

“People of Peace”  
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson  
Mark 4:35-41 with Psalm 46 | September 15, 2024

*Peace! Be still!* Oh, that we could so firmly rebuke the polling data and soundbites and social media snippets swirling around us! Always keeping us on alert, fueling our anxiety about the election and the future it portends. On Wednesday morning, I was at a mini retreat with other pastors from the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Our keynote speaker—one of the Sisters of Mercy who sponsor the retreat center—referenced an article she’d recently read. A reporter had interviewed the public, asking person after person: “How do you feel in the lead-up to the November election?” And time and time again, people responded: “I feel afraid.” I feel afraid.

I couldn’t find the article Sister Maria was referencing. But a Google search revealed just how often election anxiety is in the news. “Election year stressing you out? You’re not alone,”<sup>1</sup> one headline read. “Election Anxiety Is Real. Here’s How To Cope,”<sup>2</sup> read another. According to that article, a poll from the American Psychiatric Association has revealed that 73% of people report feeling anxious about the election. An article on WebMD noted just how many of us are turning to therapy to process the stress and fear of living in this political climate and listed a handful of additional strategies to help us cope.<sup>3</sup>

I’m not a psychologist, but I assume it’s normal to feel *some* stress in the lead-up to *any* election. Because elections bring uncertainty and uncertainty brings anxiety. Will my party win or lose? What will the outcome mean for my family, my community, my country and beyond? These questions are normal ... But, it seems, the 24-hour news cycle, and the clamor of social media, and the volatility—even violence—that has come to accompany our politics—not to mention, the sheer stakes of *this* election—have driven many of us beyond anxiety, to fear. It can leave us feeling like we’re caught in the middle of a metaphorical storm, with dark winds whipping at us, and turbulent tides battering our boat. We find ourselves looking for a candidate to save us, forgetting that even our standard bearer cannot deliver us completely from the turmoil churned by competing visions for our country’s future.

Oh, that someone could demand the storm swirling around us, *Peace! Be still!*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Washington Post* (April 19, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> *Henry Ford Health* (Sept 9, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Kara Grant, “Presidential Election Have You Stressed? Here’s How to Cope,” *webmd.com* (Sept 10, 2024).

We wouldn't be the first people to beg for deliverance when the storms of life roll in. Whether we find ourselves in the midst of a windstorm wrought by global events, or national politics, or something far more personal, many of us have raised cries of lament, praying for peace in our world, peace in our land, peace in our own hearts. Scripture, too, is full of these voices—the faithful of ages past pleading for rescue in the face of storms, both metaphorical and real. Here, in our passage from Mark, the Twelve find themselves in the midst of a very real storm: winds are raging; waves are battering the boat; the disciples are sure their end is near, and they are consumed by a very real fear. “Teacher,” they cry, “do you not care that we are perishing?”

According to Mark, this is no ordinary windstorm. This is not the kind of squall that James and John and the other fisherman aboard the boat would have been trained to watch for as they scan the skies each morning. This is an extraordinary storm—a *mega* storm, to be exact. That word actually appears in the original text; *mega* is translated in your pew Bible as “great.” This “*mega* windstorm” catches the disciples by surprise, partially, I’m sure, because this is no ordinary time to be at sea.

At the beginning of this passage, Mark tells us that darkness is already falling. *On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”* It seems Jesus is feeling spontaneous. He has spent the whole day teaching—telling parable after parable to a crowd gathered beside the Sea. Now, he feels like taking a boat ride. So—much to the dismay of every Eagle Scout reading this text—Jesus and the disciples set out just as they are, with no preparation, no provisions, and no daylight left.

It's not just that they are unprepared for the journey. They are knowingly headed into the unknown. For a couple of reasons. First, they are traveling by boat. Obviously, sailing is the quickest way to cross the Sea; it's much more efficient than following along the shoreline. But it requires going across the water. Which, for the ancients, is synonymous with chaos. It's where Leviathan lives, that great sea monster. It's where waves churn and winds rage. This is the reason God gathered the primeval waters on the third day of creation—to put boundaries around the forces of chaos so that life could flourish on dry land.

In getting into the boat, the disciples are transgressing that boundary ... in more ways than one. Not only are they sailing away from the safety of shore into the waters of the deep. They are also crossing a border from Jewish Galilee to the territory of the Gentiles. The Sea of Galilee serves to separate one people from another, to draw a line between “us” and “them” ... until, of course, Jesus decides to defy the boundary, and take a boat to the other side.

In this time of divisiveness and division—when so many attempts at interacting with the “other side” lead to restrained, or *unrestrained*, hostility—perhaps it should not surprise us that the

liminal place between “us” and “them” becomes the site of a storm. Once Jesus and his disciples are far from shore, the forces of chaos rise with a vengeance. Waves beat against the hull, winds howl overhead, and—no doubt—the disciples on board are thrown into panic. I imagine they all spring to action. Simon grabs a bucket. Andrew uses his bare hands to bail water from the boat. James and John row frantically against the waves. But Jesus—well, Jesus is unfazed. Worse than that, he seems unaware. Somehow, in the midst of this chaos, Jesus is curled up on a cushion, fast asleep. “Teacher,” the disciples yell, “do you not care that we are perishing?”

Witnessing the fear that has gripped his followers, Jesus rises. He gets up from his bed and rebukes the wind: “Peace! Be still!” he yells. Immediately, the winds cease. The waves settle. And the great storm gives way to a great calm—a *mega* calm, to be exact.

With peace restored and the boat safe, Jesus turns to his disciples: “Why are you afraid?” he asks. “Have you still no faith?” And, in that moment, they seem to recognize something. As students of Scripture, they know that God *alone* can command the waters of chaos. Only God has the power to gather primeval waters and part the Red Sea waves; only God—the Psalmist reminds us—has the power to still a storm and quell the churning sea (Ps 107). The disciples still don’t understand the fullness of who Jesus is; they won’t for some time. But here, now, they realize that the power and presence of God dwells with him. And they are filled with awe. Or, to be more precise, the disciples “fear a great fear.”

Our translations of the Bible often use the word “fear” when talking about reverence. It strikes us as odd, for—certainly—we shouldn’t be afraid of the Lord. But, when Scripture speaks of fear, it is a particular kind of fear. It is different from terror or anxiety. It is the kind of fear that lives alongside awe, wonder, astonishment. It fills us in the mysterious moments that take our breath away, because we realize how small we are, how much is beyond our control, how great and good is our God. This, I think, is the kind of awe and reverence the disciples experience when they realize they are in the presence of one more powerful than the sea. So, Mark tells us, they fear a great fear—a *mega* fear to be exact. They are filled with great awe to match the great calm of the sea.

I find it heartening that the peace and wonder that come to the Twelve at the end of this passage are pure gifts of grace. They are not the result of the disciples’ trust that all would be well. After all, the opposite is true. Jesus chides his followers for having *no* faith at all. But their lack of faith has no bearing on the outcome of this story. For *Jesus* has faith enough to see them through.

This is the reason, I think, that we find Jesus asleep at that back of the boat. He's not neglecting his duties; he's not trying to ignore his disciples or their concerns. He simply has faith that all will be well. According to Scripture, sleep is a "typical posture of those who trust in God."<sup>4</sup> So, even as Jesus and his disciples journey across the waters of chaos, across the liminal space between "us" and "them," Jesus falls asleep. And even while winds rage and waves batter the boat, Jesus stays asleep. He knows that the chaos of this moment will not overtake them. Because God, who has always commanded the waters, is at work in Jesus. And, as God's anointed One, he will continue to push back the forces of chaos and death. Jesus knows that his presence in that boat is enough, no matter what he and his disciples face as they transgress the boundary that restrains chaos, that divides people. So, when a *mega* storm blows in, and anxiety and fear grip the disciples, Jesus trusts that all will be well. And he *ensures* that all will be well. He rises from his bed and commands the forces of chaos: *Peace! Be still!*

The promise of the Gospel is that—through the Holy Spirit—the Risen Christ is still present with us. Maybe he's asleep at the back of the boat; maybe he's rising to rebuke the wind. But Christ is with us, in the midst of every storm. This is the assurance that anchors our souls when the forces of chaos threaten to undo us. Even when we—like the disciples before us—find ourselves in the grip of anxiety or fear, Christ's presence can bring us a measure of the peace that surpasses all understanding. This is a gift that comes *not* from our own confidence or certainty, but from the one who whispers: *Be still and know that I am God.*

Long ago, the daughter of Adela St. Johns witnessed how this assurance brought peace to her mother in the midst of one of life's harshest storms. A colleague shares her story:

Adela St. Johns was a journalist, novelist and screenwriter who became known as "The World's Greatest Girl Reporter" because of her successes in publishing during the 20s and 30s.<sup>5</sup> She was also among the generation of women who watched their sons go off to war. Adela's older son William served as a pilot in World War II.

"One bleak winter morning she received a telegram that read: *Pilot Officer William St. Johns ... Killed in Action.* Adela's daughter, [Elaine], reported what happened next. She wrote, "mom retired quietly to her study to mourn the loss of her laughing, loving son. Hours later, when she emerged, she said simply, 'The rope held.'

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<sup>4</sup> C. Clifton Black, "Commentary on Mark 4:35-41," [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

<sup>5</sup> Joanna Scutts, "The Writer Once Called 'The World's Greatest Girl Reporter,'" [time.com](http://time.com) (March 22, 2016).

“Years later, [Adela] explained what she meant. The rope was her faith. It was what she held onto when the bottom dropped out beneath her. She said, “When Bill died, I felt like a lone mountain climber stranded on the verge of an abyss with nothing but the rope coiled on my shoulder. When the unthinkable happens, you have to wonder (if you can survive it). Well, somehow, I threw that rope into the void, and the rope held. The inner voice we all long to hear said gently, ‘All is well with your child.’ And I knew it was so.”<sup>6</sup>

In that moment, even as grief and anger swirled around her, Adela St. Johns knew the gift of peace. Even in the midst of the storm, when—no doubt—the wind was still howling and the waves were still churning, she experienced the peace that surpasses all understanding. Because she sensed the presence of Christ, assuring her that all would be well. This was her anchor in the midst of the storm.

*Peace! Be still!* And, at Jesus’ words, the winds died and the seas grew calm; the boat no longer tossed about. And the disciples’ fears were stilled, giving way to wonder and peace.

Over the past few weeks, we have been exploring what it means to live into our baptismal identity by participating in Christ’s ministry of justice, love, and peace. The call to be People of Peace is multi-faceted; it includes being peacemakers—people who seek reconciliation, who strive to rid the world of violence, who demand justice so that all creation may know God’s promised *shalom*. That work, of course, is deeply tied to the callings we focused on the last two Sundays—to be People of Justice and People of Love. But our ability to *make* peace begins with *receiving* peace—with knowing the peace that surpasses all understanding. And this peace comes from trusting that Christ is present, even in the midst of whatever storms come our way, even when we find ourselves in the grip of anxiety and fear. Christ is with us, inviting us to a deeper confidence that God is always at work to push back the forces of chaos that threaten to undo us. But reminding us also that—even when we have little faith, or no faith at all—his presence is rope enough. Jesus anchors our lives in hope, calms the storms buffeting our souls, and invites our hearts to rest in his peace.

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Andrews, “What Are We Worried About?” *Lectionary Homiletics* (October, 2001), as shared by Gregory Knox Jones in his sermon, “The Eye of God,” delivered at Westminster Presbyterian Church (Wilmington, DE) on March 14, 2021.