

STORMY TIMES

Mark 4: 35-41; June 20, 2021; Union Congregational United Church of Christ
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The sea, the storm, and the rocking boat – certainly an evocative metaphorical image for the stormy times inevitable in our own life journeys. The perils of some remembered life passage, the profound vulnerability of the craft that bears us on our precarious way – our fear, our trepidation – and our longing for someone – anyone - who will calm the storm – at least for a little while – and at the same time - calm us and our fears.

Today's scripture story from the gospel of Mark, is a story about fear and the confrontation of fear – not by a sudden burst of courage or stepping up with resolve on the part of the ones who are fearful – but something else. You might wonder about the fear of the disciples – at least some of whom have experience of storms even worse than this one— after all, several of them were fishermen descended from generations of fishermen – and yet, in this story these disciples seem absolutely overcome with fear – at this storm. Perhaps they are remembering family members and friends who did not survive such storms of the past. So, we know there is more to this storm than might seem obvious at first gust of wind.

The disciples never do pull up their big boy waders and call on their inner resources and knowledge of those earlier storms weathered, but instead let themselves be paralyzed by a fear that completely immobilizes them.

My dog Hazel, a rescue from a reservation in northern Minnesota is terrified of storms – the moment it begins to thunder, she is beside herself. She also quivers and seeks a safe hiding place at the sound of gunshots, fireworks, overhead aircraft, or loud trucks or motorcycles on the highway. Hazel knows from her experience in her time living with me, that I will not let anything hurt her – and yet – every time she hears any of these noises – all of her previous knowledge, her trust of me seems to disappear and she shakes and shivers and hides as best she can. Thunder shirts and hidey holes and hugs help a little, but the fear overcomes her every time.

No matter how much I tell her or show her that there she need not be afraid, the fear simply will not allow her to be comforted and she needs to find her own safe hiding space to stay until the storm is over.

Jesus never tells this disciples that there is nothing to be afraid of. As a resident of Galilee living alongside the sea, surely Jesus as well as the disciples formerly fishermen knew something of the fearful nature of the turbulent sea. Jesus knew there was reason to be afraid, and he must also have known that if his fishermen disciples were afraid, they had reason to be.

Instead, Jesus asks them “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

It does not help my dog Hazel if I try to convince her that there is nothing to be afraid of when storms and loud scary noises happen. She knows better. I do ask her as she shivers and shakes, “Don’t you know I won’t let anything happen to you. You are safe with me. Why can’t you trust that?”

A child wakes from a bad dream in the darkness of night, sobbing and shaking and crying out. Mom or dad rushes into the room and gathers the child in a tight hug, gently wiping sweaty hair off her forehead, and the tears from her face. Rocking the child back and forth, the parent whispers over and over, “SSHH, sshh, sshh, there is nothing to be afraid of. I am here. I am with you. There is nothing to be afraid of. I am here.” Is this really the truth? Is there really nothing to be afraid of? Is the parent being completely truthful to the child?

When I tell Hazel over and over that there is nothing to be afraid of, is that really true? Hazel knows differently. She grew up traumatized by the sound of gun shots and the terror of abuse and neglect. Her dog memory assures her that absolutely yes, there is much to be afraid of when she hears sounds that remind her of the times of terror. And when I tell here there is nothing to be afraid of, because I know at least a little part of her earlier life story, I also know that for Hazel, she still knows she has reason to be afraid.

Telling someone there is nothing to be afraid of, is a very different thing from, ‘Do not be afraid.’ The hard truth of our world, particularly depending on who you are – your race, your ethnicity, your geography, your gender - is that the fearful things in our world are very, very real.

Isolation, pain, abuse, neglect, bullying, illness, meaninglessness, rejection, losing one's job, financial problems, failure, violence, oppression, hate, death – and so much more. It is also true that as we grow in faith, as we learn more and more to trust that God is always with us, we begin to understand that even though all these things are very definitely real, they do not have to define us, and they do not get to have the last word. Even death – to one of faith – is not the last word. These fearful things do not have ultimate power over us, because we believe in a God who loves unconditionally, a God who is steadfast, slow to anger, merciful, quick to forgive. We believe in a God who is stronger than even the most powerful fear or grief.

Every Sunday as I invite you to the time of receiving the offering of ourselves and our financial gifts, I remind you that even in the hardest of times, even when we are immersed in sadness and grief, even when we feel isolated and alone, even when we are beside ourselves with despair, that our God is a God of abundance, a God of love, a God who will never leave us alone.

“Do not be afraid” might be the most important words we people of faith can hear. These are the words that begin and end the gospel of Jesus Christ. “Do not be afraid”, were the words spoken by an angel to Mary, the mother of Jesus – who certainly had much to be afraid of as she prepared to give birth. These same words, “Do not be afraid,” were also spoken to terrified shepherds on the hillsides who raced to see the miracle child and because of it, their lives were never the same again. And a short lifetime later, these same words “Do not be afraid,” were spoken to the women who came to the tomb with spices and tears following Jesus' death on the cross only to find it empty. “Do not be afraid.” Not because there are no terrifying things to rightfully be afraid of, because there are, but because there are no storms, or waves or turbulence, or thunder or anything else in all of creation - but instead, “Do not be afraid,” because God is and will always be with us through it all.

Instead of telling a terrified child, a terrified parent, a terrified immigrant, a terrified black man, a terrified transwoman, a terrified Asian woman, a terrified dog, “There is nothing to be afraid of”, the real truth is to say, “Don't be afraid, because you are not alone, I will be here, I want to be here for you, I will stay with you, and if I can't stay with you, I will be holding you in prayer,

and God will be with you always.”

The easy part of this truth which every child figures out later in life and every older person already knows is that there are many things to be afraid of, **the** some of the things that frighten us are real and some are not. The rest of the truth, the deeper truth that only a faith in the God who constantly seeks us and loves us, can teach us, is that even though there are real and fearsome things in this world, they need not have control over us, and they need not own us, because we are not alone in this boat.

Several years ago Marian Wright Edelman in the National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths Resourcebook: [My Boat is So Small : Creating a Safe Harbor of Hope](#) ended her letter of welcome with several short prayers. I share these with you.

God, we have pushed so many of our children into the tumultuous sea of life in leaky boats without survival gear. Forgive us and help them to forgive us. Help us now to give all our children the anchor of faith, the rudder of hope, the sails of health care and education, and the paddles of family and community to keep them afloat when life’s sea gets rough. Amen.

God, help me persist although I want to give up.

God, help me to keep trying although I can’t see what good it does.

God, help me to keep praying although I’m not sure you hear me.

God, help me to keep living in ways that seek to please you.

God, help me to know when to lead and when to follow.

God, help me to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

God, help me to know when to act and when to wait. Amen.

O God, Grant us creative patience

To persist until we see what the end may be.

Keep us from giving up just because the way is hard and uncertain.

Help us never to cease trying to get all people their fair share of our world’s concern because they are your children. Amen.