

Call to Worship

In Jesus Christ, God reaches out to us, embraces us, cares for us, comes to us – but not always.

There are times when we earnestly implore God in prayer, but our prayers are not answered. There are times when we cry out in distress, but we are not delivered. What then?

Are we able to let God be God, even when God does not appear to be focused upon or working for us?
Who is this Jesus, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Come – take a hand to steady yourself and step into the church. Though there may be storms ahead, keep your eyes open – and see!

Prayer of Invocation

Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others.

'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen.

The Word

Mark 4:35-41

Common English Bible

Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along.

Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?"

He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, "Silence! Be still!" The wind settled down and there was a great calm. Jesus asked them, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?"

Overcome with awe, they said to each other, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!"

I have been anxiously awaiting a large envelope to arrive. It will be our finished income tax statements from the accountant. Our taxes can be complicated with Bob employed part time at a business that takes out State and Federal taxes and also a self-employed farmer part time. Add to that myself, being self-employed as clergy, sending in quarterly estimates. Then you add on the farm rental adjustments, etc.- well it is complicated...

Last year it was not nice at all. My first mental math said that we had to pay for 2017 and first quarterly 2018 the sum of \$10,000, by mid-April. I had put half of that aside 'just in case' but began to be sick to my stomach with fear of how to gather the rest, especially as the quarterly payment would continue all year at double what I had paid in 2017. Bob came home, looked at the tax paperwork and said "Why don't you check the pricing for new counter tops for the kitchen."

I snapped back "I can't think of 'new' anything right now..." He then said "I thought you had this stuff all figured out. This made me even more scared. I laid in bed Friday night going over and over the numbers to no relief. Saturday morning after Bob left for work, I took out the tax paperwork again and the numbers were still the same.

Feeling depressed and still scared, I talked with God all morning. Lord, I guess I needed some humbling. We won't go without essentials, and we are really blessed in so many ways. I really do mean it when I tell people that I'm not a pastor for the money. Even so Lord, get me through this.

Because it was Saturday, in the afternoon I took a nap and felt better physically when I awoke. Then Bob called. He reminded me that we had set aside some money in the safe to pay the tax enough to cover half of that \$10,000. As I got off of the phone I said once again as I have many times in the past...Why, Lord, does it take me so long to turn to you for the answers? And what was I really afraid of?

The question 'What are you afraid of?' should instead be 'Why are you afraid?'

As parents we might ask our children this question when they shake with fright during a storm. To us it is just another storm to blow over, and we can assure them that everything will be all right. But to them it is a horrifying catastrophe. We don't share their fright as we have already weathered many 'stormy' situations in the past. It is easy for children to be afraid of the things they don't understand, things that they can't see, and anything that seems to them to be out of control.

Even so, as adults we have our times of fear when facing the unknown. We worry about the things that we cannot see, and we lose sleep over the things that are out of our control. And if someone should inadvertently use a well-intentioned comment or cliché to calm us down or cheer us up, then watch out...we are liable to unleash a full-scale adult temper tantrum!

Truly and honestly there are still some things that we are afraid of. There is no shame in that. As we become able to admit the reality of our fear we are taking the beginning steps toward dealing with it. Today's scripture – Mark 4 – shows Jesus helping the disciples face their fears. Once again, we can learn from Christ's example, given to us from ancient times, through the scriptures.

Just prior to this event, Jesus had been sharing parables with a whole crowd of people. The multitude of people had become so great that Jesus moved to a boat on the water from which to continue preaching. Because the disciples didn't completely understand the meaning of the parables, Jesus later spent additional time alone with them and some of the other followers to be able to explain the full meaning of what he had said.

The work of trying to help all of these people hear the message and then to go over it again in more detail with the disciples would have made for an exhausting day for Christ, both physically and emotionally. Jesus knew how important it was to move away from the crowd at times to regroup and refresh; to rest and restore for whatever was to come next. He also knew that he had the length of a trip across the waters, so he laid his head to rest and he slept.

Most of us have read or heard these words from Psalm 121:3 "He who watches over you will not slumber." Still it sometimes seems as if the Lord is asleep, uninformed and out of touch when an unexpected disaster comes up. The disciples had crossed the Sea of Galilee before, but on this night the raging storm had them terrified. The traditional stories combined with the understandings of their day told of the sea as a symbol of chaos, evil and demonic power. Hebrew literature compared the raging sea to the conflict of God and Satan. The stormy sea was also a sign of the power of death and the powerlessness of man.

The famous Dutch painter, Rembrandt, painted 'The Storm on the Sea of Galilee' at age 28. Having achieved youthful success as a portrait painter, Rembrandt's later years were marked by personal tragedy and financial hardships. Yet his etchings and paintings were popular throughout his lifetime, his reputation as an artist remained high and for twenty years he taught many important Dutch painters.

Rembrandt's greatest creative triumphs are exemplified especially in his portraits of his contemporaries, self-portraits and illustrations of scenes from the Bible. His 40 self-portraits form a unique and intimate biography, in which the artist surveyed himself without vanity and with the utmost sincerity. The Storm on the Sea of Galilee is my favorite Rembrandt Paintings, as it tells us a story about humanity throughout time.

If you look closely at this painting you find that Rembrandt has painted himself in the boat. He is the one in Blue, front and center holding on to his fifteenth century hat with one hand and the boat with the other. There is fear in his eyes. I wonder what he was thinking to add himself to the terrified disciples as Jesus slept?

If we were painters, we might also see ourselves holding on for dear life in the boat, as Jesus slept. Several of the cold and snow storms we experienced this winter had fear within them. Not knowing when the pipes froze if they would pour water into the house when they thawed; not knowing if roofs would hold under the weight of the snow; not sure if the roads were open in case of an emergency or how long it would be until we could be dug out. Expected or not, the storms in our lives can bring fear.

Perhaps it was an unexpected storm that overwhelmed the disciples, a storm so rough that it brought to their minds images of certain death. The disciples panicked and cried out, "Teacher, don't you care that we are drowning?"

The frightened disciples must have been wondering about the Messiah, as he slept on through the storm. Surely he could at least be afraid with them or help bail out the boat, or for sure inspire and encourage them with words as he usually did. But he slept on. I've always wondered how long they waited before they shouted to him? How long did they think they could handle it alone before they surrendered to their need for God.

Actually, while asleep, Jesus is teaching them a valuable lesson. Jesus slept because to him the storm was not a real crisis. Counselors learn that people consider themselves in crisis when all of their normal coping mechanisms fail. For Jesus the situation as he knew it was obviously not beyond control. For the disciples, faith had been replaced by fear. Jesus, by contrast, rested with the assurance that God would protect them in the storm.

Just as we do, all Hebrews knew the Creation Story, which ended on the seventh day with God resting. They understood sleep and rest as divine choice. What an interesting concept. Could we understand rest as 'of God' enough to say, I need a break now; or I need more sleep or rest. We know that as humans, when we go without enough rest, the tension can build in us and we can become physically or mentally unstable, which can lead to fear...That is something to evaluate this Lenten Season...

Jesus, by taking the boat trip at this time, could have been also giving an opportunity for rest to the disciples. They surely also felt the press of the crowds and the overwhelming fatigue of trying to absorb all that Jesus was trying to teach them. They also needed space to reconnect with God in the midst of it all. Moving away with God is something that must be a learned response.

In mid December I remember relating to someone about a winter a number of years ago when we never saw above zero the whole month of December and we thought that was extreme. In the thick of the cold and snow of the winter that was 2018 – I now think that we will look back on this one for years ..., Anyway, in the thick of this past winter, I received an email from the United Methodist Conference asking the churches to prepare a place for people in the community who might lose their heat and need a place to be.

Some of the large city churches like La Crosse and Madison went about preparing for such a need. We didn't have to do anything, yet this church could be an emergency shelter for this community. Oh, we would have had to clear some space for cots and organize some blankets and cooking help, but we would be available and ready to serve as needed.

It's all about having a good contingency plan. Boy Scout Motto "Be Prepared." Having a plan 'B' ready for whatever we might have to face. We can't know when fear will come, but we can be ready to face 'whatever' with a good backup plan. Here is the first point of any good Christian backup plan, remembering where our strength comes from...Philippians 4:13, the Apostle Paul writes *"I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength."* Or as I memorized it when I was younger: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

We can't do any of this without God. That is why we yearn for others to also know the peace of Christ. I have stood by many hospital bedsides and gravesides, aching for family members that just can't seem to allow themselves to lean on God and on the people around them for support as they grieve. We don't need to be

evangelists to bring more people to church. We just need to share the good news of God's love and abiding presence in the good times and in the hard times, so no one has to go home in fear.

The opposite of love isn't hate. Hate is just a response to fear. So is anger, injustice to others, along with sadness and many other physically and emotionally harmful reactions. If you can believe God's love for yourself and for others, there is no need for hatred, injustice or overwhelming sadness. Fear still comes sometimes, but the best plan of action is to recognize it as fear and turn it over to God. We need to practice our trust in God and make our faith a permanent fixture in our lives. 1st John 4:18 says, "Perfect love casts out fear..."

Jesus' control over the sea was a new revelation to the disciples. They knew that he had power over sickness and demons in people, but they never imagined that he could also control the evil forces behind the storm. By calming the storm, Jesus revealed himself to the disciples as the Divine Creator of Genesis. No harm could come to them because the power of death had no right to Jesus' life at this point. With one command, Jesus asserted his divine authority to restore universal order and peace.

Later, at the cross, Jesus would use another method to defeat death by giving in to it and then rising from it. Once again, the disciples would be surprised by the power of Christ. We can also have confidence in this Jesus; the one who holds all power in his hands.

After shutting down the storm, Jesus turned and scolded his disciples, asking them, "*Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?*" They had seen and known numerous signs of his power. They had heard how he spoke of God and loving each other. The question for the disciples was, and is for us – at what point will we take Jesus seriously? How many miracles must we witness? How many times must God deliver us? How many prayers must the Lord answer before we recognize that God has the power over everything?

Jesus identified clearly that fear was the reason for the disciples feeble faith. More than once in the past Jesus had said to the disciples "Why do you doubt?" "Fear not." "You of little faith..." For us today it is also an ongoing challenge to take fear out of the forefront of our lives. At the center of every fear is the needling doubt that God cannot or will not handle our situation. When it comes to trusting God, we are inclined to become unconvinced and unsure.

Fear may come, but we have to learn to push it aside and expect to find Jesus in the middle of our storms. I have shared with some of you the saying in my kitchen that says: "Don't tell God how big your storm is. Tell the storm how big your God is." It is about believing that God, through Christ, can calm the storm and then going there first...

I invite you this week to think of a recent 'storm' in your life. What role did fear and faith play in your response to that situation? How might you prepare yourself to handle things differently for the next time the 'storm' comes?