



“Peace! Be Still!”

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Mark 4:35-41

Well, Youth Camp was this past week and because Samuel Quesada wasn't there, I was finally able to win my first game of Ninja... sorry, Darrin. And I love that now whenever I join the game the youth freak out like they are about to get beat up by a prize fighter. But yes, youth camp was a lot of fun. We learned how to follow Jesus and draw close to the divine even in the midst of all of our storms, struggles, and problems in life. We talked about the importance of forgiveness as Jesus said, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” We learned that following is hard and that the terrain is often rocky and unpredictable. But that even in the pain, even in the storms, there is purpose and God is there.

Well, another difficult thing about Youth Camp was getting up in the morning. There were full days of activities, fun nightly events that lasted until 11:00pm, talking and talking and talking until wee hours of the morning. Then to have to get up, shower, eat breakfast, and get ready for yet another full day seemed impossible. It seemed like all they wanted to do was stay in bed. And that was what I saw from the counselors. Yet, even the kids had a rough time making it through Bible Study and other activities. They were all so tired!

I wanted the kids to wake up and experience all that camp had to offer. I wanted them to get to know the divine. I wanted them to know that even in the storms and struggles of their lives, they could hear Jesus bringing words of peace. And in today's world of families being torn apart, and school shootings, and bullying, and loneliness, we all needed a word from God that the swirling seas of life would not overcome us and that we would not drown.

And that's what we hear in our Gospel Lesson for today. This is the first water crossing story in Mark's Gospel and this calming of the storm narrative is a familiar one as it is recorded in every single one of the Gospels. In fact, there are multiple recorded instances of Jesus crossing over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee in order to bring his teachings and his healing message to all those across the borders and on the margins. You see Jesus wasn't afraid to go to “the other side.” He wasn't afraid to bring peace to all people, of all positions, of all ethnicities, and of all classes. That is who Jesus was.

Jesus crossed to the “other side” twice in Mark's Gospel - here in chapter four and again in chapter six. Both crossings were similar in nature. Each time Jesus and his disciples attempted to cross to the “other side” they are met with resistance. Sure, the resistance wasn't ICE agents, detention camps, and busses, but Jesus did encounter evil and demons and nature. And each time Jesus interacted with the elements of resistance, he rebuked them, he muzzled them, and he calmed them. The things of this world which seem to want to capsize our lives and drown us in despair are no match for the God of the universe who brings calm to chaos and stillness to despair.

Because, you see, the world is a scary place. We are hindered by the sea at every turn like the Hebrew people fleeing from Egypt. The sea has always been a place of mythological chaos, especially throughout the Bible. From the creation story in Genesis, to the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, the sea is the location of primordial chaos. It represents all that stands against the creative order of God. And in this story, chaos and fear were trying to stop Jesus' ministry. All of the recognized fear, the oppressive empire, and the established order crashed and battered against Jesus' new social reality called the kingdom of God.

But Jesus faithfully journeyed to the other side, nonetheless. He faithfully journeyed to the other side because so far in Jesus' ministry he had only worked with his own people, the Jews. In the crossing of the sea to the other side, Jesus and his disciples moved into Gentile territory. Jesus accompanied the disciples into an impure space, with outcast people, and unclean practices. It would be a place where peace was needed, where chaos and evil made the Gerasene demoniac an "other," where those who had been broken by the storms and resistances in their lives resided.

So, when Jesus and his disciples made their attempt to cross over, they were indeed met by a storm. Here the metaphor could point to any resistance encountered as Jesus sought to move the kingdom of God into new territory. The storm could've been the hesitation of Jewish disciples who had grown up on stories and myths of what happened on the "other side." It could've been cultural prejudice. It could've simply been fear of the unknown. Whatever it was, the storm raged against the movement of Jesus' ministry. The storm raged even though Jesus was present in the boat. The storm raged and this is a clue that storms will always rage. We will encounter storms in our journey as followers of Jesus Christ. And those storms and that resistance will come from within ourselves, and without.

We will constantly struggle with external resistance to our works of justice in the world, to our practices and protests of protection for the least of these, and from the systems and structures that seek to maintain power and "the ways things are." And we will always struggle with internal resistance when we encounter something that does not fit within our current worldview or cultural understanding, when our emotions begin to crumble, and when we feel battered and bruised.

And when those storms begin to rage in our lives we tend to be like the disciples, don't we? We want God, no, we need God to calm the wind and seas. We need God to rebuke the evil in our lives. We need God to wake up from God's slumber and bring peace. We want to shout at God, "What's the matter with you? Don't you see we are perishing? Don't you see that our marriages are falling apart? Don't you see that we are degrading with disease? Don't you see that we are crumbling with distress? Don't you see the kids' faces as the busses roll away to unknown places in McAllen Texas? Don't you see us drowning in our fear, Lord? Wake up, God! Stop sleeping when we need you most!"

But if you notice, Jesus reluctantly arises and hesitantly uses his power. He doesn't seem to want to do anything. Like the youth and counselors at Youth Camp this past week, all Jesus wanted to do was keep on sleeping! The text even says that Jesus went so far as to rebuke his own disciples for even asking for his help. He called them faithless. One commentator says, "This storm-

calming power isn't the kind of power Jesus came to demonstrate. Rather, it is the exact kind of power Jesus came in order to give up, to empty himself of. It is the same power he rejects when he refuses to throw himself from the pinnacle when he is tempted in the desert, the same power he turns down when he refuses to kneel before the Adversary, that same superficial power that controls earthly things."

And like the disciples, this story reveals to us how little we believe that God is with us in the midst of our overwhelming storms. And I get it! The lightening is flashing and the thunder is booming and the rickety old boat is filling with water. We think that one more big wave will be the end of us. I wonder if it's because, deep down, maybe we don't really believe that a "God-with-us," that God in the flesh is actually enough. We want the words "peace, be still" shouted from the rooftops. We want the weather to be blissful and calm. We want the ride of life to be cheerful and charming. But it's not. Life is hard and we are constantly putting together the pieces of our broken lives. And Jesus, the one who was broken on the cross is with us in our boat. The miracle in this story of the calming of the sea is not in the rebuking of the wind and the waves, it is that Jesus was present with his disciples in the water-logged and weather-beaten places of their lives. Jesus was right there with them, experiencing the same terrible storm, the same terrible waves, the same terrible fear.

And it is in those moments that we encounter peace. God's power isn't in the control of creation or of people, or in the rebuking of chaos. The power of God is being in covenant, loving, abiding relationship with us. God's power is not in the eradicating of what is bad in the world, or what is sad in the world, but in empowering us, as Christians, and people who live the law of love, to build something good in this world, to recognize that we are the agents of peace and stillness and grace and justice. God's power is revealed as he comes alongside us, journeys with us, suffers with us, and even stays with us in the boat when the storms of life pummel us. Jesus is with us as we move to the other side.

Even though we don't always believe it, there is always an "other side." There is always an "other side" to the storm. There is always an "other side" to a debate. There is always an "other side" to a law. There is always an "other side" to our fear. There is always an "other side" that Jesus wants to accompany you to. And it is our job, as scared, broken, worried disciples to trust that Jesus wants to get us through the storm to show us that there is hope after the rain. That there are promises after the rain. That there are people, like you and me, who have come through the storm and have made it through the rain.

And when we cross over to the other side with Jesus we must be prepared to see what Jesus wants us to see. Jesus was in the business of crossing social and spiritual and emotional boundaries. He ate with unsuitable people, he broke the Sabbath laws, he associated with the foreigner and healed them at the wrong times, and he rebuked the unclean spirits so that people could go back to their communities. Crossing to the other side with Jesus might be risky, it might be unpredictable, and it might mean we will literally be put through hell. But we must cross over because the storms will still come. We will not live a storm-free life, and we, like the disciples, will continue to find ourselves crying out, "Wake up! Don't you care? Aren't you going to do something?"

And, once we make it through the storms and the trials and the struggles, following Jesus may well take us straight to the very borders of our lives, into encounters with the worst pain and suffering of the world, the places where Jesus' words of peace are needed most. And even for us, who know the end of this story, which the disciples in their storm did not, crossing to the other side at Jesus' command may waterlog our spirits, it may try our faith, it may drown us within an inch of our lives where we only have one last breath to take before the storm wins. But, if we hang on to Jesus, who rests in our fears and puts us in a position to experience the stilling of our storms, and the restoration of the broken and the marginalized, and the transformation of death to life, then we might be able to one day hear the words, "Peace, be still."

There once was a King who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture of peace. Many artists tried. The King looked at all the pictures, but there were only two he really liked and he had to choose between them. One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror, for peaceful towering mountains were all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace. The other picture had mountains too. But these were rugged and bare. Above was an angry sky from which rain fell and in which lightening played. Down the side of the mountain tumbled a foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all. But when the King looked, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock. In the bush a mother bird had built her nest. There, in the midst of the rush of angry water, sat the mother bird on her nest... perfect peace.

Which picture do you think won the prize? The King chose the second picture. "Because," explained the King, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace."

Church, the storms of life are raging around us. We feel the wind knocking us down and the weather-worn boat shaking under our feet. We can't see through the pounding rain or hear through the crashing waves. We are drowning in fear. But if we look to our Jesus who is unafraid, who ultimately is not asleep on the job, but speaks words of peace that stills the troubled waters of our souls, then we will have the ability to cross not only the borders and boundaries of our own lives, but we will be able to bring hope to the world. Was it only the waves and the wind Jesus was commanding, or was it maybe our hearts as well? "Peace...be still."

Amen.