

Sermon on Mark 4:35-41
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 21, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

On this Father's Day, it's probably appropriate that the gospel for the day talks about Jesus and his disciples being in a boat – a fishing boat, to be precise. Because what do many Minnesota fathers like to do more than fishing? Now some of you may say, well, there are many things I enjoy more than fishing – but you're here, and those who are fishing are not! Anyway, it sounds like as good an entry point for preaching today to talk about men in boats – in this state, we can all relate, anyway! And most fishermen tell stories about storms they have survived (for those who don't survive, don't tell the story!) – and the gospel today is about a great storm that threatened to sink the boat which Jesus and his disciples were in.

Even I have a story about being in a boat, during a great storm, and I don't fish very often! I gave you a hint of it three years ago, the last time I preached on this text on a Sunday morning. It was 35 years ago, when I was in college, on a college choir tour in Norway. We were travelling up and down the coast of Norway, 70-some choir members and guests, sailing in a mission boat called *The Gideon*. We sailed by night through every fjord you could name, stopping in towns during the day, singing a concert every evening, to re-embark on our journey at night. We started in Oslo, and continued north across the Arctic Circle on Memorial Day, and returned south along the coast to Bergen – the hometown of composer Edvard Grieg. Anyway, most of our journeys were inside the fjords inside the coastal islands, so we hardly ever felt the force of the North Sea.

But some nights we did leave the protection of the islands, and sailed across open sea to the next fjord. And then we didn't get much sleep. I vividly recall trying to sleep while our little boat was tossed and turned amid the waves. When we rolled one way, I would doze off, but when we rolled back, my legs would come up over my body, and I would wake up. It was like trying to sleep on a roller coaster! One night it got so bad, that I left my cabin to look out and see what was happening. I should have stayed in bed.

I went down to the galley of the ship (which for you “landlubbers” is the kitchen) and saw two of the crew crying (they were cooks – who weren't used to sailing the ocean). They were frightened, because that night was a great storm, with waves towering over the boat, and they wanted to go home. A few others in our choir were also up, looking out through the darkness to witness the storm going around us. Eventually, we figured the best thing we could do was go back to bed and pray! The next morning, we asked our choir director (Leland Sateren) at breakfast how he slept that night during the storm. “Storm? There was a storm? I

slept like a baby, and put my trust in God and the captain of the ship!” Thank you, Leland! Which is what we all should have done (including the cooks).

Today’s gospel portrays a similar situation. Jesus and his disciples set out across the sea of Galilee in a fishing boat, leaving the crowds behind. But later that night a great storm blew up (which was common on that body of water), and soon it seemed that the boat would be swamped. The disciples were afraid, but Jesus slept in the stern, on a cushion. They woke Jesus up and asked him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” So Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, telling the sea, “Peace, be still!” The wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. Jesus asked them, “Why were you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (For hadn’t they just seen Jesus heal many in Galilee from disease and had taught them about the kingdom of God.) So they were all filled with awe and said to each other, “Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

This story has a direct relation to our experiences of life on earth, and our questions about God. First of all, we all know about the storms that threaten our existence. If you haven’t experienced them, you will! There are the storms of nature, like great wind storms, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, blizzards and floods which can result in death and destruction, so we fear them for good reason. There are the other storms of life as well: like illness and disease, injury, and war, which threaten to cripple or kill us. There are storms of life events, like when we lose a family member through death or illness, separation or divorce. There are emotional storms, like those which come from such separations, when we don’t know where or who to turn to. They can result in anxiety or depression, even mental illness, and they all challenge our faith and hope. The longer you live, the more you become acquainted with these emotional storms of life.

Throughout these storms a common question we have is that of the disciples: “where is God?” Could God be sleeping throughout despair, or unaware and uncaring? Is Jesus asleep in the stern of our boat, while we are sinking? Scripture tells us in no uncertain terms that NO! God is not unaware of your suffering! Jesus is not asleep at the wheel, uncaring or indifferent! God listens to our prayers when we call to him, and God has answered our prayers with the gift of God’s Son, Jesus our Lord, who came and died and rose again in order to give us life.

So one more lesson comes from this gospel story that gives us hope and strengthens our faith. It is this: that God has power over these storms of life, and has given this power to Jesus, God’s Son. Jesus was able to calm the wind and the waves. Jesus had the power to heal the sickness that struck the men, women and children who came to him for healing. Jesus even was able to raise the dead to life, as he did for Lazarus his friend, and as he did for Jairus’ daughter (as we shall see in next week’s gospel lesson).

Jesus has the power to hold you up when you or I experience those storms that come in life. Jesus may not be with us “in person” in our boat to ask to calm the wind and the waves. But Jesus is here, in our heart, available and present to call upon for strength, faith, and hope when we are afraid. When you don’t have anyone to turn to, even when you think that God is asleep and everyone else has given up on you, Jesus is here, in your heart, and you can call on him. You don’t have to wake Jesus up – usually it’s you and me that need to wake up and be aware of his presence!

So when the winds and waves of the storms in your life come up, call on Jesus, who is there in the boat with you! He’s not asleep, he is waiting on your call! And think about the response the director of our choir had when we were afraid in that boat in Norway 35 years ago: I slept in peace, because my trust was in God and in the captain who steered the ship! There are some things that are out of our hands, so it is good to keep our trust in God and in those whom God has appointed to care for us. God gave that captain the skills and the calling to steer our ship safely through troubled waters. Who has God called to sail the ship through the storms of our lives? Do you have trusted mentors, leaders, parents, or friends who can help you do that? Sometimes we are the ones whom God has called to sail the ship through stormy seas, and then we put our skills to the test, do our best, and trust in God to carry us through. Even if we sink, God is with us to raise us to eternal life, so what, in the end, is there to fear?

So this story from the gospel, became a parable based on a true story. Jesus really was on a boat with his friends, he probably did fall asleep (because he was very tired from his work of preaching and healing), and a storm did come up. The disciples were afraid, and wondered how their master could sleep through such a storm. They woke him up, and Jesus calmed the storm with the power of God over wind and waves.

Later on, as the church experienced trials and persecutions, as storms battered those first Christians with difficulty and threatened their survival, they remembered this story of Jesus calming the storm, and received comfort and hope from it. They knew that ultimately, their lives were in God’s hands, and Jesus would always be with them. Later on, a symbol for the early church became a ship with a mast and a sail, to symbolize how they saw themselves as a ship sailing through the storms of life, buffeted by the wind and the waves, yet protected by the hand of God (even when our human boats may sink and some may drown). So many churches are designed like boats “upside down”. Ours is – if you look up, you can see in the ceiling the hull of a boat upside down, like Noah’s ark sailing through the great flood.

It’s the same for you and me. God has shown his love for us, in sending his Son to save us, to show us the way to life forever. Whenever the storms threaten

us, and make you and me afraid, we can look to this and other stories that encourage us with the power and grace of God in Christ Jesus. For Jesus has power to calm us, and even to calm the storms in our lives, if we call on him in trust and faith. To trust in God who gives us life is the invitation of his Son. And so we in the Church today can proclaim the good news that we are saved by the grace of God, who reaches down with love and mercy to pick us up when we have fallen, and raise us up to life forever. Praise be to God, who has sent his Son to calm the seas and storms in our lives, and show us the kingdom of God. Amen.