

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 7
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
June 20, 2021
Job 38:1-11
Psalm 9:9-20
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

Suffering through the Storm

I have never been on a boat in the middle of a lake in the midst of a storm. Have you? I have been on boats and ships and ferries on the ocean, and on boats on lakes and in rivers. I have been through lots of storms traveling in cars and on airplanes and sitting safely inside my home. But I have never been on a small boat in the middle of a lake in the midst of a storm.

Although I am quite an enthusiastic kayaker, I am an inexperienced sailor.

So, I'm not sure what I would do in a boat on a lake in the midst of a storm if the waves were swamping the boat, and the boat seemed about to sink. But I'm pretty sure that I would be afraid.

Afraid may be too mild a word for what the disciples of Jesus were feeling in our gospel passage today.

Perhaps terrified is more like it. And at least four of them were experienced sailors, fishers by trade.

Isn't it interesting though that the text of Mark does not mention their emotions as the passage begins? Rather, Mark indicates that when "a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped," the disciples go to the sleeping Jesus in the stern, wake him up, and exclaim, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

What does Jesus know that they don't?

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Author and scholar Alexander John Shaia holds that each of the four canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, was composed by and for a distinct community of Jesus followers in the first century. And each gospel is intended to deal with a particular set of circumstances being faced at the time by the community that composed it.

The gospel of Mark was composed by and for a community of Jewish Jesus followers who had been kicked out of the synagogues and facing persecution by Rome, resulting in many of their deaths.

Dr Shaia suggests that their key question is, “How do we move through suffering?”

As we and millions of other Christians around the world follow the Revised Common Lectionary, we move through a three-year cycle. We call these Years A, B, and C. In Year A, we engage Matthew. In Year B, this year, we have Mark. For almost all of these Sundays after Pentecost until Advent, Mark will be our companion.

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So, think on the circumstances of the community of Jesus followers facing persecution who composed Mark. Their question is not, “Why do we suffer?” Their question is, “How do we move through suffering?” Do you feel how their situation shaped the gospel?

Mark is full of immediacy. The verses are short, sometimes even terse; the stories succinct. In the first century people would have been memorizing the entire gospel and chanting it as a prayer, literally, praying the gospel. If you were waiting for the authorities to come for you, hiding inside your house and afraid, this gospel would lend itself to fairly easy recall even in such a situation of duress.

Mark uses the geography of the Sea of Galilee and the towns all around it as part of the story. Jesus and the disciples go around the lake, which is some 12.5 miles long and 7.5 miles wide, on land. They also cross the Sea of Galilee four times in Mark. Today we have the first of these four crossings.

Meanwhile, back on the boat in the middle of the lake in the midst of a storm, the disciples are afraid. What does Jesus know that they don't?

Storms arise quickly and often on the Sea of Galilee. It's in a volcanic area of the Levant. Storms on that lake are par for the course. Sailing at night, which seems to have been Jesus' idea in this passage, may be adding an unnecessary element of risk. But the reality is that nobody should be surprised when storms arise on that lake. They are not sent from God to bedevil particular people or particular boats. They are just part of what happens in that place.

Jesus knows that the disciples have the resources within themselves already to negotiate the storm. He has given them the teachings they need; he has modeled how to move forward even when afraid. Here was a chance to demonstrate what they had learned, *that* they had learned, face their fear, and move through the peril at hand. Their prior life experience was preparation. Jesus' teachings inform how they could apply it. Nothing is wasted in God's economy.

When the boat begins to swamp though, they immediately run to Jesus to ask him to fix it. They want him to be their wonderworker. He is inviting them to draw on their own resources,

to grow up in faith by doing difficult things. They just want the storm to be over. They are taking the weather very personally.

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It's fairly common for members of the human species to take personally things which are just part of the natural course of life in this world. I've certainly done it. Have you?

Our first reading comes from chapter 38 of the book of Job. By this point in this book, Job has suffered almost unimaginable losses. Numerous calamities have struck his family, killed his children, destroyed his home, and his own health is in jeopardy. In terms of material goods, he who had possessed great wealth now possesses almost nothing.

Job's so-called friends descend on him with all kinds of easy answers and unhelpful, unsolicited advice. He endures not only the loss of all his stuff and his loved ones but also the insufferable platitudes and accusations of his friends. Finally, when his actually awful advisors shut up, Job, who has been asking questions and in conversation with God all along, can identify God's voice. And that voice comes to him from a whirlwind, that is, in the sound of a storm.

Job sees that God has been present all along even when it least seemed so. He sees, in the words of Paula D'Arcy, that, "God comes to us disguised as our life." Job understands that people who are trying their best are not exempt from weather or calamity. Job at last moves through suffering to the other side. It is not a journey he would have picked. But it is a journey that he has survived. At the end, having nothing, Job possesses everything that's necessary.

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So too with St Paul, our patron, in the reading from the second letter to the Corinthians. Paul and his companions endured, as he wrote to the Jesus followers in the city of Corinth in Greece, "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger." They were doing their best to follow what they understood as the Holy Spirit's leadership. And this led not to the rosiest of realities but to some of the most brutal. Not because God sent these things to punish or test them but because in the course of living on this earth even or perhaps especially when trying to conform our lives to God's standards, we still face difficulties.

Following Jesus is not a get out of jail free card. It is a path of purpose and meaning through anything and everything that may happen to us in this life. Paul and his companions came to understand that even when they were regarded as having nothing, they possessed everything: everything they needed, everything that matters. As Paul said elsewhere, "God's grace is sufficient."

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Jesus' goal seems to be equipping his followers so that they can live his life even when he is no longer bodily present. These disciples on this boat seem reluctant to practice so long as he is around.

Later in Mark, Jesus will do things differently. He will send them on across the lake ahead of him. When the storm gathers, he will walk out to meet them.

In all four of the lake crossings in Mark, Jesus is either with them the entire way or he comes to meet them where they are. This is one way we move through suffering. We keep going, and God goes with us. Even when it doesn't feel as though God is with us. Somehow or other, we are accompanied.

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Almost the last thing I did before lockdown in 2020 was drive from Atlanta to Louisville, Kentucky to attend the funeral of my favorite seminary professor, Dr Frank Tupper. Frank had endured the loss of his beloved spouse to cancer, had raised their two children as a single parent, had wrestled with all manner of critics in the midst of a denominational takeover, had been run out of one seminary and found a home in another, and had at last retired. Not long into retirement and not so long after a diagnosis of Parkinson's, he took a terrible fall down the stairs of his home and suffered a horrendous spinal cord injury. Confined to a wheelchair and almost entirely paralyzed from the neck down, his children and grandchildren reconfigured their lives into a multi-generation household so that he could live at home. He began writing again. And he began to receive visitors. My last in-person visit with him was in September 2018. I was so glad to see him and spend time with him. His brilliant mind still amazingly active, his spirit resilient, even then he affirmed what he had affirmed all along: "Life is arbitrary; God is not." Frank found in the Jesus story of compassion and in the company of Jesus the resources not only to endure suffering but to move through it.

When we know that we are not alone, that the Divine Help remains with us always, we are encouraged, that is, we have heart enough to move through difficult circumstances. We don't merely suffer: we move through suffering and on to the other side.

Frank wrote a long and brilliant book about suffering entitled *A Scandalous Providence*. It is worth the effort to glean his insights. But when I need a short, chantable verse like the Jesus followers facing persecution who composed Mark, when I am in the midst of a storm and trying to figure out the next step, I meditate on that shortest version: "Life is arbitrary; God is not."