

Readings For Sunday June 24th

Psalm 107:23-32 (NIV)

²³ Some went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters.

²⁴ They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep.

²⁵ For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.

²⁶ They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.

²⁷ They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end.

²⁸ Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress.

²⁹ He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.

³⁰ They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.

³¹ Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind.

³² Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.

Mark 4:35-41 (NIV)

³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." ³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" ³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. ⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" ⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Sermon: “Who *then* is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?”

In Mark chapter 4 Jesus is presented as a teacher of memorable parables through which he answers the question, “What is the kingdom of God *like*?” Mark then, over the next few chapters, demonstrates *practically* what this means with a series of dramatic miracle stories. These “epiphanies (or revelations) of divine power” begin with this well-known story of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee.¹ Jesus had had a long day of teaching the crowds while sitting in a boat.² When evening came he told his disciples to take him to the other side of the lake.³ There was more than one boat, and several of the disciples were fishermen who were very familiar with these waters. The Sea of Galilee is noted for its sudden storms and one, we are told, quickly arose on that journey and the boat was being swamped by waves and was in danger of sinking. Even experienced sailors were afraid.

Stories of rescue from imminent danger are captivating, because the word “rescue” tells us that there’s going to be a *happy* ending. Oddly, perhaps, we discover that in this life-and-death crisis “Jesus was sleeping peacefully” in the stern of the boat.⁴ That scenario conjures up another image in the minds of Mark’s audience, namely the story of Jonah.⁵ Jonah was also asleep in the bottom of a boat in a ferocious storm which caused the crew to fear for their lives. There is, I suggest, an implied contrast between Jonah and Jesus here; Jonah was an un-willing prophet running *away* from his God-given commission. Jesus was faithfully *fulfilling* his God-given mission. Jonah, in a sense, sacrificed himself by getting the crew to throw him overboard in order to save the sailors. Jesus also, as Mark later tells us, gave “his life as a ransom for many.”⁶ Jonah 1:6 tells us the ship’s captain wakes up Jonah with: “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up and call on your god.” The disciples wake Jesus up with a similar: “Don’t you care that we are perishing?” The parallels in these two rescue stories are clearly evident. But what happens next in the gospel account is as shocking and as terrifying to the disciples as the storm itself.

Jesus does not answer the disciples’ question, but simply addresses the trouble with two simple commands: “be still” and “be silent.” Jesus speaks in rhetoric that is similar to casting out a demon – the command to “be quiet” could be interpreted as “be muzzled.” And in the Old Testament we read many texts in which the feared sea represents turbulent *chaos*, often embodied as a monster with various names - like Leviathan. Everyone knew that no human can confine chaos; *only God could do that*, just as he did in creation. Listen to how the psalmist praises God for his deliverance in our Old Testament reading this morning: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them

¹ See also Matt 8:23-27 and Luke 8:22-25. Note: apart from fishermen, the Jews were *not* a seafaring people. They left that to their Phoenician Mediterranean neighbors in the North.

² Mark 4:1, 35.

³ This was to *gentile* (non-Jewish) territory; it is possible this links symbolically with the “birds” nesting in the mustard seed bushes from the previous parable (Mark 4:32) thus hinting of the wider implications of Jesus’ ministry.

⁴ Mark 4:38. Yes, the human Jesus is tired after a long day. However, peaceful sleep is *also* a sign of a person’s deep *trust in God* (see Psalm 3:5, 4:8) and this is to be contrasted with the disciples’ highly anxious state of mind.

⁵ See also Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.* (Deep River, 2015), 27-38.

⁶ Mark 10:45.

out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then *they were glad* because they had *quiet*, and he brought them to their desired haven.”⁷ The psalmist’s response is one of *joy*.⁸

What happens on the lake after Jesus gives his command? The winds cease, and there is a similar dead calm.⁹ Yet the disciples’ panic is now replaced by great *fear*, to which Jesus asks: ‘Why are you afraid; have you *still* no faith?’ The disciples then ask each other: “Who *then* is *this* that even the wind and the waves obey him?” And Mark need not give an explicit answer, because the events themselves reveal the identity of Jesus as one who is *intimately* connected with God, since he was doing acts that were reserved for God *alone*.¹⁰ In this unusual case, Jesus turns the situation on its head *not* by rescuing the ship but by calming the storm! It is a teachable moment that reveals what the coming of the kingdom of God means; the world will be turned upside down. This is *not* a publicity stunt that commands allegiance; no one else was there except his disciples and Jesus already *had* their allegiance. Rather it was an unforgettable moment which revealed to the disciples exactly *who* it was they were following.

Some people struggle to believe that this miracle *actually* happened, preferring instead to seeing it as *literary* reference. These so-called “nature miracles,” of calming the storm or walking on water, are problematic because – in essence - the miracle is one of physics, not biology. The complexities, even mysteries, of the human mind and body enable some to accept the *possibility* of miraculous healings. But calming a storm stretches credulity because physics is meant to be so well-understood! Mark records it to make a point, namely that Jesus has come to defeat evil – and in their culture, the unpredictable, chaotic sea was the figurative embodiment of all that was evil. If, on the one hand, we only view the story as a *literal* way, then it’s just a dramatic miracle and we fail to see the symbolism to which it points, namely the kingdom of God is definitively overcoming evil with good. On the other hand, if someone struggles with the occurrence of the miracle itself, first I ask: “Just *this* miracle, or *all* of Christ’s miracles?” If the latter, there is no *rational* basis to come to that conclusion. Second, “How, then, do *you* envision evil being replaced by good? What alternative and suitably powerful image works for you?” And as you reflect on that, so the focus comes back to the disciples’ question, “*Who then is this that even the wind and waves obey him?*” Whether it is binding and exorcising demons or taming the forces of chaos, no one doubted God was working powerfully through Jesus the Messiah.¹¹

We often live in fear of disapproval, rejection, failure, illness, and - of course - we fear dying and the death of those we love. We are afraid for ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation and

⁷ Ps 107:28-30.

⁸ And remember, in the story of Jonah, after the sailors threw him overboard there also was a great calm. The sailors response was to “fear the Lord,” in other words to worship and honor him (Jonah 1:16).

⁹ The Greek in Mark emphasises a “great” storm, a “great” calm, and the disciples’ response as a “great” fear.

¹⁰ It might be possible for other miracle workers and sorcerers to duplicate Jesus’ healings and exorcisms – but not mastery over the sea!

¹¹ Mark has already made reference to the “stronger” one who is in their midst, one who apparently has power to break into Satan’s domain; Mark 1:7; 3:37.

our messy, corrupt world. When our lives are in a crisis or grave danger, our natural human reaction is to doubt God's love and care for us, even to wonder whether there is a God - and if he does exist, is he even *aware* of our problems? Like the disciples, we cry out in the midst of *our* storms of life: "God, don't you care?" The suspicion that God doesn't really care for us will corrode away our life, if we let it. We may give up praying. We might still *believe* in God but we won't have a *relationship* with him. At such times, today's text speaks to our condition. God *is* present with us and is deeply concerned for us even when we do not recognize his care and activity. In this incident, Jesus was in the *same* boat *with* the disciples, so *of course* he cared what happened to them! Jesus is still in *our* boat with us today, here in St. Andrew's, and in each of our individual situations.

Mark's *readers* would have also identified with the disciples' panic-prayer: "Don't you care that we are about to die?" This would echo the anguished prayers of Christians in the time of Nero's rampage against the Christians in Rome in 64 CE and the terrors faced by Christians in Palestine and Syria during the Jewish revolt. The kind of faith the story calls for, however, is not *only* that Jesus *could* save *them* from the storm, but that he is *with* them - again, literally in the same boat. Moreover, it is a kind of faith that holds tight to Jesus being both Lord of the storm and capable of saving even beyond death. Mark's readers knew that God did *not* deliver Jesus from the death, but *raised* him *from* the dead,¹² which corresponds to the ultimate defeat of evil. Moreover, Mark's readers likely knew of the martyrdoms of Peter, Paul, and other Christians. This calls for a faith in God who saves through and beyond death, and not necessarily *from* death. We need to remember this in our praying, and you know that I say this as someone who has experienced this first hand.¹³ In the face of life's chaos, Mark challenges his readers, who are *already* followers of Jesus, to *persist* in their faith and to *continue* to trust in him regardless. And so this story keeps pointing *us* back to the identity of Jesus and asks us today, since *this* is who is, will you and I trust him?

I end today with two final thoughts: First, who here is in a crisis and needs to hear Jesus speak the commanding words of "be still" and "be silent" to their situation? Jesus is now the Risen Christ, who is in the process of bringing all the forces of chaos into account. We still serve a God of miracles, the God of the possible, and in light of *that* we are encouraged to pray, confident that our prayers are heard and make a real difference - even if they do not always result in what we *want* or ask for.

Second, it is certainly OK to pray panic-prayers; but don't be surprised if Jesus replies: "Why are you afraid? In light of all you have witnessed and experienced about me, do you *still* have no faith?"! Jesus does *not* say, "There is *nothing* to be afraid of." Instead he asks "Why are you afraid? I am here, with you, and I have already faced everything you can possibly face and come through the other side of the deep waters." The fearful storms we all face are *very* real, but they do *not* have the last word. In whatever we are facing, will we exercise *faith* or *fear*? Mark urges us all to have faith, because Jesus - the Lord of Everything - is with us. Let us become more aware that Jesus Christ is in *our* boat and so is present with us on our journey. AMEN.

¹² Mark 16:6-8.

¹³ See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).