

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 7B

PREACHED JUNE 23, 2018 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: Mark 4:35-41, Job 38:1-11, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

While serving as a hospital chaplain during my seminary training, I encountered a variety of people whose lives were greatly affected by a diagnosis of a terminal illness. One such person was a middle-aged woman who had been diagnosed with HIV/AIDs. At that time (1994), that diagnosis pretty much guaranteed a death sentence. In a lengthy conversation with this woman while she was hospitalized, I learned that she had no idea how she had contracted the disease – no illicit sexual activity, drug use, blood transfusion, none of that. Anyone else would have been angry at God for this random bad luck diagnosis.

But she was just the opposite. She shared with me that she was grateful for having gone through the trials and tribulations of her illness, as it brought her closer to God. She did not blame God for the way her life had turned out, and she did not fear death because she had faith.

Another family I got to know in my first call dealt with a cancer diagnosis for the well-loved matriarch of the family. As in my previous example, this was luck-of-the-draw kind of diagnosis – no real reasons for getting cancer, which ultimately took the woman's life.

While the woman came to be at peace with her diagnosis, the woman's daughter was just the opposite. She was so angry with God for having taken her mother from her that she lost all faith and eventually left the church.

Fear or faith – sometimes those are our only two options, as the disciples discovered with Jesus on a boat on the Sea of Galilee. While in the boat heading to "*the other side*" (the Gentile region), a storm began to overtake their boat and the others. Now, it's important to note that because of the topography, sudden violent storms often occurred on the Sea of Galilee (which is really a lake). And at least four of Jesus' disciples were fishermen, so you would expect them to be able to handle such a storm. But they were with Jesus, and when storms come we don't always think logically; our fear seems to take over.

So it was for Jesus' disciples in the boat that night. As Jesus slept in the stern, they were panicking. What do they do? In fear, they call on Jesus, waking him and shouting, "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*"

Jesus' first reaction is to relieve their fear, their suffering. He "*rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.*" Only then – after he had relieved the stress of the situation – did Jesus challenge them: "*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*" Is Jesus accusatory or sad, angry or resigned in his tone of voice? We really don't know.

What we do know is that Jesus does not try to reason with their fears. He doesn't try to correct their poor theology or remind them of the whole tradition of God's deliverance and care for the people of Israel. Instead, he immediately takes away the cause of the fear, which then prompts the disciples to be fearful for a different reason

and to question among themselves, "*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*" //

Have we ever accused God of not caring for us? What does it do to our faith and trust when we think that God no longer cares, or has abandoned us? How does God show that care for us? Must God always perform miracles – remove us or others from the dangerous storms – for us to believe that God still cares for us and the world?

Here's a radical thought: there may be times in our lives when trusting God means that we take a nap in a boat in the middle of a storm. While everyone around us is panicking, we have the assurance that God is with us, and God can use us to bring calm out of chaos. And yes, there may be times that we will simply have to pretend that we have faith, because like the disciples in the boat we are feeling abandoned by God in our peril.

It might seem like Zion is that boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee being tossed and turned by the wind and waves of a culture which, less and less, cries out to God to save them. Like the disciples, we fear for our lives, for our very existence. We cry out to Jesus for help, for deliverance from the storm. Have we lost our faith?

We followers of Jesus will sometimes feel alone, as though we have been stranded or abandoned by Jesus. But the truth is that in every dark moment Jesus is there with us. Jesus does not take us anywhere he does not himself reside. That's the climax of the promise made by Jesus at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel – the Great Commission. Jesus says to his disciples: "*And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" No matter where we are, in what scary situation we find ourselves, Jesus is with us.

The alternative to risking the dangerous, stormy crossing is to stay tied up on the shore. It's much calmer – and far less dangerous – than to try and venture out into the boat. Unfortunately, that's an accurate depiction of many people and many churches. As individuals and as a congregation, we are often more willing to be safe than to answer Jesus' call to go to the other side – to a place unknown, a place of enemies, and great potential for rejection – and to not be afraid of the storms that may arise on the journey. //

One of the first songs I remember learning and singing in front of an audience was to be performed at our family reunion with my sister and cousin Karla, who is close to my age. I was no more than five years old, and my uncle taught us a song from the Broadway musical *The King and I* entitled, "I Whistle a Happy Tune." Now, the words of the song tell us that if we are afraid about something, we should just whistle. The happiness in the tune, the lyrics tell us, will convince people that we're not afraid – and we may even convince ourselves.

That trick might work on a few occasions, but I'd much rather rely on my faith in God to calm my fears. As the disciples learned, the cure for fear is faith. And Jesus calls on us to show that faith in our daily lives, in our words and actions and thoughts, in the midst of all the storms of life. AMEN