

Do We Have Fear or Faith?

3rd Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 7, Yr. B. Fathers' Day. (Text: Mark 4:35-41)

There was a little boy of about four or five who was scared of thunderstorms. Every time there was a big storm, the kid would wake up and cry, and his mother would have to come into his room and calm him down. Sometimes she'd lie down on the bed beside him until he finally fell asleep. One night there was a big storm with lots of thunder and lightning, and the boy started crying. After his mom came in and sat beside him for a while, he settled back down – even though the thunder was still rumbling. So, she stood up to go back to her own bed. Then the little boy said, “Mommy, aren't you going to (sniff) stay with me?” She answered, “No, I have to go and be with Daddy.” The boy responded, “(sniff, sniff) ...The big sissy!”

When I was a kindergartener, I was the exact opposite of the kid in my story. I didn't like thunderstorms either, and I was scared to death of lightning. (I still am!) But if my dad were there – even if he was just in the house, not even in the room with me – I was fine. When Daddy was in the house, or the car, or the boat, I felt as if nothing could hurt me. Nothing bad could happen to us. We were sure to be o.k. I had never seen my dad command a storm to cease, but somehow – if he was with us in the storm – I knew we'd all be o.k. Such is the faith of a little child in his daddy... and such must be the faith in God possessed by all who want to share God's kingdom.

When Jesus asked his disciples to take him across to the other side of the lake, he'd had a very full few weeks of intense ministry. Earlier that very day he'd been speaking down on the lakeside, and the crowd had grown so large that he'd had to get into a boat and push out from the shore in order to be heard. Then other boats came up, and their owners sat in them to listen to him.

When Jesus was finished speaking it was late afternoon, and he asked the disciples just to row the boat on across the lake to the opposite side – a distance of about eight miles. He was certainly exhausted, and probably wanted to take a break, escape the attention of the crowd for a while. Eight miles is a long way, but most of his disciples were big, strong fishermen who'd spent their lives on this particular body of water. Rowing that distance presented no challenge to them. And if the wind was fair, they could put up the sail.

You know how it went. Jesus, worn out by many days of non-stop ministry – preaching, counseling, healing, answering questions – fell asleep on a cushion in the stern, entrusting himself to the boating skills of his friends. They were in their element, doing what they knew best how to do. So Jesus could relax and take a nap while they crossed the lake. But a sudden storm kicked up, and the situation got so scary that the fishermen – who had faced many other storms on this lake before – woke Jesus up and said, “*Master, don't you care that we're about to die!?*”

The gospel says that Jesus woke up and commanded the wind and waves to be still, “*and there was a great calm.*” Then he asked his friends, the terrified fishermen, “*Why are you afraid? Have you still no FAITH?*”

The last bit of teaching that Jesus had given to the crowds before he and the twelve headed across the lake was a pair of simple parables about seeds. (That was our gospel reading last Sunday). The basic message of these parables was that everything has to start small – especially faith – but in time it will grow, and grow and finally be fruitful. Jesus might have assumed that if his disciples had even “a mustard seed” of faith – if they were even just *beginning* to trust what God was obviously doing in Him – they would not have been afraid in the storm.

When Jesus had called these twelve people to follow him, he knew they had no faith yet. But they were attracted to Him and had enough interest in what He was saying and doing that they were willing to follow at least for a while and see what would happen. Now He said to them, in effect, *“Has nothing you’ve seen or heard over the last six months weeks with Me given you ANY faith? — What’s it going to take?”*

Then they turned to one another and asked, *“Who is this man, that even the wind and waves obey Him?”* “Who is this?” indeed! They didn’t really know who He was. Of course, that’s the crucial question, for them and for us: *“Who is this man?”* —Why, this is the Lord of the storm! This is the One who answered Job out of the whirlwind and asked, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?” ...the One at whose decree all things were made. This man in the storm-tossed fishing boat was none other than God-Himself-Here-With-Us.

Last week we learned that when Paul was trying to explain what the new life of faith in Christ felt like, he described it this way, *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new!”* People who have put their trust in Jesus see the world *differently* from the way other people do.

Believers must sometimes sail into storms – and I’m not mainly talking about bad weather. There are the far worse storms of anxiety and doubt that can come upon us when we face the death of our spouse, or a child, or the approach of our own life’s end. And in these times of economic uncertainty many believing people also have to cope with the loss of their jobs, or the failure of their businesses, or the possibility that everything they own might become worthless. At our men’s group on Wednesday morning we went around the room and all of us named something that scares us. Not a man there said, “I fear nothing,” because that would not have been true. We’re all scared of something. A few had phobias, like I do. (I’m still terrified of lightning.) Some were afraid of failure. Others were afraid of economic catastrophe. —How about you? What’s *your* biggest fear? Go inside yourself and think about this for a minute. (And don’t tell me that you “have no fear.” I won’t believe you.) I invited the men on Wednesday morning, and I invite each of you right now to ponder this: *How can you muster your faith to overcome your fear?*

In addition to our personal fears, there are also storms of panic that come when some human institution which we have relied on shows itself to be frighteningly frail, when a boat in which we expected to ride out the hurricane springs some serious leaks.

Speaking of leaky boats, next month the Episcopal Church will hold its once-every-three-years General Convention. Many Episcopalians are hoping this huge assembly of bishops and clergy and lay people – the largest deliberative body on earth – will bring an end to the long series of storms our denomination has been through and usher in a new, sweet era of calm. That would be wonderful, but frankly I’m not holding my breath.

It’s not that I don’t have hope for the Church, though. I have *great* hope for the Church! It is the Lord’s chosen instrument to do His work in the world. But I’m referring to that universal, Spirit-filled community of love and grace which cannot be identified with any single denomination. My hope is for the worldwide community of souls who have given their hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ and put their trust in Him.

As I said last week, for those of us who are in Christ, there’s a “new world.” The old world has gone and everything has changed. That means we no longer see either the storms of this mortal life or the storms of ecclesiastical politics through our “old eyes” of fear. Now we look *beyond* the storms, with eyes of faith.

What can move people from fear to faith, from living in the “old order of things” to living in “a new creation”? I can’t give an absolute answer to that question, but I can tell you this much from personal experience: *fear is contagious*. One or two scared people can persuade a boatload of others that “the end is near.” One or two can infect a multitude with terror. But *faith is contagious too!* One or two people with a simple, child-like faith, can rescue a fearful multitude that has no faith.

What the disciples in their little boat on Galilee needed on that stormy afternoon was for just *one* to say to the others, “Don’t be scared, men. We’re going to get through this thing. Just take a look at Jesus there. See how peacefully he’s sleeping? He *told* us to cross over to the other side, and – by golly – I believe that if we’re doing what HE told us to do, then we can forget about the storm. We *will* get to the other side!” First one man and then another would have grabbed his oar and pulled harder. —And Jesus could have finished his nap. What the Lord asks you and me to do, He always gives us the power to accomplish. All things are possible through Him.

So, whatever the future might hold, don’t let your fears own you. God Himself is with us. The Lord of the storm is in our boat!