Finding Peace in the Storm
Mark 4: 35-5:1

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/ 24th June 2012

How many times have we heard this story? How many sermons have we heard preached on it? How many children first learned this story in church school? How many of us heard it as children, leaving impressions that still shape our hearing of it? We all have our own images in mind whenever we hear the story: what the boat looked like, its size, the number of sails it had, images of the Sea of Galilee, the waves, the terror and fear. It’s a story of high drama and suspense and considerable meaning.

What does the story really mean? There are many ways to approach this text. We could say it’s about having more faith. Or it’s about Jesus’ authority over nature. Like the exorcism and healing stories, it demonstrates that Jesus has power over forces in creation that are bent on chaos and destruction. It’s a miracle story. Sermons could be constructed around any of these themes.

I want to take a different approach informed by the scholarship of Ched Myers, who wrote one of the best commentaries on the gospel of Mark, Binding the Strong Man.¹ I want to ask a different set of questions: Why exactly does Jesus invite them on the journey in the first place, “to go across to the other side” (4:35)? Where is “the other side”? What’s there? And why is Jesus asleep on a cushion in the storm, as Mark tells us? What does Jesus know that the others don’t?

In Mark’s gospel there are six boat journeys across the Sea of Galilee. First off, we need to know that the Sea of Galilee is not really a sea. It’s an enormous lake that you can see across when it’s not too humid; thirteen miles long, eight miles across at its widest, thirty-three miles in circumference. And it’s beautiful.

I pray that I never forget the sight and the feeling I had when I first set eyes on that body of water, when I looked out and saw the contour of the hills all around it, knowing that this was the place where Jesus did his ministry, this is where he fished, that when he sailed across its waters he looked at the same topography. I was surprised how overcome with emotion I felt at that moment.

We also need to know that the boats Jesus sailed on, the fishing boats, were very small, with one sail. Archeologists unearthed a fishing vessel that dates from the first century, measuring about twenty-seven feet long and about eight feet wide.² Not very big. And even today the Sea of Galilee is known for having intense storms and wind squalls that appear as if from nowhere. The winds blow east from the Mediterranean, through the valleys, and hit the Sea of Galilee. I saw these storms moving across the lake several times. And when you remember how small the boats were, you, too, would be terrified out there over the deep.

Now, two of the six journeys recounted in Mark, this one and another one found
in chapter 6, are narrated at length and both describe difficult crossings. So we know they are important for Mark. If you put the texts side-by-side you will see that the structure, the plotline of the stories are almost exactly the same. And both stories are built around Jesus’ wish “to go across to the other side.” Here in chapter 4, we find that after Jesus rebukes winds and reduces the waves to a “dead calm,” after his rebuke of the disciples, they are filled with awe. Filled with awe, the text says, “they came to the other side” (5:1).

It’s easy to overlook Jesus’ initial words here in the story, in verse 35. We’re so focused on the storm and Jesus’ miracle. What we need to know, however, is that Mark, like the other gospel writers, is very intentional about the structure of the story and that he is immersed in a world of symbol and meaning. This means that there’s always a surface reading of the text and then there’s usually a deeper, symbolic meaning in the text. Mark’s gospel is rich this way. And nothing, no word or expression, is extraneous in the gospels. We have to pay attention to everything otherwise we will miss the meaning. Even geography is important.

“On that day,” Mark tells us. What day? What happened on that day? The day dawned at the beginning of chapter 4, “he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land” (4:1). And using the water as an amplification system, “He began to teach them many things in parables.” What follows is the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and others. When evening approaches, Jesus says to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And so obeying Jesus, they gathered their things and set sail.

So what’s on the other side of the Sea of Galilee? Gentiles. How do we know this? The text doesn’t explicitly say so, but we know. But we learn in chapter 5 that when they arrive “on the other side,” they arrive in the country of the Gerasenes. This is the place where Jesus heals the demoniac along the lakeshore, whose legion of demons he sends into the pigs and then the pigs jump off a cliff. Pigs. From the disciples’ perspective this is unclean territory. Gentile territory. That’s where Jesus wants to take them. And on the way, they face a storm. But that’s where Jesus wants to take them.

We have a stormy boat journey across the lake – one level of meaning. And we have a stormy boat journey across the lake from the land of the Jews to the land of the Gentiles – second level of meaning. And on the way across from Jew to Gentile lands they encounter a storm. Now try to put yourself for a moment in the sandals of the disciples on that boat: all Jews, ordinary men, fishermen, day laborers, uneducated, living in clearly defined societal roles, with certain outlooks, opinions, prejudices and perspectives, which include fear, if not downright loathing of the unclean, barbaric, godless Gentiles who live on the other side. That’s you as a Jew. You’re religious; yes, you want to follow God, you’re searching for a holier way to live, looking for justice, waiting for a Messiah to save you from the ruthless Romans occupying your homeland; life could be better, but you know you’re not like “them” across the sea, one of those
people, the unchosen people, a people without a promised land, without a covenant with God, without hope. The Gentile represents all the things you’re not; they’re all the things you fear and dislike, the Gentiles are foreign, alien. They are “the other side,” the “other side” of humanity. And that’s precisely where Jesus wants to take them.

These movements across the sea to Gentile territory are “symbolic transitions” in Mark’s gospel. They represent a journey from the known to the unknown, the foreign, the alien. They represent exactly the same kind of movement that the early Christians had to take and were wrestling with during Mark’s ministry: the integration of Gentiles into a Jewish world, the integration of Gentiles into the community of the crucified and risen Jew, who comes to save the world. This journey from known to unknown is intense, chaotic, violent, and stormy.

Ched Myers notes that both times Jesus calms the winds in Mark’s gospel the disciples are crossing from the Jewish side to the Gentile side, the storms don’t occur while crossing from the Gentile side back to the Jewish side. It’s as if the winds, stirring up the waves, are symbolic expressions of all the cultural and political forces unleashed in their world, trying to block, dissuade, prevent the crossing, oppose this journey, Jesus’ journey of social integration, the integration of Jew and Gentile, the healing of this social division that defined the Jewish world (not the Gentile world). It’s as if all the cosmic forces are conspiring and fighting against the crossing Jesus has in mind. And all the while, Jesus sleeps, on a cushion – and the disciples are freaking out!

Why are the disciples so afraid? Jesus says they should have more faith. That seems a little unfair. It’s not what we want to hear in such moments. Why were they so afraid in the storm and Jesus so content? I don’t think it’s because the disciples are mortals and Jesus is the Son of God. Maybe the storm was ferocious. Maybe it was scary. Maybe Jesus was so tired after a day of teaching and dealing with the crowds that he just wanted to be left alone, so tired he could sleep even through the storm. Maybe the disciples are not tired enough, for what have they been doing all day? Maybe they were unaware of the purpose. Sometimes we are able and maybe willing to weather a storm when we have a clear sense of the destination. If we don’t know where we’re going, it’s easy to be distracted by things (like the weather). Maybe the disciples felt abandoned, left to fend for themselves. Maybe that’s why they were fearful. They couldn’t trust in Jesus and so they took matters into their own hands. Or, maybe, just maybe, the storm that was going on “out there” mirrored the storm in their souls when they realized they were heading for Gentile territory and they became fearful about going there.

Maybe this is Mark’s message: Jesus is always trying to take us to the other side. And on the way there don’t be surprised if it gets stormy. On this journey don’t be surprised if the winds pick up and toss the boat around. Expect it, actually. Don’t be surprised if the cultural and social and even political forces that surround you want to block, dissuade, prevent, and oppose the Jesus journey in your life. As Jesus knew – and as we need to remember – people are not going to open wide their arms to welcome the
kingdom of God in your midst, the resistance in our souls and in our world against God’s desire and will is intense and real. While, as Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) said, the “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” – and by justice he means it bends toward healing, toward shalom, toward peace, toward wholeness, toward inclusion, toward reconciliation – the universe might bend in that direction (and I believe that it does because I trust the gospel) – there are considerable forces at work in our hearts and in the world (and sometimes even in the Church) that are hell-bent on trying to bend it the other way.

When the winds blow and the waves push us back and prevent us from getting where Jesus wants to take us and we become afraid, maybe we can take Jesus at his word and say, with his authority (which he gives to us): “Peace. Be still.” Even if we can’t change what’s stirring all around us we can find peace in the storm, like Jesus, and be still, knowing that while the furies rage all around us, we are still safe, safe because there is a still point at the heart of all things, which is maybe why Jesus can sleep. It is as T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) described it:

    At the still point of the turning world,....
    at the still point, there the dance is,....
    Except for the point, the still point,
    There would be no dance, and there is only the dance,....

The journey to the other side is the dance, it’s the moral arc of the universe, it’s the good news of the kingdom, that’s where we’re heading and Jesus will take us where we need to go to get there.

This is what I’m hoping the General Assembly will remember as it gathers this coming week in Pittsburgh, PA. The images in this text have been stirring around my head as I read about what’s facing the Assembly, what David Hutton will face as one of our elected commissioners from Baltimore Presbytery. What’s on the agenda? Living into the new ordination standards regarding gay and lesbian Christians called to ministry, which went into effect last July; should we divest from investment in Israel or is there another way to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians; should we have non-geographical presbyteries – this sounds innocuous, but it isn’t, it’s politically charged. The committee that will deal with this question is the one that David Hutton has been appointed to. And, finally, what will the Presbyterian Church say about same-gender marriage and will the General Assembly grant the freedom for ministers to officiate in states where it is currently legal. Without being overly dramatic, it does feel like a storm is brewing. I heard one person say this week that this is the most important Assembly since the American Civil War – when the Presbyterian Church split over the question of slavery. Churches have left and are leaving because of the ordination decision last year. Will more follow? Probably.

I trust that Jesus wants to take the Church and even the General Assembly where it needs to go. The winds obstructing that journey will be fierce, the waves intense, and people will be tempted to react in fear. But in faith, let us trust that Jesus has a plan;
Jesus wants to take us to the other side – wherever that may be. So expect a storm, but in the midst of it, may we know peace and be still; at the still point, may we find peace.

2 This find is known as the “Jesus Boat,” although there is no direct connection between it and Jesus. [http://www.jesusboatmuseum.com/](http://www.jesusboatmuseum.com/)
3 Myers, 195.
4 Myers, 197.
5 Myers, 197.
6 Myers, 196.