

WORSHIP

Sermon | 6.24.2018



Sea, Storm, Ship

By the Reverend Chuck Williamson

Mark 4:35-41

As I said, we are building our worship service around this passage in the gospel of Mark which tells of Jesus's stilling the storm. So you might think of today's worship service as something like a Bible study.

And here's the approach I would like for us to take. You know how it is that sometimes you look at a work of art—a painting or a poem or a classic novel—and you see or hear one thing. But then if you come back to it again later, you see or hear something brand new, something you didn't even notice before. I think the Bible is like that—like a work of art. The reason we read the Bible over and over again is that the Holy Spirit is constantly opening up new truths to us.

So for today, I want to propose that we take a several runs at this passage to see what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us today. I'm suggesting that there are three elements of this story that will make up the framework for our worship today: the sea...the storm...the ship. (I know it's really just a boat, but I wanted something that started with "s" to keep up the alliteration.) So: sea...storm...ship.

Part 1: The SEA

We start with the sea. The setting for this story is the Sea of Galilee. I don't know what you picture in your mind's eye when you think about the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps you think of it as a vast body of water, perhaps like the Mediterranean or the Atlantic Ocean, a huge expanse of water. But that's not quite accurate. Calling the Sea of Galilee a sea is something of a misnomer. It's really a fresh water lake, not much bigger in area than Lake Norman. But Mark, gospel writer, calls it a sea, and he does that for a reason. Mark wanted to plant in the minds of his readers a particular image. He knew that his readers were familiar with the Old Testament, and for them the "sea" was a metaphor that pointed to the awesome power of God.



For example, in the story of creation in chapter 1 of Genesis, we are told that before God spoke that creative word, “the earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep”, that is, the sea. And it was that watery chaos—the sea—that God, the Creator, put in order.

But that’s not the only time in the Old Testament that the sea points to the awesome power of God. Can you think of other Old Testament stories where “the sea” plays an important part? There’s the Exodus story, when the people of Israel were making their escape from slavery in Egypt. Moses was leading the Hebrew people with pharaoh’s mighty army in hot pursuit. They found themselves at the banks of the Red Sea. There they were: trapped between the most powerful human force—pharaoh’s army—and a natural power over which they had no control—the Red Sea. They were trapped. That was when God demonstrated God’s power over creation by rolling back the waters of the sea so that the Israelites could walk through on dry land.

So for those who are familiar with the Old Testament, the sea is a metaphor that calls to mind the awesome creative power of God.

But for those familiar with the Old Testament, water is not only a metaphor for God’s power; it was also a symbol of God’s grace. There was the time on their wilderness wanderings when the Hebrew people were thirsty and called out to God, beseeching God to help them. So what did God do? God caused water to gush forth out of a rock.

Or the 23rd Psalm says that God, our Shepherd, leads us beside still waters and restores our soul.

The sea, water, points to the power and the grace of God. That’s why water is the visible element in the sacrament of baptism.

Part 2: The STORM

Ok, that’s one look at this passage. Now let’s turn it a little bit and let the light hit it from a different angle. Part 2: the storm.

So there they were out on the Sea of Galilee when a sudden storm blew up. It must have been quite a storm for them to get so scared. After all, these were seasoned fishermen; they’d been out there before when the sea got rough, and they knew the signs of a dangerous storm. The waves started lapping over the sides of the boat; the boat was being tossed around. No wonder they were getting scared.

And through it all Jesus was sound asleep in the back of the boat.

The terrified disciples wake up Jesus, say, “Don’t you care that we’re about to die?” Jesus wipes the sleep from his eyes, looks at the storm, tells the wind and waves to be still, then turns to the disciples and says, “Where is your faith?”



Here again Mark, the gospel writer, is using the storm as a metaphor. This is not just about an isolated storm that blew up on the Sea of Galilee many years ago; this is about life's storms. Mark's readers understood that; so do we.

I have heard sermons on this scripture passage that say something along the lines that the point of this story is that if you just have faith in Jesus, you won't have any storms in your life. Or if you have faith in Jesus, all your life's storms will just miraculously go away. But frankly I don't buy that.

Storms happen—even to people of faith.

One person who certainly knew about the storms that arise in our lives was Horatio Spafford. Mr. Spafford was a man of faith, a devout Christian. He was a successful attorney in Chicago, and he had invested heavily in Chicago real estate. But when, on October 8, 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern that ignited the Great Chicago Fire, most of Mr. Spafford's real estate holdings went up in smoke.

As you would expect, it was a terrible loss for their family.

So Mr. Spafford decided that to help rebuild the family's spirits, they would take a family trip to England. So in November of 1873, the family boarded the French ocean liner, *Ville du Havre*, to sail to England. However, at the last minute Mr. Spafford was called back to Chicago to deal with a business matter, and he told his wife and four daughters to go ahead, and that he would join them in a few days.

With 313 people on board, the *Ville du Havre* set sail. Four days into the crossing, it collided with another ship, and in less than 12 minutes she sank. 222 of the passengers drowned, including all four of the Spafford daughters. Miraculously, Mrs. Spafford survived. When she was safely on the other side, she sent a cable to her husband that said, "Survived alone."

Mr. Spafford hurried to join her. The captain of the ship on which he was sailing was aware of the tragedy that he had experienced, and when they got to the approximate place where the *Ville du Havre* had gone down, the captain called Mr. Spafford to the bridge and told him that this was the place. Almost immediately, Mr. Spafford returned to his stateroom and wrote the words to the hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." The tune name, by the way, is *Ville du Havre*, the name of the ship that sank.

No, the point of this story is not that Christians will be spared from the storms of life. The promise of this story is that Jesus is with us through the storms.

I was talking to a friend about this "stilling the storm" story, and he told me that he imagines that when the disciples woke Jesus up from his deep sleep, Jesus might have been



just a little testy. He probably said something like, “Look, why are you afraid? I’m with you. We’re here in the boat together. There is nothing to fear.”

One of my favorite passages is from Isaiah 43, where the prophet gives this promise from God:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”

The promise is not that we will never have any storms. The promise is that whatever the storm may be, Jesus is with us. And therefore we do not need to be afraid.

Part 3: The BOAT

Let’s look at this passage one more time. We’ve come to part 3: the boat.

By the time that Mark wrote his gospel, some 35 or 40 years had elapsed since the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In those 40 years, a lot had been happening: the disciples had been telling the story of Jesus; the apostle Paul had been traveling all over that part of the world planting churches here and there. The church was beginning to grow. And one of the images that was frequently used to describe what the church is like was a boat. Through the centuries, that image has stuck.

In one of the stained glass windows in our chapel, there’s a depiction of a wooden boat. Around it is the Greek word *Oikumene* which means “ecumenical”—the world-wide body of Christ, the church.

In fact, that symbol is found right here. This room where we are sitting is called the nave, which comes from the same root word as “navy”, and the wooden beams and ceiling are meant to call to our minds the hull of a ship.

I think that when Mark talks about a boat, he wants his hearers to think about the church.

And I want us to take a few moments and think about what life in this boat is like. I know this is a little irregular, but I don’t want to be up here, I want to be down there in the boat with you.

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he said, “Love God; love your neighbor.” This boat is a place where love of God and love of neighbor are practiced. I don’t think those are two separate things, but two dimensions of the same thing. In 1 John,



the writer asks, “How can you say you love God whom you have not seen, if you do not love your brother and sister whom you have seen?” It’s clear that one way we show love for God is by showing love for one another.

But here’s the rub: I know you; you know me. I know that you are a bunch of sinners; you know that I am a sinner. And loving one another can sometimes be something of a challenge. And yet we are the people that God has brought together to travel along in this boat that is First Presbyterian Church. You might even say that this boat is something of a laboratory where love for one another—even a bunch of sinners—is practiced and learned.

And how do we go about that—learning to love one another? I think the first thing we need to do is to look at each other, really look at one another. Most Sundays we begin our worship time with an opportunity to greet one another and say hello. I know some people don’t especially like that time—it can be somewhat chaotic, and sometimes it doesn’t seem very worshipful. But it has a purpose: it’s a chance for us to look at each other, to see the people with whom we are sharing our boat.

I didn’t give you that opportunity this morning, so instead, I have an assignment for you. When our service ends, don’t rush to your car, but hang around for a little while. That’s what Lemonade on the Lawn is about—an opportunity to spend some time talking to your fellow shipmates.

You know that there’s a line in the book of Exodus when God is describing the chosen people, the Hebrews. And God calls them a “peculiar treasure” (Exodus 19:5). I love that description of God’s people. The word “peculiar”, of course, can have a couple of meanings. It can mean “particular”, “unique”, “special”. But it can also mean “odd”, “unusual”. And I think both meanings apply when we are talking about God’s chosen people. We are unique, special, a treasure in God’s eyes, but we are also be kinda weird, strange, odd, peculiar. And yet God has brought this particular, this peculiar, group of people together, and this is the group God calls us to love.

But there’s one more thing. It may seem that if we can just learn how to love those who are sharing this First Presbyterian boat with us, then we’ve done all that God expects of us. But it’s bigger than that.

Ever since I knew I would be preaching on this passage, I’ve read it over and over again. And every time I read it, there’s one line that always jumps out at me. It’s at the beginning when they were pushing out to sea, Mark tells us “other boats were with him.” I think Mark wants us his readers to look around and see the other boats that are a part of the larger flotilla that belongs to Jesus...to pay attention to these other boats. Our little FPC boat is not the only boat on the sea; there are other boats—Baptist boats and Methodist boats and



Roman Catholic boats, conservative boats and liberal boats...and Jewish boats and Muslim boats and Buddhist boats...and even atheist boats—all filled with people who are loved by God and all filled with people whom we are called to love.

So here's your second assignment. As you go through the rest of this day and into the week ahead, when you find yourself interacting with another person—a family member, a co-worker, even the complete stranger—look that person in the eye and say to yourself, “This person is a child of God, made in the image of God, loved by God. And this is a person that God wants me to love.”

