

On the Sea

Mark 4:35-41

June 23, 2024

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

The disciples and Jesus are in the boat. This isn't exactly a pleasure cruise, nor a work trip, but a boat trip as a means of transportation across the Sea of Galilee, which is more the size of a large lake. Even so, they obviously don't have a motor. It's likely a sailboat, or even more likely a boat powered by oars and thus powered by the disciples themselves. Remember that at least some of them are fishermen, so this is a pretty normal thing for them to be doing—hop in the boat to travel to where they need to be. It's been some long days that have placed big demands on Jesus and his energy, and he falls asleep in the back of the boat. A storm blows up, which wasn't uncommon on the Sea of Galilee. Waves were crashing into the boat, and it was starting to fill up with water. The disciples, even the fishermen among them, are worried, which I'm sure made the others even more afraid, like if the flight attendants on the airplane are afraid, that's when you know it's time for you, a mere passenger, to be scared too.¹

“Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?!?!?” Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing? Teacher.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus gets called “Teacher” or “Rabbi” fairly often, though that isn't our most used title for him. He also gets called or described by other names: Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Master, Messiah. Here in this passage from Mark, the disciples cry out in fear and call him Teacher.² Similar stories of Jesus calming the storm appear in Matthew and Luke, but there, at the same point in the story, they call him Lord or Master. At the moment when they are most afraid, they call him Teacher, even though they are longing and hoping for the power and authority of a Master of Lord, not a teacher.

A teacher, well, teaches. They have information and lessons to share, lessons that their students need to learn or discover. Teachers hold influence and power, but not power over nature.

Any reader of the Hebrew Scriptures knew exactly who held power over nature, power over the waters and seas. The Holy One who created the seas, that's who. God is the one who calms chaotic waters. It's evident at Creation and reaffirmed in the book of Job, throughout the Psalms, including Psalm 107 that Etta/Sandy read, and in the prophets, too.³ At this point in Mark, Jesus's power and authority have been evident several times. At his baptism, he alone heard God's voice from heaven calling him the Son of God. He has forgiven sins, a power reserved for God alone. He has been identified by unclean spirits as the Son of God, but the disciples have not yet called him Messiah. That doesn't happen until chapter 8. The disciples know him, but they haven't figured out who he is completely yet.

¹ Matt Skinner makes this comparison on the “Sermon Brainwave” podcast for today 6/23/24, available on the Working Preacher YouTube channel.

² Karoline Lewis, on the same podcast, points out that the disciples call Jesus “Teacher” only in Mark.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-6>

What they do know, instinctively, in their depths, is that Jesus is the person who can help them at this frightening moment. They are a bit bewildered, probably hurt, maybe even angry, that he is asleep, of all things, in the midst of their terror. But they call out to him in the way they know best, “Teacher!”

And the Teacher reveals himself as the One who can calm the chaotic seas, the One who is equal to the Creator. “Peace, be still,” he calls out to the wind and the waves, and they obey him. Teacher reveals himself to be both Master and Lord, and maybe that’s why Matthew and Luke match their titles to Jesus’s actions in their tellings of the story.

But as we said a minute ago, a Teacher has information to share and lessons that students need to learn. So what is it that the disciples need to learn from their Teacher in the midst of this storm?

They need to learn what he’s already showed them, that he is the Son of God, the only one who would have power and authority over the elements of the storm. They sorta kinda begin to get that, because they respond to his calming of the storm with great awe and say “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” They must know the answer to that question, even as their minds can’t grasp it, that a man could be equal to God, that a man could be God.

They need to learn the faith that Jesus himself shows in the boat. His sleep shows his trust and faith in the Creator of the seas. Jesus himself has plenty of faith that the storm will not destroy them. After he’s calmed the storm, he says to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Fear is the opposite of faith here. Nothing about doubt, but plenty about fear. Why are you afraid, have you still no faith?

In the midst of our storms, then, in the midst of bad news that threatens to overwhelm us and sink our spirits, our Teacher teaches us the same lessons as he did the disciples. Jesus has not only the knowledge but the power and authority to calm the storms that threaten to do us in. I’m of course talking more about figurative storms than literal ones with thunder and lightning. Where do we turn if our storm needs calming, or if our response to the storm needs calming? To the one that has the power to command it to be still and bring peace. We place our trust and faith in that Jesus.

And in turn, we learn by experience and repeated trial and error the faith of Jesus. We learn that faith and fear are opposites, that we don’t need to be controlled by our fears, that our faith in Jesus brings peace.

In the calm and stillness, we come to recognize the true identity and power of our Teacher, our Savior, our Lord. And that brings us to awe.