



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Fourth Sunday After Pentecost**

**June 21, 2015**

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### **“Little Boat in a Big Storm”**

*(Mark 4:35-41)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:35-41).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty God, in Your mercy guide the course of this world so that Your Church may joyfully serve You in godly peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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We're not quite sure always what to do with stories like this one – the disciples in a boat in a storm, Jesus asleep, Jesus ordering the storm to be stilled. Ministers are often asked in a good natured way if we can't do something about the weather on the day of the church picnic, for instance, or for an outdoor wedding. On a cold, windy, wet Friday, after the rehearsal, the father of the bride sidles up and says, "Come on now, Rev. You must have some pull upstairs. Can't you do something about the weather and get us a nice, sunny day tomorrow?"

I pray about the weather now and then, but I also know God may have bigger issues in mind than this wedding or that golf outing. When on the news I see a massive low pressure front sweeping up from the south, gathering a lot of steam and energy and moisture from the gulf, taking aim at Wisconsin, frankly I'm a little doubtful that my prayers will create an island of warm sunshine around a wedding. Maybe I shouldn't be, but I am.

Huge storms don't just stop because we want them to or even need them to. Therefore sometimes we conclude God must have a hands-off approach and doesn't like to meddle in human affairs, sort of like the Prime Directive in Star Trek prohibiting interference with alien cultures. So one of my suspicions is that the average Lutheran hears a story like this and at some level simply stops listening. Things like this don't happen, after all, and there's nothing the preacher can say that will make me believe it ever did or will happen. So we stop listening, put our mind in neutral and hope the preacher at least keeps it short.

It's a big issue actually, a deeply profound issue about the relationship between the Creator and his creation.

Does God meddle in our lives? Will he intervene for us?  
And if so, why doesn't he do it more consistently?

One theologian (not one of ours) sat his students in a circle and he put a garbage can in the middle of the circle. He asked his students to jot down on a piece of paper a story or part of the Bible they simply have a hard time believing. Jot it down, crumple it up, and toss it in the trash. And so they did. One wrote down the creation account in Genesis 1, another the possession of demons. Others threw in various miracles, and on and on it went. It was quite a pile. Then the professor took out each item, one by one, and asked "what truth might we be discarding here?" What hopeful, helpful truth about ourselves, our lives, the world, and how God interacts with it . . . what hopeful, helpful truth are we so close to throwing out? By the end, the students retrieved just about all they were about to discard and, if only in their minds, put them reverently back in place.

So let's take another look at this passage and ask "how might this ancient text be relevant to us today? What might God be teaching us with this text?"

Crossing at night was his idea. His disciples were with him. Earlier he had spent the day teaching beside the sea. The crowd gathering around was so large that he got into a boat and used it as a sort of impromptu pulpit. It's night now. He has dismissed the crowd and is using the same boat, presumably, to cross over the sea to the western side.

Back in 1986 an ancient boat was discovered submerged in the muddy shores on the north-west side of the Sea of Galilee. They dated it to about the time of Christ but, of course, there's no evidence connecting it to Jesus or his disciples. It does show, however, what kind of fishing boats were used at that time. The boat has a very shallow draft with a flat bottom, allowing it to get close to the shore while fishing. It has a raised stern and was open and had low sides for ease of casting nets out and hauling them back in. Think about it: A small flat-bottomed fishing boat with low sides. In a wind storm, such a vessel would be very vulnerable.

And that's exactly how Mark describes it: "The waves were breaking into the boat so that it was nearly swamped."

Realize, many in the boat with Jesus are seasoned fishermen. They didn't scare easily, but they're scared now. Some are rowing furiously, some are bailing water over the low walls, some are tugging at the sail, one is at the rudder, and they're all thinking about their wives and children and how they wish they were home right now. But they're not home. They're in a little boat riding low in the water, at night, in the middle of a great big wind storm. They think they're going to die.

What is Jesus doing? He's in the back, underneath the raised stern platform, asleep. How is anybody's guess, but he's back there sleeping . . . on a cushion Mark carefully notes. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report this; it's an essential part of their corporate memory of the event. Certainly his blissful sleep stood out in stark contrast with the violence of the storm and hyperventilating panic of his disciples.

The disciples shake Jesus awake and say, "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" It's the language of panic. Jesus gets up and "rebukes" the wind and addresses the lake as if it were an unruly heckler. "Peace! Be quiet!" Interestingly enough, he used those exact words back in the first chapter of Mark where he rebuked and silenced the demon in Capernaum.

What had been a "great windstorm" Mark now describes as a "great calm." It has gone from one extreme to another. Then Jesus looks at his disciples and asks, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Clearly the knowledge and faith of the disciples is still a work in progress. (That theme of the disciples' obtuseness will only become stronger as Mark's gospel progresses.) They are unable to respond to the crisis with any trust or confidence in Jesus. Instead, they completely lose their poise and panic. Now that the storm is over their original fear turns into a new and even greater fear. They realize they are brushing up against the almighty power of

God and it scares them half to death.

In Mark's Gospel, this is the first nature miracle they've witnessed. They've seen him heal the sick, and that's fantastic and wonderful and exciting, but people get well all the time, right? The healing properties God has given the body are usually sufficient. Sometimes we need a little extra boost from physicians and pharmacists. But we get sick all the time, and most of the time we get well again. What doesn't happen is the dramatic calming of a storm with the utterance of a few words. This is new. This they haven't seen.

By the way, the early church loved this story. In fact, one of the earliest symbols of the Christian church is a small boat tossed about by a storm. The early Christians knew what it meant to be a little boat in a stormy sea. Their numbers were small, insignificant, a tiny minority in every city, and then targeted, hunted down, arrested, tortured, executed by the Roman Empire, the most powerful entity in the world. The early church loved this account of the disciples in the boat and Jesus calming the storm. They heard in this story they were not alone. For one, they had each other and that's good. Some of us are rowing, some bailing, some pulling at the sail, and some praying. We can encourage one another, prop one another up, and that helps a lot. I wouldn't want to go through life without you, without my friends in Christ.

But you know what? There's somebody else in the boat with us. He's back there in the stern, not far from the tiller actually, quiet, but present . . . with all the strength and courage and peace of God in him.

And the truth this story communicates is that there is no storm, no threat, no chaos that can undo us or negate us or destroy us because he's here with us. The truth is that the Lord of the universe, Almighty God, is in the boat and therefore, no matter what is going on out there, we are ultimately safe in the boat with him. Though all hell break loose, we are secure in his presence and grace.

The truth of this story is that all of us have a friend, a

companion, who stands beside us and encourages and loves and forgives and blesses us and ultimately saves us. Jesus Christ is his name.

St. Francis wrote, “All my life thou has been at the helm though very secretly.” Martin Luther wrote, “If you want to go abroad with Christ, bad weather will not fail to come, *and Christ will want to sleep*. Then we really feel the temptation. Otherwise, if He were not sleeping and were to calm the bad weather [too] soon, we would never find out what it means to be a Christian, and I suppose, would think . . . that we were helping ourselves by our own power. Here, however, temptation strengthens faith. Therefore one must say: No human power was able to help; God alone and His dear Word have done it.”

The Sea of Galilee, of course, has no monopoly on sudden and violent storms. We are, each of us, subject to accident, disease, and death. We can without warning lose love, work, and home. Sometimes the storm is violent and life threatening and we are tossed about, bounced around, and the noise is deafening, and the next big wave might overturn us, and everything is dark, people are shouting and screaming . . . Relax. The one with all the power and the love, the one who has claimed you as his own in baptism, he’s in the boat with us. And with him, we are safe.

I like to think about what happened next, during the rest of the voyage. Mark doesn’t tell us, but I’ll bet they breathed a huge sigh of relief because they were just given their lives back. I’ll bet they stretched their aching muscles, maybe recounted the most harrowing moments, and maybe even laughed a little bit at what an incredible night it had been, how they all had thought they were going to die. And as the sun rose, I’ll bet they stole a glance at him sitting there in the stern.

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

It’s Jesus, God’s only Son, God’s love – from which nothing, no storm, no wind, no wave can separate us. All

praise to him. Amen.

