

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Mark 4:35-41
Walk This Way: Around the Storm or Through It
August 3, 2008

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. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But 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?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

In over twenty years of baptizing individuals, I have more than once encountered candidates who were paralyzed by the fear of going under water. It is a very real and genuine fear, the fear of water. Water, is in itself a symbol of power. I am currently reading at home a memoir of a WW II salvage diver. He was the first one to enter the ruins of the USS Arizona that sank at Pearl Harbor. He spoke of the inky blackness of the water due to the oil and how he had to feel his way through the vessel, frequently bumping into the corpses of dead navy men. At one point, his life line and oxygen line got hung up and his air supply was pinched off. He wrote that it took all of his energy to fight the fear and panic rising in him. In order for him to survive in that hull of a ship, he could not let fear overwhelm him as the black water threatened to entomb him. There is just something about water.

I wonder if that was on the mind of John Mark when he wrote this gospel, amidst a time when Christians were experiencing the overwhelming flood of Nero's persecution. Those first decades after Jesus' resurrection were not a period of enthusiastic growth, but a fearful fight for survival. If you answered the call to walk the way of Jesus, it could mean exclusion, poverty, and even death. The water was rising for those early followers, and it looked as though all could go under.

John Mark remembers the story of when the disciples, themselves, faced dreadful fear. It, too, involved water. It was a storm at sea. The sea, for the first century Jew, is often the scene of chaos and terror. One needs to only remember the significance of the Red Sea that blocked the path of the fleeing slaves of Pharaoh. Then there was Jonah, who admitted to being the cause of the fierce storm at sea, and so, was subsequently tossed overboard, only to be swallowed by a great fish. The sea is a scene of chaos and fear.

This gospel story, found also in Matthew and Luke, is a story that I come back to often over the years. This is not merely a story for our entertainment, that we may be amazed at this one, who, in the words of the disciples, "even the wind and the sea obey." This is an invitation. On that familiar Sea of Galilee, where Jesus issued his initial call to come and follow, Jesus was inviting then, and inviting now, to come and follow, even into the storm.

Let's look more closely to the story itself. This Sea of Galilee became quite the popular hangout for this man named Jesus and all of his friends. That particular evening, everything seemed to be just as normal as the day before. It was just another day, and just another boat ride with the seasoned fisherman. But this would be no ordinary scenic tour across the sea.

There is a decision to go to the other side. Mark uses the phrase "other side" several more times in the gospel. On the west side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and the disciples are among their fellow Jews. The west

side was familiar territory, with a shared culture and a shared faith. On the east side, they are among Gentiles, outsiders in culture and religion. The Sea of Galilee serves as a symbolic social barrier between the west and the east, the Jews and the Gentiles. It is when they cross over, when they are in movement, in transition, that the potential for danger is exposed.

A word about the Sea of Galilee: it really is not a sea at all, but a lake. I have had the privilege like some of you, to not only see it but take a boat ride across it. The Sea of Galilee is seven miles wide and thirteen miles long. From the shoreline, it drops off rather quickly to a depth of 150 feet. Due to its rather small size but sudden depth, the sea is prone to violent storms with capsizing waves.

As they move to the other side, the storms sets in. To veteran fishermen like Peter and Andrew, this was nothing new, but it appears that this was no average storm. John Mark gives us the detail that so great was the storm, that the boat itself was being swamped. The ancient fear of going under water pulsed through the anxious veins of all those in the boat...except for Jesus. Jesus was sleeping. Who can sleep during a storm? There at the stern, where the helmsman usually works, Jesus is out of it. The fearful disciples wake him and say to him – and this statement really grabs me – *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* (v. 38)

Have you ever felt that way about God? When you feel as though you are about to go under the fury of a storm? When fear has throttled you? When you are swamped by waves of doubt or disappointment? Do you ever feel like saying: *“Do you not care that I am about to go under?”*

Jesus stills the storm. He says to the waves, literally, *“Silence. Be muzzled”* and then he asks the disciples *“Why are you afraid? Do you still not have faith in me?”*

If I had my way, I would like to just bypass the storms. I would like to go through this world without having to deal with the death of someone I love. Couldn't there be a way we could navigate around divorce or disease or failure? Why does life have to be so messy, so hard, so stormy and turbulent?

Who, after all, really wants to participate when the storms of life are upon us? Could not God just *“bail us out?”* Like the disciples, we just want God to take care of the storm or take us out of it. *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”* Indeed, I suspect that for many we would much prefer a voyage like that popular attraction at Disney World – *It's a Small World After All* - where that syrupy tune is piped in overhead and happy faced children greet us at every bend. The water is always smooth and the boat ride is simply pleasurable.

But we know life is more complex than this. So, I ask all of us who have answered the call to follow, for all of us who desire to know Christ, for all of us who dare to bear his name, for all of us who say we want to seek his face, *“Are you sure you want to participate in this voyage, to walk this way?”*

It is a call to...

Get in the Boat! To walk the way of Christ is a call to cross over.

This implies at least two things. First, we cannot go around or otherwise avoid the storms when they come. Following Jesus does not mean that we are immune to car wrecks and disease, discouragement and shame, or confusion and doubt.

Secondly, going through the storms includes joining with others in the journey.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed a bill that provided the land for a Vietnam memorial monument. Those of us who lived through Vietnam, know that this was an ugly and painful time in our country's

consciousness. A monument could help augment the healing and suffering of our nation and those veterans of that war. A nationwide panel of architects, designers, and academics was created to jury the design competition. Out of 1421 entries, a student from Yale – Maya Lin – won the commission.

When her design – a mirror-like wall of black granite that never rises above the ground level with the names of the deceased etched in chronological order - was first unveiled the reaction was immediate outrage. One vet called it, a black gash of shame. Another called it, the most insulting and demeaning memorial to our experience that was possible. Activist, Phyllis Schafly, took swipes at it calling it a tribute to Jane Fonda. Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan alleged that the selection panel that chose Lin was infiltrated by communists and was a slap in the face. Perot even funded another memorial – an oversized representative statue of three servicemen, which you can see today beside Lin’s monument. The sculptor sneered at Lin’s work, calling it brown bag esthetics.

Veterans did not even want Lin at the memorial’s dedication, so she hid out in the press box. But over twenty-five years later, Lin’s Vietnam Memorial – the Vietnam Wall – is one of the most popular sites in all of Washington D.C., with more than 1 million visitors each year. It has become America’s version of the Wailing Wall. Now, some of Lin’s harshest critics have become her greatest fans and every major veterans group has passed resolutions either apologizing for their earlier treatment of her, or thanking her for hanging in there, when their own members mercilessly attacked her.

Why is the Wall so successful? Because it invites the visitor to be more than a spectator. It encourages participation – from placing your hand upon the engraved names of the dead, or taking a piece of paper and rubbing an etching of a loved ones’ name, to seeing your own reflection in the black granite.

Like the Vietnam Wall Memorial, the story of Jesus in the storm is an invitation to life that calls for our participation.

Interact with the Hurting: What the disciples wanted is the same thing we want when storms come – a quick and easy way out. But, it would not always be that way with those early followers of Jesus. And neither will it be for any of us.

If you come here this morning in the name of Jesus – one of his followers – be prepared to interact with **all** of life, including the storms of suffering and trial. Unless you simply want to be a bystander of life, the gospel calls on us to “take up our oars” and engage life fully. Even in the darkness of the storm. For that is where we will find God. What is important is that we remain together, working together, and praying together when the storms assault.

Pull Others in the Boat

Last summer, I enjoyed going with our 9th graders whitewater rafting. For most of my adult life, I have paddled on the rivers with friends and church members. No matter who I am paddling with in the boat, the scenario is still the same. We get into the water and initially everything is kind of confusing. Six paddles are digging into the water in six different directions and everyone is trying desperately to stay in the boat. The one thing you do not want to see when whitewater rafting, is someone who is not paddling. It is at those moments I want to take my paddle and whack them out of the boat.

It is probably not a bad analogy of the church. We don’t want to see folks in our church who are not paddling, who are swamped with their own pity party, or grief, or sin, or failure. The temptation is great to simply take the paddle and whack them out of the boat.

Yet God has called us all here, in this vessel we call the church, to face the storms together. There will be times it will get turbulent and we need to be here together, paddling, encouraging, breathing new life into the fearful lives of one another and those who have stumbled in afraid that life is about to take them under.

Some time ago, I was visiting with a family whose loved one was recuperating from open-heart surgery. The surgeon remarked that when you go to see your husband, he will look bad. There will be tubes connected to him and a respirator breathing for him. He will look puffy, a bit bruised and somewhat discolored. All this is very typical. "But this is what I want you to do," he said to the family, "I want you to touch his hand. I want you to stroke his arm. I want you to speak loving words into his ear. I want you to tell him how much better he is doing and how encouraged you all are at his progress." The doctor said that among the hundreds of patients he has operated on through the years, the ones who do the best, are the ones who are surrounded by the touch and the voices of encouragement of loved ones.

In our complex journeys of life – even when we are at our lowest point – we must remind one another while we are in the boat, that our role is of mutual support and concern. We will encourage one another while our oars are flailing at the waves that assault us.

My friends, God will not always deliver us or remove us from the storms that come our way. But I am forever more convinced that God will not desert us during these times. God will not always go for us or instead of us. God will not always replace us. In fact, God will not always quiet the storm around us, but will see us through the storm.

We came here this day because in one form or another we said, we want to find God or at least we want to be found by God. Look to the storms. Wherever we find suffering, there we will find the face of God.

In the scattered thoughts of a lonely housewife, overwhelmed at the tidal waves of anxiety – there you will see the face of God.

In the pain of someone whose body is rotting from cancer, and whose limbs are wracked with the white-heat ache of chemotherapy – there you will see the face of God.

In the tear-streaked faces of numb family members who sit stiffly around the open mouth of a grave, beneath a canopy, while a minister reads of hope in a world yet to be – there you will see the face of God.

Wherever tears abide and anxiety is high, wherever there is fear in the unknown and storms are savage, wherever there are voices of doubt inside and the black dog of depression lives – there, yes, right in the heart of the storm, one will find my Jesus.

For that is our confession, as we are reminded that our God came to dwell among us, to cry among us and sorrow among us and journey through the storms with us, indeed to die among us. For it is in these storms of life that we find the life and the hope and the face of God.

Well, we know the story well by now. Jesus calms the storm. He said, "Peace. Be still," and asked, "Why are you afraid?" I want to invite you to walk the way of Christ this morning, to a deeper faith that will see you though whatever you are going through, for Christ is the one intent on us getting to the other side.

There is one thing about following Christ – we do not do it alone. We follow together, in the boat, in the storm and through the storm. I need you with me. And we need each other. And there are others yet waiting to get it.

“Walk this Way” – Sooner or later a path presents a choice: through the storm or around it.

Jesus asked of his disciples. *“Have you still no faith?”*