

We're all in the same boat

Hespeler, June 23, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, [Mark 4:35-41](#)

It was a lovely morning when you and Jesus got into the boat and started sailing. The gulls cried overhead, and the herons and egrets waded through the shallows around you. The cormorants swam cheerily alongside as you raised the sail and caught the gentle breeze that would make for an easy crossing to the other side.

And so, you just had a lovely time. You sang some of your favourite songs, had some fine uplifting prayers and Jesus even spoke to you about the scriptures and their application to life in Galilee in your day. It all made being a disciple of Jesus feel so free and easy. Many of you were so comfortable that you began to nod or even doze off in the bottom of the boat.

The Other Boats

There were other boats drifting alongside you as well. There was one nearby that was filled with disciples who were very faithful to Jesus but just had a slightly different way of living out the practice of baptism – insisting that only adults could be baptised. Another boat was full of disciples who were very fond of burning incense, ringing bells and doing things like that to enhance their practice of faith.

And then there were some other boats where their practices were hardly different at all from those in your boat. It was just that they just really liked their boat and, even if it was a bit rickety and let a little water seep through, they really wanted to stay in it. So, despite the minor diversity among the boats, everyone just had a wonderful morning of pleasant Christian fellowship and formation.

Why Don't We Get that Story?

That pleasant crossing must have happened prior to the story that we read from the Gospel of Mark today. But did you notice that we didn't get the story of *that* crossing? Such times are very meaningful and are keys to discipleship. Jesus and his friends no doubt had many such times while they were together. The accounts of them just didn't make their way into the gospels.

In the same way there have been many eras in the life of the church when we have been able to enjoy together the peacefulness of the voyage of this Christian life, when we can coexist amicably with other Christian groups but don't worry about them too much because we are all moving in the same general direction.

These have been wonderful and meaningful times that have been fundamental to the formation of our faith, practice and priorities. We cherish them. But are we living in such times? It seems not.



A Promised Destination

And so, despite the fact that I know we love to talk about such times in the life of the church, I don't want to talk about that morning crossing today. I want to talk about the one that is described in the gospel. And let's note that the story of that crossing actually starts out pleasant enough. Jesus has just wound up a lovely day preaching to the crowds and he turns to his disciples and says, **"Let us go across to the other side of the lake."** Now, that sounds nice enough, doesn't it? Jesus seems to be promising just as gentle a crossing as you had this morning.

But, if you pay close attention, you will realize that he doesn't actually promise anything about the ease of the crossing. He does promise that you are getting to the other side which will turn out to be a very important promise indeed. But you should never mistake God's promises about your destination for promises about how easy it's going to be to get there. Nevertheless, when God gives you a promise, you should hold onto it.

The Other Boats Still There

And so, you get back in the boat. Just before you push off from the dock, I want you to notice something. Mark makes a point of saying at this point in the story that, **"Other boats were there too."**

I can find no other way to understand that than the way I described those other boats during the morning crossing. Mark seems to be dropping into his story a reference to other Christian groups that existed at the time that this gospel was written.

Of course, that early on, the division between disciples of Jesus would not have been as formal as what we have today. There were no denominations and there were not even church buildings for people to become attached to, but there are all kinds of indications that different groups of Christians had different understandings of how to be faithful disciples almost right from the very beginning. This is the reality that Mark is giving a nod to at the beginning of the story of this crossing. And he refreshingly even seems to be acknowledging that it is okay that different groups have different approaches to Jesus.

So, everything seems to be pretty promising and harmonious as you set out to go back across the lake. But, of course, that is exactly what is about to change.

The Challenge of Stormy Times

It is one thing to be a Christian and live out your faith as a church when the breezes are gentle, the water is calm and the passage is easy. It is quite a different matter when the storm comes. And that is exactly what this story in the gospel is about.

And there have been many storms in the history of the church. The storms have been different in intensity and power. The church has dealt with barbarian invasions, persecutions and reformations. Those were terrifying storms for those caught in them. Other storms have been a little less ferocious and have had more to do with societal change and economic troubles.

A Regular Refrain

But my studies in church history have taught me that, no matter how intense the storm may be, we always seem to respond in the same way – the way that the disciples respond to the storm in this story. **"Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die?"** we cry with them.

Have you noticed that this seems to have become the refrain in many churches these days? Not all, certainly, there are places and congregations where they seem to have found their way through the

present storm, but when I was at the General Assembly the other week, that was certainly a very common refrain.

Mark's Lessons for Us

I feel as if Mark has very intentionally told this story of Jesus in a way that is intended to help the church of his time and down through the ages to navigate such storms and so I would like us to pay close attention to what we can learn from it. The first lesson we need to hear is the most important. The story begins with Jesus saying **“Let us go across to the other side of the lake.”** And it ends with them arriving at the opposite shore.

The meaning of this is, I hope, clear. Jesus does not abandon his church. Jesus will see us over to the other side. That doesn't mean that the crossing won't be frightening. That doesn't mean that we won't be *afraid* that we will die. It certainly doesn't mean that we will not change in some significant ways in the crossing. But we will get there. Hold onto that promise. Never forget it.

When We Forget

When the disciples forget that promise in the middle of the storm, Jesus rebukes them, and rightly so. He wonders why they have no faith. And so, though I certainly understand why we are tempted from time to time to cry out, **“Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die?”** we will be rebuked when we do so.

I do believe that Jesus understands and appreciates it when we express our fears and worries, but do not make the mistake of giving into despair because you have forgotten Jesus' promises. When you believe them, you will begin to see the new possibilities that Jesus is creating for you in the midst of the storm. It is true that you may not arrive at the far side of the lake in exactly the same condition as when you embarked. The storm will bring change. But Jesus' promise of arrival is secure.

Where Are the Other Boats?

But, speaking of potential change, we come to the second lesson of this story. As I noted, when the disciples began their journey, Mark made a point of saying that **“other boats were there too.”** And I think I made it clear that I don't think that is just a random comment. I think that Mark is saying something about the church outside of storm times.

But, if that is the state of things before the storm comes, what happens once it starts? **“A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.”** Yes, it seems as if once the storm starts, we are no longer thinking in terms of our boat and the other boats.

When We're All in the Same Boat

And that is exactly how it goes, doesn't it? When all is going well, when the breezes are gentle and the currents are not against you, it is easy to let all those little things matter. The disagreements over theology, the differences in polity, the particular preferences in pious practice can seem really important and the resources are abundant enough that you can justify each maintaining your own boats.

But once the storm hits what happens? You suddenly realize how much we are all in the same boat. When the water is washing over the gunnels and the waves threaten to capsize you, all of those distinctives and differences just don't seem to matter anymore.

Downside and Upside

Now, I need to be honest here and admit that there is a downside to this inclement weather realization. When storms have struck at various times throughout the history of the church, those have been times when various traditions or distinctiveness have been lost. It just became too much to maintain all of the different ways of doing and being. And those losses are real and very painful. The present storm the church is facing will see some of those kinds of losses and we must be compassionate in the face of them.

But the “we’re all in the same boat” reality of the storm also brings with it a very large upside. The storm is also a time of great creativity and we particularly experience that in terms of finding ways to work together. All of a sudden, those distinctions that you have between your various groups, even if they are still very meaningful to you, no longer seem to be a big enough reason for you not to get in the same boat together.

When the storm hits, there is often a willingness to suspend and sometimes even ignore those rules and structures that might get in the way of you working together. You would never dream of doing such things in the calm weather, but everything seems possible in the storm.

The Summer Experiment

That is exactly what happened, by the way, with our summer experiment this year. This whole idea of us working together and worshipping together was not something that we asked the Presbytery to make happen, despite the fact that the Presbytery is ultimately responsible for the relationships between its congregations. We worked this out between ourselves, respecting the wisdom of the sessions in each congregation.

Now, if, at the end of this experiment we discern that God is calling some of these congregations to work together in ongoing ways, we may have to go to the Presbytery and figure out how to do that according to our Presbyterian polity, but, in the storm, there is a kind of freedom to experiment. And there is some exciting about that.

Fright and Faith

And yes, I know that it is also frightening. You are afraid that your boat might sink. The terror of the disciples in this story, even though many of them are experienced fishers, is palpable. I don’t expect that we won’t be dealing with fear. But, if you remember Jesus’ promise to the church, that we are going to get to the other side, you do not need to lose faith and that is what matters.

But is not just the promise that Jesus gives you before you start this crossing that gives you reason to hope. It is also what he does for you in the midst of the storm. **Jesus stood up and commanded the wind, “Be quiet!” and he said to the waves, “Be still!” The wind died down, and there was a great calm.** Never forget that, as we learn to trust in Jesus, he will give that same comfort and peace and calm even though the storm may rage all around us.

We have his promise that we will get to the other side. We have his offer of peace and calm in the midst of the storm. And so let us embark with faith. **“Let us go across to the other side of the lake.”**