

Benedictus June 20, 2015

Sermon: Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Well it's good to be with you this evening. I have been reflecting on this passage in Mark ever since Sarah asked me if I would preach for you this evening. The more time I spent with the passage, the more layers of meaning I discovered. It's amazing what can be captured in 6 verses. In particular, some words have stayed with me and I'd like to do a bit of musing with you about them.

However let's begin with the story. Jesus has spent all day teaching in parables. The crowds were so overwhelming that he got into a boat and taught from that. Now, at the end of the day, they stay in the boat and head over to the other side of the lake. So it's dark and now a fierce storm develops and these hardened fishermen fear for their lives. They wake Jesus, he calms the storm and then the disciples are terrified and ask "Who is this man?"

So where do we begin? The opening words "*That day*" It seems that so many of the stories of Jesus begin something like this, *that day, one day* It's like it is a particular moment in time when something particular happened. I'm reminded of the first few lines of Mary Oliver's poem; "The Journey" "One day you finally knew what you had to do and began, though the voices around kept shouting their bad advice..." It's like this is a seminal moment, a change point, something has to be different. And so, "that day" alerts us, it says something important is about to be told, something transformative is taking place here.

Then the next thing we read is that evening has come. So it's dark. All that is about to take place, takes place in the dark, in the night. Remembering that Mark was written when Christians were being persecuted, we could say that this story is an encouragement to keep faith in this dark time.

The next word that really captured my attention was "other" – *let's go over to the other side*.

There are four crossing journeys in the first half of Mark. Ched Myers suggests that "*The function of this crossing pattern is to dramatize the fact that, despite their cultural and political 'otherness', Mark's Jesus is determined to bring liberation to those on the other side.*" ("Say to this Mountain" Ched Myers et al, pg56)

Not only is Jesus going over to the **other** side, there are also **other** boats with him. There seems to be a lot of "otherness" in this story. Certainly the region across the "sea" was Gentile territory so it was in a real sense "other". Jesus asks the disciples (good Jewish boys) to go over to the other side.

What might this mean for us? What does otherness look like for you? At its most basic, “other” is anything that is “not me”. We might find “other” in gender, sexuality, theology, ethnicity, culture, social status, age, ability/disability...and so on. It may even be parts of ourselves that we don’t like “I wish I was other than I am.” Whoever or whatever is other for us, Jesus invites us to move towards this, to head over to the other side.

Coming back to the text, we discover that the disciples took him “just as he was”. I’m reminded of that old Billy Graham hymn “Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come”. Our text however turns this around and invites us to take Jesus just as he is...

We take Him;

- Not as we wish Jesus was.
- Not as others may present Jesus.
- Not as you might see Him in the lives of others.

We let go of our illusions, our wish list for Jesus or what we need him to be, and allow him to reveal himself to us.

So we are letting Jesus be who He is (no strings attached), we’re heading over to the other side and it’s dark...we can’t see much. That should be enough, don’t you think?... well no...a furious storm comes out of nowhere. Apparently this happens often because of the geography of the region. However continuing with our metaphoric reading,... if we let God be God, move towards what we don’t know or like or understand and it’s dark anyway, of course there’s going to be a storm....emotional, spiritual, political, economic, theological storms. In our country at the moment, we are in the midst of a number of these storms.

What do we do?

Well what did the disciples do? Firstly they were fisherman, they knew about boats and water and weather and they are bucketing furiously. The text says that they fear that they are going to drown so it must be a big storm. They are doing everything they know from a lifetime in boats to save the situation....then they look around... I can just imagine the scene...

Where’s Jesus? One of them says and other replies, “He’s asleep up in the stern.” “You have got to be kidding me,” Peter says, “how could he possibly sleep through this? Go and wake him up. We need all hands on deck.”

So they go and wake him up and what do they say? “Don’t you care?”

So after responding to God’s invitation to move towards otherness in the dark and then finding ourselves in the midst of a terrible storm which we try to negotiate using all the life/spiritual skills we have at our disposal, we find we are sinking. And it seems like God is asleep. Surely our response is very much like the disciples; “Don’t you care God?”

So getting back to the story, the disciples had no expectation that Jesus could actually do anything about the storm, what they wanted was for Him to respond to their fear and lend a hand baling out the water. They wanted Him to be part of their world/their consciousness even as they are seeking to follow Him.

It is at this point that the disciples’ world is really shaken up. As the gospel tells it, Jesus addresses the wind and the waves, just like I would say to my dog, “Stop” and the storm stops....

And Jesus says to them, to us; "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Now these hardened fisherman are actually terrified.

Well my first response is, "Hang on a minute Jesus. I'm going over to the other side in the dark or maybe, I'm heading into mystery and I've let go of rational arguments and you seem to be sleeping on the job, what do you mean I don't have any faith? What do you think has got me this far?"

And it's like Jesus is saying, "Yes AND I want to open you to a whole other way of being. I want to invite you into my consciousness, my way, my vision, my embodiment which is the Kingdom of God." And the disciples go; "Whoa..." This is terrifying....

In my mind I go to Hebrews 10:31 "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" and 12:29 "*Our God is a consuming fire.*"

We are contrary creatures, what we most want is also what we most fear. In that moment on the lake, the disciples actually glimpsed who Jesus really was and this reality was far more frightening than any storm. Suddenly there is a revelation, a new clarity, an explosion of awakening for the disciples and it is almost too much. Like Moses (Exodus 33:18-23) they and we need to be shielded from the face of God because it's just too much for us. And so we experience the dance within ourselves between a deep desire for God and an often inexplicable resistance to fully entering into this mystery. We are afraid.

We are called to faith. Heb 11:1 faith – "*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*" We might call it dark faith or blind faith, the faith of the sleeping Jesus, the faith of non-anxious presence. The faith where even in absence there is presence. As John O'Donohue says "It seems that absence is impossible without presence. Absence is the sister of presence. ...all absence is full of hidden presence." (Eternal Echoes pg 228, 274)

Jesus is asleep in the boat but he's in the boat. It seems like he's absent but he is always present.

This dance of faith, of the movement in and out, experiencing absence and presence, is an ever deepening journey of a lifetime. I would like to suggest that meditation is like a sacrament of this dance. In meditation, we let go of the ego ways that we use to support our belief that God is present. Often this then means, that what we actually feel/think/emote is nothing ie absence. Our time of meditation is the dance of letting go of thoughts, images, feelings, being present which feels like absence. Then a thought/feeling/image comes and soothes the rawness of ego-nothingness and each time, we choose again, to let go of the thought/feeling/image and move back into presence which feels like absence.

Each time we do this during our meditation, we are choosing the way of dark faith, we are choosing to be in the boat going over to the other side in the dark with a storm raging and letting go into the "Be still" of the risen Christ. Even as we choose this again and again during the time of meditation, we are affirming our commitment to live this way in the rest of our day, the rest of our lives.

In all the journeys of life, of working for justice, of seeking peace, of living into the kingdom of God whatever that looks like in our lives, we are choosing as Joan Chittister says "a journey through earthen darkness to the dazzling light that already flames in each of us, but in a hidden place that is left to each of us to find." (pg 38 "The Rule of Benedict – Insight for the Ages").

Amen.