

June 21, 2015 – Father’s Day  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 4:35-41

### **Parable of the Storm**

Last Wednesday night I went to see a play of Moby Dick, that sea story about Captain Ahab and his crewmates, “call me Ishmael,” and the other ones who accompany him. It was a creative and thought-provoking production. Sea stories, especially stormy sea stories, are about watery adventures and dangers and more: they’re about human nature and cosmic forces. Moby Dick is not just a sea story, but an allegory.

Today’s gospel reading is also a sea story, that is also an allegory. There’s a crew: the ones who accompany him, “call me disciple,” characters who are depictions of human nature; and there’s nature-nature: its threatening forces, not a whale but the wind and waves; and then there’s the captain: a different kind of captain, different than Ahab, the gospel’s captain is not monomaniacal, but he’s mysterious, too. He, too, is not in the action at first, but when he does appear later he has sharp words with the crew. There’s a surprising harshness to Jesus’ questions after the storm, “Why are you afraid? and, “Have you still no faith?” He asks, as if disappointed in the unspoken answer. He asks, when he is the one who has led them on this perilous voyage, and left them to their own devices. He asks, when the boat has been in great danger, and instead of steering, he was sleeping. It’s a thought-provoking story, that is also an allegory, a parable, like the parables we had last week. This week: the parable of the storm.

It begins: “on that same day,” as in, on that same day that Jesus told parables, the parables that we heard last week: of a tiny mustard seed growing prodigiously, of someone scattering seeds and then going to sleep. Today’s sea story follows after those parables, parables of mystery, and assurance, parables of confident faith. “On that same day” that Jesus was telling parables, teaching, Jesus said, “Let us go across to the other side.”

To the other side, as in to a foreign place, to Gentile territory across the lake. At this point in Mark’s gospel, Jesus has become known locally, he’s been stirring things up, even stirring things up among members of his family. Some people think he’s crazy because of what he does, how he goes about healing, casting out demons. He rebukes unclean spirits and brings people peace, and calm. Now Jesus gets into a boat, and crosses to the other side. He’s become known locally, now he travels to a wider locale. The geography of the gospel is expanding, the mission and ministry is reaching new places, strange places, perhaps dangerous places.

But it’s already dangerous, even before they get there. They’re crossing to the other side and a storm kicks up, a great storm, a storm of Biblical proportions, like the storms we had early last week. Wasn’t that something? The rain came down in sheets, cell phones shrieked, tornado sirens droned. Basements flooded. The storm in today’s gospel story is like that and worse, like that on the sea, at night. The wind is blowing, the waves are rising, the boat is sinking.

And Jesus is sleeping. Jesus is sleeping in the boat, on a cushion. That detail about the cushion always jumps out at me. I’ve seen alternate translations that go with “pillow,” but that doesn’t sound much better to me. Why do first century fishermen have a cushion, or a pillow, in their boat? And why is Jesus sleeping on it? How can he be sleeping on it? Doesn’t he know how bad the weather is? Doesn’t he know the disciples are afraid? Doesn’t he care?

That’s what the disciples ask him. “Teacher,” that’s what he was doing on that same day, teaching, telling parables, stories of seeds that grow while someone sleeps, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are perishing?”

In the storm-tossed boat, amidst the wind and the waves, amidst such fear, such legitimate fear, the cushion seems a luxury of carelessness. How can there be rest, in a world full of danger? How can there be repose, when suffering is indiscriminate? When caught in a storm, when winds of stress blow from every side, when waves of illness, or debt, or anxiety batter, when the waters of dread rise, we ask, we cry out, “Don’t you care?!” Is that not the question on our hearts, the question at the very heart of human nature? Is the universe indifferent? Does hope lie? Does hope lie sleeping, curled into itself? God, don’t you care?

Hear now the gospel: Jesus wakes up—yet more than that, much more than that. To be accurate to the original language of the text, Jesus doesn’t wake up. The verb used is one that appears again later in the gospel. Jesus doesn’t wake up, Jesus rises. That is what God does, in Jesus. The story of the gospel is of God with us, present in the sea of human suffering, voyaging into the very heart of the storm—and rising. Like the parable after which it follows, in which someone sleeps, and rises, so also on the sea. God rises, and drives out the forces of evil, performs an exorcism on the sea. Jesus rebukes it—the verb used is the same one used earlier, with demons. Jesus rebukes the sea and makes it calm, as he has rebuked demons and made those possessed by them calm. Crossing to the other side, the display of Jesus’ power also expands, even nature obeys him. Crossing to the other side, Jesus does what he’s been doing, he heals and teaches.

He teaches, by asking questions, sharp questions. Jesus minces no words, like a ship captain, he’s barking orders. “Why are you afraid? Literally, Jesus calls the disciples cowards. Having identified with them, I want point out to Jesus how terrible the storm was. I want to note how, though I know he was with us in it, it didn’t look like he was doing anything. Circumstances were horrible. We had no idea how we’d get through it. Help seemed asleep, unconcerned, apathetic.

Jesus doesn’t address any of that. He simply asks, “You think that’s faith?”

A couple weeks ago, in that first round of storms that hit Texas back in May, those violent storms, that caused such terrible flooding, I heard a story about a family in Houston. It began at their wrecked home. The father said, “Welcome to our devastation.” Early in the morning, while their children slept, he and his wife watched the waters rise. Having grown up in Western Canada, where floods aren’t common, they didn’t know what to do. They tried to stop the water, but it kept coming in faster. They started grabbing photos, and artwork, and family treasures, started stashing everything up as high as they could. Eventually they had to leave. Days later they returned, to sort through belongings, find what was salvageable, fill out insurance forms. Many friends are helping, but it’s still very hard, losing so much, so much of it precious and unreplacable. It’s hard, too, because the way forward is unclear. The mother said, “Is FEMA going to pay for us to paint that drywall or do we then have to hire painters? And how long is all that going to take? And the house dried out and restored to move back in?”

My heart was sinking for this family, but that’s not how the story ended, that’s not what was about. It ended with the father, a neuroscientist, who loves the outdoors, who believes eventually, the family will be fine. He says his kids had lots of questions about the flood, but he believes going through this can teach them something. He said, “They can see how we respond to it and stay positive and be with friends. This is good for them, I think, in the end. It’ll happen to them in their lifetime, sometime they’ll have to suffer something tough. So this is good.”

That’s faith, what that father said, faith amidst storms. Faith, like that of families of people murdered at a prayer meeting in Charleston, families who showed up in court and, through tears, spoke the word “forgiveness.” That’s faith. Being a disciple does not eliminate storms. Often it means heading right into them. But we do not go alone. He is teacher, and healer, and captain of all there is. Let us go with him, across to the other side.