

Peace, Be Still
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Mark 4:35-41

They were in the most terrible storm of their lives. Out on the open sea, the weather threatened to swamp the disciples and their boat. They battled waves many times higher than the tallest one among them. They were terrified. Completely undone. Together, they shared the sinking feeling that this was the end of the world as they know it. Baling water as fast as they possibly could, wrestling the wind-whipped sails, they hung on for their lives.

But Jesus was fast asleep. In the stern, his head rested on a cushion. Were it not for the crashing waves and shouting disciples, I'm pretty sure you could have heard him snoring.

Finally, the disciples, in terror and exasperation, shout to him, *"Don't you care that we are perishing?"*

Jesus wakes and rebukes the wind and commands it to quiet down. *"Peace! Be still,"* he says. Who was he talking to exactly? The wind or his companions?

We are like the disciples. We want God to calm the storm. We shout at God, *"What's the matter with you? Don't you see we are perishing? Don't you see so many of us — children, even! — have already perished? Wake up, God! Stop sleeping when we need you most!"*

It would be easy to reduce this story to an assurance that God will deliver us if anything bad happens, but we know that simply is not true. We remember the people of Hawaii, experiencing terrible destruction from a volcano, or the people of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, still struggling to recover from devastating storms a year ago; we think of families broken by divorce or violence; of tragic accidents and purposeful deeds that bring heartache and loss to innocent people.

The news shows children being kept in circumstances resembling cages and pens, separated from their parents as they flee even worse conditions in their homelands. How can the most vulnerable in our midst, and those who struggle to find safety, live with any hope?

Who can blame them, or us, for being afraid?

We know fear, from our personal dread of illness, suffering, death (our own and that of our loved ones), and the emotional suffering of loss and loneliness, to the shared anxiety we have about terrorism, war, environmental damage, gun violence and economic troubles.

As a pastor, every Sunday I look out at a congregation tossed on the stormy seas of job loss, the emotional devastation of broken relationships, health challenges, worries over children and elderly parents, fear of being alone, and death itself.

Storms are buffeting the church today, individually and as the Body of Christ. Longtime members fear the end of the story for their much-loved congregation and its familiar and inspiring story; church leaders worry about declines in membership and giving as our wider culture navigates its way through crisis and division; church members struggle with whether to suppress or try to resolve conflicts that arise over issues that were simply unknown to the early church.

This story, important enough to be included in all four Gospels, is at the heart of the Good News for us today. In every storm that makes us anxious, we hear the words, "*Do not be afraid.*" These are "the first and the last word of the gospel. It is the word the angels speak to the terrified shepherds and the word spoken at the tomb when the women discover it empty: '*Do not be afraid.*'"¹

Jesus has been teaching for a while in familiar and safe territory, among his own people. He's tired, but he doesn't go home for a good night's sleep. Instead, he does that thing that all restless seekers do: he sets out into the unfamiliar and the not-so-safe. Jesus takes his disciples across the sea into Gentile territory... the significance of that means this good news is for all, not just for us and our own.

This becomes more obvious in future stories about desperate Syro-Phoenician mothers and other foreigners helped by Jesus, but for this night, the disciples find themselves on the risky way to encountering "otherness," and it's no wonder they feel threatened. We are all afraid of those who are "other," but Jesus calls us to get out of our comfort zones and move out into unfamiliar territory, promising that he will be with us all the way.

Where is that place, that "zone," where we will need to take a risk in order to embody the Good News for others?

¹ Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol 3

Frederick Buechner preached a beautiful sermon on this text that points us outward and onward, as Jesus commanded his followers long ago: *"Go...Go for God's sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going."*

Buechner reassures us that Jesus will be with us: *"Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way 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. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we're done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him"*²

For the disciples, the storm was surely less fearsome than the experience of the presence of God. We can have faith that this power at the heart of the universe, at the heart of all reality, vibrates with love and goodness, and, in the end, will allow all things to unfold in justice and peace, making all things right, including our small but precious lives.

Jesus spoke of the mustard seed being tiny but growing into this big tree that gives shelter to the birds of the air. He spoke of the widow's mite being the greatest gift of all, the lost coin being worth turning the house upside down to find, Jesus visited the house of little Zacchaeus, so short that he couldn't see Jesus passing by, so he climbed a tree and received a visit from the Teacher himself. Jesus spoke of faith like that of a child and the importance of giving water to the little ones.

To those of us who know what it feels like to be small against great challenges, Jesus understands.

All of us know what it feels like to feel tiny in the face of overwhelming circumstances--illness, divorce, chronic pain, anxiety, the loss of loved ones and the suffering of our children. Maybe we don't know what we're supposed to do, or we don't know how to help our family reconcile or to repair broken friendships. We know what it feels like to face debt and financial fears and unsolvable problems, worries about our livelihood and our safety. We know what it feels like to be unappreciated, unnoticed, unacknowledged.

And then there are the problems we share: damage to the environment and global warming and pollution, war and killing and violence, poverty and racism and mass incarceration, sexism and ageism and homophobia, whether we are personally impacted by them or not.

² Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermons

All these things that feel big and overpowering, and we feel so small in the face of these Goliaths, coming out of their camp every day and challenging us to do battle.

And then there is the United Church of Christ, so small and beautiful at the table of churches, bringing our hard-learned lessons about freedom with responsibility, our dream of a table with a place for everyone, of evangelical courage, early truth-telling, extravagant hospitality...bringing our hope for the future, a hope rooted not in our own power but in the power of the living God, a God who has brought us this far and will not forget about us or leave us to the giant crashing waves that tower over us...the living God, who looks upon even the smallest ones in creation, upon you and me, each of us, in love and infinite care.

Together we dream of that great and glorious day, when we shall overcome with love all that threatens and intimidates, because God will see us through to a time when we shall walk hand in hand.

With that dream before us, and the sure knowledge that God is with us, how can we be afraid?

It can be a tremendous challenge to remain compassionate and empathetic as the storm rages on. Over time, our ability to feel and care for others becomes eroded through overuse of our skills of compassion. We might even experience an emotional blunting – whereby we react to situations differently than one would normally expect or find ourselves not caring when we should. If you find yourself feeling emotionally vulnerable, significantly stressed, or overwhelmed, please consider seeing someone like a therapist who can help you process your feelings and implement strategies to help you combat compassion fatigue and maintain a healthy balance.

When our boat takes on too much water... is when we need help the most. The "battle" for justice and healing and peace is long and day-by-day, and we engage it anew each morning. The large battles and moments of hope fuel our hope in our individual lives, too, for healing and peace in our families and our bodies, for the solving of problems and the sure knowledge that, because we are the church, others are with us no matter what we face. The next time you are rocked by the storm, remember that you don't need to stand in the bow all alone, trying to be strong. We are all in the same boat. The good news is this: *God* is in the boat with us. Amen.