

THE GOSPEL OUTSIDE - STORM

Lent

Mark 4:35-41

A Sermon Preached by
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Mark 4:35-41¹

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in their boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace. Be still." Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?"

Pastor Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God
Be in our heads,
Be in our hearts,
Be in our understanding,
Be in the words heard and the words spoken. – Amen.

Whose voices will we follow: those who control the storm or those who control the boat? All week despite anything else going on in my life or the world, in reading and praying about this text I just kept getting stuck on the basic narrative, weird little problem in this small text. Because, as I know many of you know, I tend to think of these things. In my imagination I try to notice: Who are the characters? What would they do? Where are they?

And so what we know is Jesus is the son of a carpenter who has gone to the Sea of Galilee and whatever metaphors you want to enjoy about why he would gather fishermen, that most of his disciples are known as mariners, and they all get in. Let's see, that day when evening had come Jesus, son of a carpenter, says to them, "Let's go across to the other side." Okay. And leaving the crowds behind, they took him with them. They – the fisher people – took Jesus the carpenter with them in the boat just as he was, and other boats were with them.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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So you have a carpenter and a bunch of fisher people in a flotilla of boats going across the Sea of Galilee to do something, we don't know yet. And a storm comes. So I got to tell you, I am neither carpenter nor sailor, but if I'm in a small craft crossing the sea of Galilee and there's a storm, I know who I'm going to ask for help and it's *not* the carpenter.

I just couldn't get over this small fact: that in this story – who we've all presuming that the person we should wake up who should be there, who should be leading us – does not have any of the requirements for the job. And that often leads me to think about leadership in general and who we think of. Who you put your pulpit? I don't know! Who are we looking to? Because most of the time, whether elected or born to leadership, our leaders are described as having the *mostest* of whatever the dominant traits of the group are. The dominant traits that we somehow as a whole group have kinda decided this is really what humanity looks like and you have the most of it. If you are the most British, you must be royalty, right! You are ... If you're gonna be a leader what we have all sorts of requirements that if you're a part of this group that part of being in leadership is having the qualities of those you lead *plus ten*. If you're a CFO of a bank, you probably have a background in banking. Right? If you're to be a judge, you've probably studied the law. So even if we look at these, the merit-based, we usually try to find someone that reflects the values or at least the description of who we think we are.

Now this gets a little skewed if we don't take into account that those in leadership or those in power are also constantly mirroring and trying to tell us who we are. For example, even in these ancient texts one of the primary reasons you aren't going to hear too many women leaders is because in ancient biological thinking the most complete human was male, that women were simply not done growing or somehow different in vessel. But the real true human is male and so sometimes, sometimes in the narrative, if you are really going to understand how powerful woman is, in the narrative she actually becomes a man. It's not because ... It's not because she grew penis. Okay? It's because in that ancient construct for you to understand that person in leadership you could only understand that as male.

So it's not strange; it's been going on for thousands and thousands of years, that most of our leaders are reflecting a culture that understands that our dominant values reflect that your taller, your most male – which means that you are cysgendered which means you were born male. You didn't become male through an ancient leadership thing or through surgery or something. You are born male. You are able-bodied. You're healthy. You have the fairest skin. You're not too old. And you're not too young. And you have wealth. It reflects a lot of how our society is structured already. To celebrate those traits as the mostest. And we're at this point somewhat hardwired to follow that. It both reflects our understanding of the status quo and it maintains it.

It means that if we're in a boat, we're going to follow the sailors. We're to follow the captain. We're going to follow the *captain-est* captain with the biggest voice who seems to project that even if the boat goes down, he could buy us a new boat, and it will tell us that we are all okay. It doesn't tell us ... It doesn't tell us to follow a poor carpenter who came just as he was, assuming he didn't even have the tools to fix the boat if it were broken. When a group decides to follow a leader who does not reflect the most dominant traits, it *says* something. It says something about how that group is beginning to understand what does have power *or* how and who they think they really are. At the very least a group electing someone that is outside of these dominant traits is saying I have recognized a broader picture of what it means to be human, to be strong, to be worthy.

So when I read the Scripture I [was] overwhelmed with its contradictions.

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I'm reminded as Jesus is sleeping at the bottom of the boat of the story of Jonah, of another story of another unexpected traveler in a boat, who no one expected to talk to, to ask anything about, and in the moment of the storm that everyone turned to the unexpected sleeping person at the bottom of the boat and say, "Aren't you going to do something? *Wake up!*" Just as in that story of Jonah, when all sailing skills fail, it's everyone's job to pray. And suddenly the dynamics of who has the most of what we need changes. Because we don't need the best sailor, we need the best *prayer!* And if there's anything my Christian faith has taught me it's that we follow a God who speaks not through the most dominant voice, not through the largest whitest most heterosexual cysgendered able-bodied man – not to say that God is not above using heterosexual cysgendered able-bodied white men. God will use whatever tools are available. It's just that those characteristics don't make you special to God. We follow a God that responds to those who call most clearly and plainly for love and justice. We follow a God who listens and speaks to a Jewish carpenter on a boat full of fishermen headed to the other side.

And the Gospel lesson this morning reminds me – reminds us all – that we have a long-standing biblical mandate to listen to and follow non-dominant voices.

Hang with me now.

There are also those who hear in this text an allegory for the Church – I would argue for any government or institution – that the boat – the *boat* – represents the church trying to go out in the world – not an individual congregation. We're talking the Church like the big institutional Church that is bigger than just United Church of Christ or University Congregational. It's about this institution we call Church. Somehow going out into the world and trying to get to the other side, encountering storms – storms of anxiety and poverty and hate and injustice that could swamp it from stem to stern. And now the disciples in the storm know that what they need most is not the best sailor of the boat but *anybody* willing to pray. When Jesus calms the storm, he reminds us that for all our sailing skills they are *sailing* skills that handle the *boat*. If we need to talk to the *wind*, we need to talk to God. When Jesus calms the *storm*, he reminds us that all our institutional political and social skills and power are to work the boat and the system. And if we need to talk to the storm, to the pain, to the passion of humanity, we need to be talking to God.

Because what if one of these boats we're in aren't just the church. What if the boats are in all the institutions that are supposed to hold us and protect us from the storm? They're supposed to be a shelter. They're supposed to be able to pilot us through rough seas and get us to the other side. What if the skills we need are not the ones to handle the boat anymore but the ones who have nothing to offer but their connection to God, their call for justice, their willingness to love those on the other side? What if ... What if in the sea of swamped boats and desperate sailors, what we really need are young carpenters.

In the story of Jonah, the story this gospel – pericope² – this little, this *little* piece is meant to remind you of: Jonah calms the storm by having himself thrown in the water. It would be far too distracting in the Gospel of Mark for the gospel writers to have Jesus dive in the water, calm the seas for everyone else, fortell his resurrection by miraculously meeting them on the other side after three days of being regurgitated via fish – so they don't. They just let you think of it for a moment and they

² A pericope (/pəˈrɪkəpiː/; Greek περικοπή, "a cutting-out") in rhetoric is a set of verses that forms one coherent unit or thought, suitable for public reading from a text, now usually of sacred scripture. Definition accessed 5/9/2018 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericope>

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leave that part to the book of Jonah. But it is possible that this Gospel story is trying to remind us that it's *not* the boat that saves us. That it's *not* the storm that was the danger, but the *not* listening to God, the *not* preaching justice, the *not* responding to God's call that is the danger.

We are witnessing a storm raging all around us. Its waves crash upon the boats of the church, of our schools, of our government, the very patterns of modern civic life, that we were taught would hold us and protect us from the storm. The captains of these boats have long histories of sailing. In their knowledge, too, of how to wield the boat, they have deluded themselves into thinking that they control the seas. They do not. *God* controls the seas.

And God is listening and speaking through other voices, through non-dominant voices, through younger voices. *Yes?* Through older voices, through voices of people of color, through voices of transgendered and non-binary gendered people, through the voices of those whose voice speaks with their hands or through text-to-speech synthesizers, through same-sex loving people, through unrecognized citizens in every language and body.

For far too many years systems and institutions of white male supremacy have been a pyramid scheme of power that has robbed us *all* of our humanity and our connection to God. These systems of violence and weapons of violence have wreaked havoc in the name of protecting the very institutions that were meant to protect *us* from the storms, both literal, as in hurricanes that have ravaged the shores, and the ones of our own making: of poverty, of the continuing lack of power and water in Puerto Rico or Flint, Michigan. For too many years the cries of the poor and the vulnerable have been met by those in institutional power saying, "You're not strong enough to withstand the storm." And this past month ... In these past years, in tweet after tweet, in news story after punchline, I have heard those with *no* institutional power saying, "I am the storm." God asks us whose voices will we follow: those: who control the boats or those who speak to the storm?

We are sinking, Lord!
The boat is taking water, going down.
Part the water, Lord!
Lord we long to plant our feet on solid ground.
Oh, Lord of earth and sky and sea
 your hand is reaching out to me
We know that you have heard our plea.
Our hope is sure.
We are secure.

– Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/05/03/2018