

“Traveling to the Other Side”

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Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

THEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

In the Bible, there’s often a theology lesson hidden in a geography reference.

For example, in John’s gospel Jesus said that he needed to go through Samaria.

That was more than just a statement about his travel plans.

You see in those days the Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Jews didn’t travel through Samaria.

It would be like a Jew in our time

making a trip to the West Bank.
Not advisable.

But, Jesus made it a point to go through Samaria.
And while he was there,
he met the woman at the well.

And you know what happened next.
The whole village came to Jesus and became believers instead of enemies.
The grace of God began as a decision to cross the border into Gentile country.

That's true in our lesson for today.

THE GERASENES

Jesus told his disciples,
"Let's go across to the other side."
He's talking about the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

And what was on the other side?
Gentile country, the country of the Gerasenes.

There's danger on the other side of the border.

We hear a lot about that these days.
All bets are off when you cross the border.

Drugs, gangs, kidnappings.
The other side of the border can be dangerous.

No telling what those Gentiles will do.
Those Gerasenes... they're crazy.

And in the fifth chapter of Mark's gospel,
we'll meet one of the craziest of the Gerasenes,
a man filled with so many demons that they called him Legion.

That's Jesus.

Always going to the other side.
Always bringing the gospel to the wrong people.

Always steering the ship right into the teeth of a storm. Always challenging the devil in the wilderness of despair.

If you're going to travel with Jesus, you better fasten your seat-belt.
There's conflict ahead.

MATTHEW AND THE SINNERS

For example, earlier in Mark's gospel,
Jesus picks Matthew, a tax collector to be one of his disciples.

And do you know what Jesus did next?

He went to dinner with Matthew and all his tax collector friends.

The religious folks noticed.
They said, "What kind of prophet eat with sinners and tax collectors?
You know what they say: Birds of a feather flock together."

But, Jesus said,
"It's the sick people who need a doctor.
These are the people who need me most."

If you take a trip to the other side of the border,
if you eat with sinners and take the side of those with little influence,
you're going to run into some rough water.

And that's how it was for Jesus from the very beginning.

THE MUSTARD SEED KINGDOM

As we learned last week, the kingdom wasn't going to come in the usual way.
The kingdom wasn't going to come with chariots and swords and the might of strong kings.

No, this kingdom that comes would be like a mustard seed.

It would start small.

It would start with those that had been left out.
People like widows, orphans,
...and those on the “wrong” side of the border.

And that’s why Jesus didn’t stay in one place very long.

There were always other people that needed to hear the gospel.
There were always other places that needed his healing touch.

When Jesus decided to leave the crowd behind and go to the other side,
he was making a really important decision.

It was about more than geography.
It was about theology.
It was about the scope of God’s grace.

The kingdom of God was not just for the Jews.
It was for the world.

It was for people who were dangerous.
It was for people who were despised.
It was even for people who were enemies.

The kingdom of God was about to cross the border.
They were about to cross over to the other side.

THE DEMANDS OF FOLLOWING JESUS

Following Jesus was not for the faint of heart.
The disciples knew all about that.

They had left friends and family to follow Jesus.

The demands of travel and the healing and the preaching was overwhelming.
In fact the demands were so great
that Jesus’ own family thought that he had lost his mind.

They came to take charge of him,
to knock some sense into him,
and take him home.

But, that didn't stop Jesus.
He had good news to preach.
He had seeds to plant.

And that good news would not be limited to his home town.

He would plant that seed far and wide.

Jesus sent his family home and told the disciples,
"You're my family now.
Whoever does God's will is my family."

And so Jesus leaves his family behind and continues to preach.
He preaches about the kingdom of God along the Sea of Galilee.
The crowds are so great that he has to get in a boat and preach from the water.

But, when the day is done and night is falling it's time to move on to the other side.
The Gentile side.

THE WINDSTORM

As Jesus and his disciples leave the crowd behind as they set sail for the other side,
there are other boats that are with them.

But, something happens to separate the boats.

A great windstorm arises.
Waves beat down into the boat.
It's about to be swamped.

And where is Jesus?
In the back of the boat,
asleep on a cushion.

How can Jesus sleep when the boat is being swamped by this great wind-storm?

I don't know.

Maybe he was a heavy sleeper.

Sometimes I wake up and my wife asks,
"Did you hear that thunderstorm?
It kept me up all night."

"Nope. Slept right through it."

DON'T YOU CARE?

But, there's more to this than just Jesus' ability to sleep through a storm.
It's about care and concern.

The disciples, some of whom were experienced fishermen, recognized that they were in real trouble.

They had seen Jesus do some miraculous things
and make some miraculous claims.
Maybe he could help?

So, they wake him up.
And they shout over the wind and the waves,
"Don't you care that we're about to die?"

This will not be the last storm that these disciples face. There's always stormy weather ahead for those who dare to follow Jesus.

In fact, one of the early symbols for a persecuted and beleaguered church was a boat on a storm tossed sea.

PEACE BE STILL

But, any storm can be weathered when the Son of God is in the boat.
Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind like it was a demon. "Peace! Be still!"

The wind stopped just as suddenly as it had begun.

And the sea was as smooth as glass.

The disciples wanted Jesus' help.

Maybe they wanted him to help dip water out of the swamped boat.

But, the disciples got more than they bargained for.

What Jesus did suggested the taming of creation itself, something only God could do.

The stilling of the storm left them speechless.

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID?

And in that moment of silence Jesus asked,
"Why are you afraid?"

The disciples had already seen so much.

People healed.

Sinners forgiven.

The Word of God preached with power.

But, they were still afraid of the storm.

Like the seed that fell on rocky ground their faith had no depth.

They did not even have faith the size of a mustard seed.

Jesus asked them,

"Do you still have no faith?"

And I think maybe Jesus is asking us the same thing.

Why are we afraid to meet the people across the border?

Why are we overwhelmed with fear when the storm comes?

Do we lack faith?

Sometimes when a small child awakens in the middle of the night disturbed
by a bad dream,

we pat their hand and say,

"There. There. It's all right."

Nothing to be afraid of.”

Jesus is not saying that.
There are things to be afraid of.

The storm can drown us.
Enemies can harm us.
There is real danger on the other side of the border.

And before it's all over all of us will be harmed by things that are beyond our control.
And sometimes it will feel like like Jesus is asleep while our boat is about to be swamped.

We might be tempted to ask the question the disciples asked,
“Lord, don't your care that we are dying here?”

FEEDING FEAR

I think of this story when we're waiting for that major hurricane to come ashore.
24/7 newscasts focus solely on what could go wrong.

Our fear increases.

We often feed our worst fears.
And sometimes I wonder if the fear isn't worse than the storm itself.

We talk about all the people that perish during the storm.
But, I wonder how many people suffer major health problems because they are afraid of the storm that is on the way?

I guess there's no way to really measure that,
but I suspect that many suffer greatly because they are afraid of the storm that is coming.

Our fears know no end, and apparently that was true for the disciples as well. Even after the storm was stilled, they were afraid. In fact, if anything their fear increased.

In verse 41 we read in the NRSV that after Jesus stilled the storm, "... they were filled with great awe." Actually, I think that's too weak a translation.

The Greek word translated "great awe" might better be translated "fear" or even "terror".

If we translate the word "fear" or "terror", it suggests that disciples' fear did not end when the storm was stilled.

It intensified.

In fact a literal translation of this verse would read that the disciples remain "fearful with a great fear."

Instead of the great calm becoming a source of great faith. The great calm becomes a source of great fear

This emphasis on fear seems to fit a theme in Mark's gospel. They were afraid of Jesus because they didn't really know who he was.

FEAR IN MARK'S GOSPEL

In Mark the disciples always lack faith.

Fear plays a big role in their faithless actions and their inability to understand.

They never seem to have eyes to see or ears to hear what Jesus is saying.

No matter how many times Jesus takes them aside to explain his parables, they remain clueless.

In Mark's gospel, we, the reader, learn the identity of Jesus from the very beginning.

He is the Son of God.

But the identity of Jesus remains a mystery for the people in Mark's gospel.

Everyone is asking throughout the gospel of Mark, "Who is this guy?"

And even after the resurrection, they do not respond with faith.

When the women find an empty tomb and the angel tell them that Jesus has risen,
their response is not faith.

Their response is fear.

They run away from the tomb and tell no one
...because they are so afraid...

And that's how Mark's gospel ends...in the middle of a sentence.

Even an empty tomb and the assurance of an angel are not enough to produce faith.

Instead, the women are afraid.
They run away.
They tell know one.

FEAR AND A LACK OF FAITH IN JESUS

Why were the disciples always afraid?
They were afraid because they didn't really know Jesus.

They asked, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

They had been with him from the very beginning.
But, they didn't really know him.

It's easy for us to be critical of those disciples.
But, are we really any different?
Do we know Jesus?

We have read the first verse of Mark's gospel.
We know that he is the Son of God.
We've heard the story many times.

Jesus has instructed us,
just as he instructed those first disciples.
In fact we have the advantage of the written Word, the Bible and years of faithful reflection on that Word.

When it comes to knowing Jesus, in some ways,
we have an advantage over those first disciples.

And yet, there's a difference
between knowing about Jesus
and believing in Jesus.

Knowledge does not always produce faith...especially when the storm
comes.

In the storm we are often filled with fear.
We sometimes accuse Jesus of not caring,
of sleeping on the job.

GOD'S WORD OF PEACE

But, our Lord is not asleep.
From the very beginning the Word of God has been bringing peace to our
world.

In Genesis we read that God spoke and brought order and a new creation
to the chaos of the formless void.

God spoke a word of forgiveness and the hope of a new life through the
prophets.

In Jesus, God spoke again,
and the Word became flesh.

We believe that by the power of the Spirit,
the Lord continues to speak a Word in the midst of the storm.

God still calms the wind and the waves.
God still speaks a word of peace
amid all the voices of chaos and despair in our world.

His voice silences the forces that would harm us.
His voice calms our deepest fears.

I'm reminded of Martin Luther's hymn,

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”.

In that hymn he reminds us that “One little Word”,
the word “above all earthly powers”
can “fell” the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us.

To put it another way,
God’s power to save is greater than the world’s power to destroy.

The storm is no match for the Son of God.
That was true then.
And it’s true now.

There was a poignant photograph taken after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in the fall of 2005. It showed the devastation of a cemetery in the historic district of the city.

Trees were toppled.
Debris covered the ground.
Several vaults were smashed.

But, in the middle of the devastation was a statue of the risen Christ that was not damaged.
His arms extended wide, offering a benediction of calm amid the chaos.

That image helps us understand this passage.

Christ stands with his arms extended wide over the chaos of our world.
He still rebukes the storm and the demons that seek to destroy us.

And all he needs is one little word,
“Peace!”

I use my favorite benediction almost every Sunday
because quite frankly I think we need to hear it every week.

The apostle Paul wrote,
“May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

In the storm we will be afraid, but we do not despair
because we know that the Lord of the storm travels with us.

He cares for us.

And he gives us peace even when it seems like peace is not possible.

He stills the wind and the waves in our life.

He points us to a peace and a hope that is eternal.

My friends, don't be afraid.

The storm is no match for the Lord of all creation.

Amen.