

Sunday June 23rd, 2024

Mark 4:35-41
“Rocking the Boat”

As a child, the late president Theodore Roosevelt was called “Teedie”. Why “Teedie” and not Teddy” I don’t know. After all, teddy bears are named after him. His mother Mittie had discovered at one point that Teedie was so afraid of the Madison Square Church where they went every week that he refused to set foot inside the church if he was alone. So, she pressed him to tell her why he was so afraid. He was terrified, she discovered, of something called the “zeal”. He claimed he had heard the minister read about it from the bible.

Using a concordance, she read him those passages containing the word “zeal” until suddenly, very excited, he told her to stop. The line was from John 2:17 (KJV) in the passage about Jesus clearing the temple, which reads, “And his disciples remembered that it was written, ‘the Zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.’” (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p. 152) One can understand how a little boy could misunderstand such a phrase.

Often it seems those things we fear most of all arise out of our lack of understanding. We do not understand our neighbours from a different country, or different religion, and we fear them. We see young people with piercings, or multi-colored hair, or unusual clothing: and we fear them. We hear of a new disease in a foreign land, and we fear it will make its way here. Fear can be rational, and it can be irrational, but either way it can cripple us.

I remember a scene from “A Charlie Brown’s Christmas” where Charlie Brown is struggling to cope with the season and he comes to Lucy’s Psychiatrist booth, drops a nickel in her can and unloads his heart. Lucy suggests that maybe Charlie suffers from fear, and she lists several choices, like agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces or claustrophobia the fear of enclosed spaces. At each one Charlie shakes his head that that isn’t it.

Then Lucy says, “Maybe you suffer from pan phobia”. Charlie says, “What’s that?” Lucy replies, “The fear of everything.” And Charlie yells out loud enough to knock Lucy from her seat, “That’s it!” Fear can be a good thing, as God gave us the feeling to protect us from predators and dangers, but now in our modern world it is becoming a problem. It steals vitality and strength. It keeps us from trying new things and discovering our full potential.

Fear is closely related, of course, to anxiety. One of the best definitions of anxiety I have ever heard is that “worry is paying interest on a debt you have not yet incurred.” As someone who struggles daily with anxiety, I can tell you honestly that it can wreak havoc on your mental health and dampen your mood, any time and in any situation. So, we often play a little mental game with ourselves.

We imagine in an upcoming event, or scenario, the very worst thing that can happen. We mull it over, letting it keep us awake at night. Then when an event or situation occurs and everything works out better than we imagined, we feel we are coping well. However, we are not. We are simply playing a game of self-delusion. We are manipulating our own feelings to cope with our anxiety. The Gospel lesson today is a familiar story to many of you.

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The story opens with Jesus teaching the crowd that has been following him and was so apt to happen, the crowd had pushed in against him. The crowd was becoming oppressive, but Jesus knew they were sheep without a shepherd. To compensate and give himself room to breathe, he stepped into a boat and set off from the shore a short distance to give himself space.

All day he had been teaching and healing from that boat, and as we saw a couple of weeks ago, Jesus was apt to forgo food and rest to keep ministering. Jesus' human nature eventually caught up with him and he was tired, so he asked his disciples to hoist anchor, and set sail for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Thus, the crowd was left behind, but Mark tells us that some of the people followed in other boats. The little fishing boat had hardly set out when Jesus, exhausted by his day, lays down, and drifts off to sleep at the back of the boat.

Perhaps you would enjoy knowing a little about the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is a freshwater lake, the largest in Israel. The lake is 21 Km long and 13 Km wide, meaning a total area of 166.7 square kilometers. It is tiny compared to many of our Canadian lakes. What is most interesting about this lake is that at 209 to 215 feet below sea level it is the lowest freshwater lake on the earth. The Dead Sea is the only one lower, but it is not a freshwater lake.

Because of its depth below sea level, and because it is surrounded by hills, the Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden and very violent storms. Air pressure drives storm fronts down onto the lake, and heat and moisture energize the storms. The storms may not last long, but they are very intense. So, in our gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples, and remember the other boats, encounter one of these terrifying storms.

Suddenly, the wind picked up, the rain rushed in, and the waves rose to the point that the little boat was taking on water. Remember these are simple little wooden boats, with simple sails, and wooden rudders, and there were at least 13 men in the boat Jesus was on, some of whom were seasoned fishermen and they were scared out of their minds. Peter, James and John, experienced on this lake, would have jumped into action: dropping the sail, keeping the boat steered properly into the waves, organizing the others to bail.

At some point into the storm, we do not know how long, one of the disciples, we don't know who, must have realized that Jesus was sleeping through this tempest. When that realization was shared with the rest of the disciples, I am sure someone said in Aramaic, their native tongue, "You've got to be joking? How can he sleep through this?" At first thought you could explain Jesus apparent indifference as simple fatigue.

In our modern colloquial language we have expressions like, "I was so tired I could have slept through an explosion" or "a team of wild horses couldn't have woken me or "he was dead to the world". The disciples find themselves trying to keep afloat, and beside themselves with fear and anger at Jesus. "Doesn't he care that we are about to perish, him included?" The bible says they, meaning all of them as a group, frantically woke him. With the wind howling, and Jesus a bit groggy, they shouted at him, "Teacher, don't you even care that we are going to drown?"

When Jesus finally comes around, he shouts to the storm, "Quiet down!" And guess what, the storm stops. As suddenly as the storm came, it was gone, and there was a great calm.

We've all seen those moments when there is no wind, and the lake is like glass. I like those moments, because in the evening on such occasions, you can see the fish coming up to grab bugs off the water. That was how the Sea of Galilee looked after Jesus calmed it.

Understandably, the disciples are in awe of Jesus. "Who is this man that even the wind and waves obey him?" Remember these are seasoned fishermen, at least some of them. They know this lake; from a young age they have sailed it often. They have heard all the stories passed down about the lake, including those of people who perished while out in such storms, but never had they seen, or heard, of anyone who could control the weather. This is something new.

Who is this Jesus who can command the weather? Clearly, this passage demonstrates Jesus' divinity as one of the points of this passage.

However, the other major point here may be of more immediate relevance to us in our day-to-day lives. What is the very first thing Jesus says to his disciples after he calms the storm? If you think about it there were plenty of options. Jesus could have said, "Oh, gee fellows sorry about that, I mean sleeping and all. I was just a bit tired. You know what it's been like." He could also have said something like, "Tada! What do you think of that little trick? Look what I can do?" But he didn't say anything like that.

What does he say? He asks a question. "Why are you so afraid?" To be frank, it's an odd question. "Why are we afraid? Did you see this storm? Poor Mathew is aching from baling, and Peter's hands are raw from holding the tiller so tight. We were going to drown. How else should we feel in such a predicament?" I am sure that the disciples stood there looking at Jesus with confused faces. "Why are we afraid? Why aren't you?"

Likely reading their hearts, Jesus asks a second question, "Do you still not have faith in me?" His question carries some frustration in it, but also a chastisement. The disciples have been following Jesus for a while now. They have seen the miracles so far, heard all the teaching, and Mark adds in verse 33-34 an extra benefit of being a disciple that likely is closely connected to this passage.

"He used many such stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they were able to understand. In fact, in his public teaching he taught only with parables, but afterward when he was alone with his disciples, he explained the meaning to them." The disciples had every advantage in knowing and following Jesus. They had seen what he could do and heard about the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Even with all this they were still afraid. I get it though. We experience life the same way. Today we have every advantage of Jesus' teaching through the scriptures and through sermons, and resources beyond measure. We claim a closeness to Jesus through our prayers and praise. We relish in words like, "Jesus is mighty to save!" "Blessed Assurance" and many, many more. Unlike the disciples who were with Jesus by the time of the storm only a few months, some of us have known Jesus for years, decades even.

So, what happens when we receive troubling news? The doctor gives us an unpleasant diagnosis, we cannot make our mortgage payment, our kid is drifting into a lifestyle we know is dangerous and leads to nothing but trouble, the company we work for is laying off people or closing outright, my marriage is in trouble: shall I go on? Anyone of these situations and hundreds more like them, can trigger our anxiety and fear.

So, during a sleepless night, Jesus comes to us and asks, “Why are you so afraid?” And our immediate response is one of anger. “What do you mean, ‘why am I afraid’?” Just look at my situation. My life is spiraling out of control. My boat is taking on water and no amount of bailing is keeping it afloat. Furthermore, despite my urgent pleas to you Jesus, you seem asleep in the back of the boat while the tempest rages.

“Don’t you care, Jesus?” That’s the heart of it all, isn’t it? Deep down in a little dark corner of our hearts we wonder, does God really care? We even go so far as to question God’s goodness, when storms come upon us. I think that what we doubt in our lives is not Jesus’ words, or the stories of Jesus. I really don’t think that is the problem. I think what we doubt is that Jesus is even aware of us, or near to us. Is Jesus a part of my life.

So, when we have this doubt, we fear. We fear we are alone, and at the mercy of the universe, and it keeps us up during the night. The greatest gift Jesus offers us is maybe that we don’t need to live like this, full of anxiety and fear. We need this story of the boat in the storm to remind us that the problem with fear is our problem. Jesus has given us a way out. Amid the tempest, Jesus is still there, peaceful, full of assurance, and not worried one bit.

Andrew Jackson, who was to become the president of the United States, won fame as the general in the Battle of New Orleans, the last great battle of the War of 1812. The famous battle was fought after the war was over. The peace treaty between the American and the British was signed on December 24th, 1814, but news traveled so slowly in those days that neither the British troops in the south nor General Jackson knew of the treaty being signed.

So, in the early part of 1815, a deadly battle was fought and won by Jackson’s army. If only he had known that the war was already over and peace declared, what suffering could have been avoided. (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p.193) It doesn’t matter what battles and struggles we face in this life. The battle is already won. Victory is already assured. “If God is for us, who can be against us.”

Where is our confidence in Christ? Why do we still shout out to him, “Don’t you care?” Have we not been listening to his words and seeing his miracles? Are we no better than the people of Jesus day who he described as an “adulterous and faithless” generation. We know we should not fret, and worry, but it is so hard not to. We want to trust Jesus, but we feel more confident in trusting ourselves.

One wonders what would have happened if the disciples had not woken Jesus? I really don’t know, but I suspect that the plans of God would not be thwarted. Plans for Jesus to go to Calvary. If the storm had truly been life threatening, Jesus would have woken on his own and calmed the storm.

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The plans for your life that God has prepared from the foundation of the world, will not be thwarted. No matter what happens, we are all in God's hands. The Apostle Paul calls us to a higher way of living when he writes...

"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7)

And frankly, isn't that what we really want: peace? A peace that passes all understanding. Then why are you afraid? He has already given you his peace, now, live in confidence by what you already possess.