

Mark 4:35-41  
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“Equipped for the Storms”

Rev. William G. Utke  
Emanuel UCC, HC

Set in the hills of northern Israel, the Sea of Galilee is nearly 700 feet below sea level. This location makes it subject to sudden and violent storms as the wind comes over the eastern mountains and drops suddenly onto the sea.

Clearly the disciples are caught in one of those storms. Their boat tossed back and forth as water from rain and crashing waves is swamping their vessel. They turn to Jesus for help and find him sleeping.

Finding the savior asleep when the danger of life approaches is a horrible feeling. Today we hear the disciples woke Jesus and asked, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

As I hear their question, I consider the many distressed and oppressed people throughout time who have cried out with the same voice, “Jesus, Spirit, do you not care that we are perishing?” Most recently we have heard these cries from families along the US Mexican border as children and parents were being separated.

Many of us breathed a small sigh of relief this past week when the President signed an executive order to halt the separation of children and parents at the border. It was a good step.

While this practice may have been in high gear recently, I can tell you from my experiences near the border during sabbatical, this is not completely new. Undocumented families have been, in a limited way, separated from each other for many years when caught crossing without US identification. The parent(s) are sent to holding cells, and these holding cells were not able to accommodate their children who were often deported.

Today in Mark’s gospel we have a story of Jesus and the disciples making their own crossing on the Sea of Galilee. One shore of the Sea of Galilee was Jewish territory and the other shore gentile. So, they were crossing a border when they made that trip. And it seems like every time they crossed from the Jewish side to the Gentile side, they encountered a horrifying storm. The question suggested by today’s story is what do people of faith do when they become caught in one of life’s storms, or when they meet others caught in the storms of life?

Sometimes people of faith complain in the storm. Remember the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, they wondered in the wilderness believing they were headed toward the promised land, yet they continued constantly crying out to Moses for food, and drink. They would wish out loud that they could go back to slavery because in Egypt they had food and a bed, which at times looked better than the hope of freedom.

Other times, when in a storm, we turn to God. In our story today, the disciples wake Jesus and he fixes everything in a flash, "Peace, be still." This is the divine element of Jesus at work. We can imagine the relaxing exhale from the frantic disciples as the wind and waves calm down. But then Jesus asks two questions which unseat his companions just as quickly, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

A third way we react when caught in the storm is to rely on the gifts God has given us, and others with us. Think of Jesus sending out his followers as missionaries, telling them to take nothing more than one tunic and one staff. He wanted his disciples to be examples of the faith they were going out to teach about. A faith that teaches us to practice the gifts and goodness God has put into ourself and others. Jesus asks his missionaries to trust the spiritual hospitality of the people they encounter to help them meet basic needs of food, drink and sleep.

With this wide variety of reactions, we might wonder... when we are in the storm, or when we meet others caught in a storm, what are we to do?

Jesus' questions at the end of the story got me thinking about how, when and where we exercise our faith. Christians often think of Faith as a noun, something we have or don't have. But there is an element of faith which acts like a verb; calling us to offer the gifts and resources God has given us when we find ourselves, or others, in the storms of life. We don't offer these gifts to save ourselves or to make our reservation in heaven but using our God-given gifts and resources to counter the storms of life is an indication that the faith of Jesus Christ has a tight grip on us.

When I think of practicing our faith, I think of others in the bible who were caught in terrible storms. Job, as Satan categorically, one by one took away everything that made his life good, he still exercised a relentless faithfulness that would not turn from God. Esther demonstrated a courageous voice as she risked her life to speak for justice. Paul revealed a determined faith as he continued writing, traveling and teaching for the cause of the gospel, even though he suffered persecutions, imprisonments, and illnesses. And Jesus himself, who ate with sinners, welcomed the foreigner, resisted injustice, invited prisoners to paradise, involved the outcast, and loved his enemies... even in the face of his crucifixion he never wavered from sharing the gifts and goodness God had given him, and trusting with complete confidence that God was with him in his boat and would not forsake him.

When Jesus asks his disciples, "Have you still no faith?" it is because he doesn't sense they are exercising the gift of faith to the fullest extent.

Jesus may have felt he could continue resting through the storm because he was in the presence of seasoned fishermen. Surely, they had endured storms like this, perhaps worse. In those experiences they acquired gifts, skills, and courage for such a time as this. They had wisdom handed down by elders teaching how to navigate these horrible storms. But now that Jesus was with them, it seems they made little use of all God had prepared them with.

When I think of God in this story, I remember the words we say at every baptism celebrated in this congregation...

The words say, "We receive this person into the love and care of the Christian Church, so that as he/she grows and matures, he/she may come to know God and offer him-/herself in God's service to the world." There is an expectation to share our God given gifts, an expectation that we will grow, built right into the words of our baptism.

So, while we are never alone in the storms of life; God has equipped us with spiritual resources and gifts—and when we exercise these... we grow in Christ's image. We grow as disciples. We grow in service. We grow as God's children. And therefore, we grow in faith.

Amen