



Bobbing Boat, or Cosmic Crossing?

Fifth Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 23, 2024

Mark 4:35-41

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Does familiarity breed contempt? Never, when it comes to Holy Scripture, but familiarity can flatten an earthshaking story into a sweet two-dimensional picture. Can we learn to listen attentively and creatively?

For example, can we receive Noah and the rainbow not as winsome scene of happy animals but a desperate move by God to rescue humankind by killing off almost every living thing on the planet? Or baby Moses not as a tender rescue but a blatant rebuke of Pharaoh's order by his own daughter, possibly risking death for her and the baby? Or Jesus' response to Zacchaeus in the tree not as a friendly dinner invitation but an upheaval of the entire social order in full public view?

And what of today's Gospel? Do we have a bobbing boat making its way across a lake, or a cosmic crossing that calls us out of our comfort zone into an entirely new way of living in the world?

It's fitting that we are in Year B of the lectionary cycle, because Mark is who we need in these tumultuous times. As the earliest of the four gospels, Mark's call is the most urgent in summoning the early Christian community to radical discipleship. He focuses with laser sharpness on God's work of compassion and justice as a call for liberation from the oppressive systems of the Roman Empire, with which the Jewish temple leaders are complicit.

Today we find ourselves at a crucial transition point in Mark. Until now, Jesus has provided lessons on inclusivity and compassion, breaking through barriers of division for the sake of human solidarity: The healing of the paralytic. The man with the withered hand. The parable of the sower. The lamp under the bushel basket.

Now we move into the reality of cosmic transformation that defines the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, which we are called to help bring about.

This shift is signaled by a dangerous crossing of the Sea of Galilee. But Jesus is not just going across a lake – he is taking his mission from Jewish to Gentile territory, from the known to the unknown, from established laws and customs into a culture where none of those apply. He is bridging the chasm between those that the Torah recognizes as God's children, and all those God's kingdom actually welcomes, meaning everyone, with Gentiles representing the rest of the world.

What is always our reaction when faced with the unknown? Fear. It is signaled here by the great storm, which is likely not an exaggeration. Situations like the one Mark describes are well known on the Sea of Galilee. Especially in the evening, warm, moist air from water rises while cooler air from the hills rapidly descends, creating high winds on the lake's surface. The Sea of Galilee is also shallow, with a maximum depth of 250 feet, which means that high wind speeds produce larger waves.

And this was no cruise ship but a typically small Galilean fishing boat, built of cedar planks, with one mast and four places for rowers. It's no wonder then that the disciples cry out, "Teacher, is it not a concern to you that we are about to die?"

The issue for us in this story is fear – not only fear of the storm itself and whether we will survive, but fear of where it will take us.

Notice though, in Mark, that the great calm that descends had no immediate effect on the disciples' fear. They were apparently still shaking in terror. After the calm descended, Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid?" (present tense) But his next question is the defining one: "Have you YET no faith?"

So here we are in the disciples' wet sandals, faced with two opposite worlds. Which do we choose to inhabit? The one ruled by fear and chaos in which we feel God has abandoned us? Or the one in which we embrace the kingdom of God that has come into our midst through Jesus, into whose hands we place all our trust, and which promises new life through a radical new way of living?

The line between these two worlds is thin and risky. Do we cling to our old isolation, captive to sin, unable to free ourselves, feeling lost, angry and hopeless in the face of world events that we are unable to control? Or do we take all our chips and place them on Jesus, thereby staking our earthly lives on his promise of resurrection life – not only life into the eternal future but right here and right now, the fullness of life in which we are freed from the power of sin and can live confidently into God's future for the cosmos?

Why can't we receive Jesus' invitation, "Let us go across to the other side," and just do it? Because it's human nature to stay where we are, to play it safe, even when doing nothing becomes unbearable. We'd rather ignore the desperate need for change than make it happen. So we sit. And wait. And think it over. "I need to think about it" is one of our best excuse for doing nothing.

The problem is that Jesus is asking, no, commanding us to make the crossing. He doesn't want us staying on one side of the lake for too long. He is calling us to go where the kingdom can be proclaimed and where we can be part of that proclamation. No one said it would be easy. No one said it would be without challenges. But Jesus is calling us.

In today's Gospel it meant a terrifying storm, and then a great calm, and then fear that persisted as the disciples throw themselves at Jesus' feet still in the midst of their fear – by the way, the same fear that the shepherds felt in Luke 2 at the announcement of Jesus' birth – as the disciples exclaim here, "Who IS this, then, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

And we must trust Jesus not knowing exactly how it will go. What if the disciples had first demanded to know what was on the other side, and Jesus had told them that the moment they stepped onto land they would run into a howling, demon-crazed person who broke chains, threw stones and ran day and night among the tombs? They would have said, "Uh, no, maybe next time."

Imagine that you were one of these who had decided to stay home and think it over. You would have missed the first great cosmic upheaval of the inbreaking of God's kingdom, when the demons rushed into two thousand pigs who then plunged themselves into the very lake you had just stepped out of, while the former demoniac runs off to become the first disciple to the Gentiles, amazing everyone he meets with his testimony. Would you want to have missed that?

I'm not going to say exactly what this means for Grace Lutheran Church, but the time for thinking it over is rapidly drawing to a close. Jesus is calling us into new life and a new way of living that is more vigorously engaged with our community, a way that enables us to walk alongside those who need to experience the light and life and love that Jesus brings.

Yes, it's easier to stay home and do as little as possible. But this is Jesus calling us, he who FOR US makes the greatest crossing of all, from mortal life through death into resurrection life. Each of you has heard his voice or you wouldn't be here today. He is our precious Lord. He has it all in hand, just as God thundered to Job today that he did. So listen to this call and let's just get into the boat.

Amen.