

Sunday, June 24 and Wednesday, June 27 + 5th Sunday after Pentecost

[Mark 4:35-41](#)

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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I think I've mentioned my pastors' text study group before. Every Tuesday at 1pm several of us from the surrounding area gather, pastors from Beaver Dam, DeForest, Sun Prairie, Burke, and elsewhere. Each study group around the country is different, but this one is serious about studying the texts for the coming Sunday.

This past week there were strongly differing opinions among the pastors on the familiar story of Jesus "calming the storm" in Mark 4. One said this familiar reading is supposed to remind us that Jesus is always with us, calming us in the midst of life's tribulations. Another argued it reminds us that God has power over all the earth's natural forces, to create them as well as stop them. This got us into a dead-end diversion over what is meant by the phrase "acts of God" as applied to natural disasters.

I had a different perspective. I see this story as yet another instance of Jesus intruding on established patterns and expectations, taking on, interrupting and stopping various forces that can lead to human destruction, and turning things completely around so that life, not death, has the last word.

It's important to remember that we are in Mark. In this gospel, things happen suddenly and dramatically. Jesus is heralding the breakthrough of God's kingdom into this world. He is overturning systems that judge, divide, and condemn, systems that relegate the most needy among us to the wasteland of society's margins—which right now includes the thousands of Mexican and Central American immigrants at our Southern border who are fleeing violence in their home countries. All these systems that devalue life will be and are being replaced in God's kingdom by a bond of connectedness that is anchored in love, in which all aspects of God's creation are considered sacred expressions of God's own self.

Here we have a great storm that has suddenly come up on the Sea of Galilee, as I'm told storms often do on that eight-mile-wide lake in Israel. Naturally this is terrifying to the disciples, especially at night. Apparently, so much water is coming into the boat that even these experienced fishermen can't contend with it. Their words show they believe they are done for: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Perhaps Jesus was purposely sleeping, or pretending to be asleep, to put his disciples on the brink like this, when they believe that all is lost. When he rebukes the storm, his words have an immediate effect. We teach this story to our children as Jesus "calming the storm," but he doesn't calm it so much as overpower it. Here as elsewhere in Mark, all Jesus has to do is speak, and forces of seemingly human destruction or

diminishment are suddenly reversed: In Mark chapter 1 he drove out an unclean spirit. In Mark 2 he cured a man's paralysis. In Mark 3 he restored a man's withered hand. And here it is the great storm. With only a word from Jesus, all lose their capacity to inflict additional harm.

But now we must ask: After the wind and sea are calmed, why are the disciples still so afraid? A better translation of the last verse is, "And they were filled with great fear," not with great awe. If Jesus had just saved *us* from certain death, would we still be terrified? Possibly, if we didn't really have any idea of who Jesus was—as the disciples didn't yet, at this point. After all, their beloved Teacher has just done something completely mind-blowing. "Who is this," they ask each other in trepidation, "that the wind and the sea obey him?"

But this is how Jesus does ministry. Not quietly, not subtly, not gently. It's sudden and shocking, especially to those who live on a steady dose of "life as usual." Furthermore, Jesus' ministry almost always takes place on the margins rather than in the center ring. The hemorrhaging woman in the midst of the crowd who touches his cloak and is healed. The Samaritan woman at a remote well who discovers that only Jesus can give living water. The Canaanite woman somewhere in the region of Tyre and Sidon who challenges Jesus and is rewarded with great faith. And here, in the middle of a lake at night.

In these marginal places Jesus opens minds to new entirely new possibilities, and sets people up to enter into a new freedom and sense of wholeness. He shatters borders and boundaries—between rich and poor, between race, class and ethnicity, between regions and rivals, even between young and old: “Let the children come to me,” he says, yet we all are invited into his embrace.

What Jesus is saying is that the reign of God on earth extends into all places, even those the privileged don’t know about. We can reach back to the example of garlic mustard from last week: Have you ever noticed how it can sprout and grow beneath heavy fallen tree branches or logs, where no light even seems to extend? In that same way, God’s kingdom is spreading into the darkest corners.

So what should we do? Be intimidated by Jesus’ power? Run away in fear? No, we are to keep getting into the boat with him, over and over, just as the disciples did, even when our reason tries to stop us. After all, this trip across the lake at night was all his idea. What if Peter had said, “No thanks, I’ll wait and take the first boat over in the morning,” Oh boy, what an experience he would have missed out on! Imagine Nathanael saying, “Peter, you won’t believe what happened last night!”

And this reading also tells us it’s OK to be afraid. In fact, it wouldn’t be human NOT to be afraid in the face of things we don’t understand. Because as much as we say we

know and love Jesus, we still have a hard time trusting him – trusting God – to lead us to the other side. We are too often tempted to run for what we consider safety instead.

When you hear Jesus calling you – as you all will – follow the compass of faith and love. Let your trust in God’s goodness and mercy be the needle that points you toward true North -- toward Jesus, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.