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Psalm 9:9-20

Mark 4:35-41

WHEN THE BOAT ROCKS

You and I have experienced storms. Most of us have probably even gone through some storms that were scary. The winds howl. The thunder rolls. We are uneasy until things ease up. We know what that's like. Perhaps fewer of us have experienced storms when we were out on a large body of water at night. Jesus and his disciples are trying to cross the Sea of Galilee when a serious storm threatens to sink them. Some of his disciples were fishermen. They had been in storms while on the water. But this storm had shaken even them. The waves were causing the boat to take on water and at least some in the boat were convinced they were perishing. There was no life raft. There were no life vests. We have a story of an external storm and we have a story of internal storms. Each storm seems to be dangerous – one can capsize a boat, the other can capsize a life.

Some of our interior storms can arise on fears that aren't even fully rational. Storyteller and former radio broadcaster John Henry Faulk told how as a boy, he and his friend, Boots Cooper, were playing in the chicken house in central Texas. They spotted a chicken snake in the top tier of the nest. It was so close that it looked like a big boa constrictor. As John Henry told it, "All of our frontier courage drained out of our heels. Actually, it trickled down our overall legs. And Boots and I made a new door through the hen house." His momma came out to see what all of the fuss was about, and she said to Boots and John Henry, "You know chicken snakes are harmless! They can't hurt you." Rubbing the sore places on his body, Boots replied, "Yes, Mrs. Faulk, I know, but they can scare you so bad, you'll hurt yourself." ¹ Internal storms can hurt us.

Sometimes fears are well-founded. The fishermen trying to guide the boat through the storm knew the sinking feeling they had might be more than just a feeling.

They knew of what Carl Sandburg would later write:

"The sea speaks a language polite people never repeat.

It is a colossal scavenger with no respect." ²

Think about the stormy waters for the early church, for whom, Mark's Gospel was written. There was good reason that a ship on the sea became a symbol of the early church – they were on a journey, powered by the wind of the Spirit, but there were some big waves at times. The early church was just beginning to experience being persecuted for their Christian faith and some had died because of their beliefs. Roman officials sought to use fear itself as a weapon, as efforts were made to silence the transformational witness of the gospel. Where was Jesus for the early church?

In the story, he is asleep in the boat during the storm. Jesus had initiated the idea of going across to the other side of the Galilean Sea after a full day of ministry. But then he assumes a passive role in the story for a while. The narrator tells us, "They took him with them in the boat, just as he was." Just as he was? Exhausted? During the day, the crowd on the beach had so pressed in on Jesus as he had been teaching, that he had gotten into the boat in order to teach from there. Even at the end of the day, when he told the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side," he wasn't quite finished teaching from the boat. But first he goes asleep on a cushion in the stern, and evidently it is a deep sleep. As the storm is brewing, the rocking of the boat in the waves doesn't awaken him. He is the one sleeping, but they are the ones having the nightmare. Finally, they can wait no longer. They wake him up saying, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus is not described as giving a verbal answer to their question. In figuring out what to do, he chooses to address the external storm first. Perhaps that is the more urgent matter – perhaps it is the storm that can be more quickly stilled. In Hebrew scriptures, God is described as One who has power over the chaos of the seas. The disciples are frightened - they know more about the sea and its power than they know about Jesus and his power. I wonder what they were thinking when he rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And what were they thinking when they watch the wind and sea obey him better than they ever would? "There was a dead calm," Mark says to describe what had been the exterior storm.

Jesus then begins to address the inner turbulence. Even with the sudden calm, the question is not, "Why were you afraid?" It is, "Why are you afraid? Have you still

no faith?” We need to be careful here, for we could assume that these two questions put back to back are communicating that anyone who has had a pounding heart and sweaty palms is being less than faithful. Certainly, God can provide a sense of peace that goes beyond what makes sense in light of the circumstances. But sometimes, pushing on in spite of one’s fears is the most faithful act of all.

One of Rembrandt’s great paintings is entitled: “Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee.” Rembrandt paints the water swamping the fore deck and Jesus, in the stern, having just been awakened by the frightened disciples is assessing what is going on. It is widely believed, since there are fourteen people in the boat, that Rembrandt painted himself in the boat along with the twelve disciples and Jesus. It’s been pointed out that the stream of light, so often in Rembrandt’s paintings, which directs the viewer’s eye to the artist’s focal point is illuminating not the figure of Jesus, which would be the artistic norm. But rather the light is shining on those disciples in the fore section of the boat who are carrying out a great struggle against the wind and crashing waves. So certain is the eventual triumph of the power of Jesus over chaotic forces, that even before Jesus has spoken, some light has burst forth upon the disciples struggling to keep the boat moving forward. Some of us would prefer to keep our feet always on solid ground, but there are those times where we find ourselves struggling to make headway through the wind and the waves of some passage.

Where today is Rembrandt’s break in the clouds and the stream of light, even if it is moonlight? Well, we can’t look only to Rembrandt for reassurance. The painting to which I have been referring was actually stolen from a museum in Boston in 1990. It hasn’t been recovered.³ But God’s peace and light don’t ultimately come from paint on a canvas. God’s peace and light cannot be stolen by any burglar or event. Jesus is the One who rebukes the wind and says to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The words are actually stronger than that in the original Greek, something like: “Be muzzled!” In response, the wind runs out of breath, and the waters become as smooth as glass.

By God’s grace, there is One who is more powerful than the storms that could send us to the bottom of the sea. By God’s grace, our Lord is in the boat with us even as we travel our various journeys. By grace, so certain is the eventual triumph of the

power of Jesus over chaotic forces, that we can affirm that the clouds have parted and some light has burst forth upon those of us struggling to keep the boat moving forward. It is our Lord who can calm the external and internal storms and enable us to continue our journey of faith. It is hard to remember that when the boat is rocking and our hearts are pounding. But Jesus is in the boat with us and God's light will shine. Alleluia! Amen.

¹ Recounted in a speech by Bill Moyers when he accepted the Ridenhour Courage Prize at The Nation Institute, April 3, 2008.

² Carl Sandberg, "Two Nocturnes", *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, p. 393, Harcourt, Brace and Co.; 1970

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/19/boston-art-heist-isabella-stewart-gardner-museum>