don't know what lies ahead in life or on the sea or even when we are in the storm, but we cannot go back. One writer said, "God can speak from the whirlwind or calm the storm, but God won't be calling us back to Egypt ever again; nor will he make the times ahead of us easy. But in truth, the breath of God's Spirit will always be moving forward. So for me in the face of storms I know I can't go back and I can't give up. The destination is still ahead.

In response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Jimmy Buffett wrote a song whose title maybe suggests the best philosophy for finding peace in the storm or after: "Breath In, Breath Out, Move On." In the chorus he adds,

*And it rained,
It was really nothing new,
And it blew,
We've seen all that before
And it poured,
The earth began to strain
Pontchartrain, leaking through the door,
Tides at war.
If a hurricane doesn't leave you dead
It will make you strong.
Don't try to explain it
just nod your head,
Breath in breath out, move on.*

Finally to have that peace in the storm we must find the power within ourselves to control what we can control. I like to use the metaphor of a thermostat. I would suggest that faith in Jesus Christ gives us a model for how to find that. We may not have the power of Christ to still the storm, but we have the

power of Christ to set our own thermostat.

I cannot control the events and circumstances outside me, and neither can you. But I do have the power, as do you, to choose my responses. I can choose to run and shout and go crazy. I can fall to pieces and curl up and give up. Or I can choose an alternative that brings peace. I can choose not to give in or give up.

Now I grant you that it is easy to lose sight of this power. There have been a lot of times when I have jumped and shouted and raged. I have given up and given in. But a lot of times my faith has somehow reminded me who is in that boat with me. It has reminded me that I do not have his power, but I have power to choose my course. I can set my compass toward the distant shore and sail on. And if I attend to the business of sailing in the midst of the storm it often keeps me from letting the power of the storm overwhelm me. It is how we breath in, breath out and move on. Faith is the gift God gives us to know we can keep sailing even as the storm rages on.

In short, we can choose to have faith that the one who does have power over the wind and the waves means to save us, not destroy us. The storms come and they will test our courage, our faith. But there is One who is in the boat with us who gives us the power to sail on. Take courage and in the face of the storms take the power to respond with faith to sail on. AMEN.