

Rev. Sarah SJ Guck

June 24, 2018

5 Pentecost

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

In 1986, the hull of a fishing boat was excavated from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Carbon dating shows that it was from Jesus' time. The boat was 26.9 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 3.9 feet high—with a small deck at the front and back - and would have held approximately 15 persons—four of them rowing. Presumably, it is in a boat very much like this that Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee—Jesus taking shelter under the stern deck. (<https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-435-41/>)

The Sea of Galilee looks like a large lake on a map, but in a boat would have seemed enormous. It is in the deepest part of the Northern Jordan rift—700 feet below sea level—surrounded by steep cliffs and mountains except in its southern extremities. As we remember from science, hot air rises and cool air falls, so the cool air in the higher elevations is always wanting to swap places with the warmer air near the water. This often results in high winds—and waves that can top thirty feet (Lockyer, 402).

In the Gospel story today at least some of the passengers in the boat with Jesus would have been experienced fisherman and likely endured storms, but this one was a "great gale". A boat staying afloat, or sinking, is a matter of physics. If a boat heads into a wave that is higher than the boat is long – very possible in this scenario – then the boat will be pitched forward and sink. Or if a wave hits the side of the boat that is higher than the boat, the boat will capsize.

³⁷"A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped."

Here they are – at least ankle deep in water – and there is Jesus, asleep. Because Jesus has such faith? Or is just that exhausted? We don't really know. But we do know that the others in the boat believed that it was because Jesus didn't care enough to save them. So they wake him up – "Teacher!" they cry to him (not, as one commentary pointed out "Lord!" but "Teacher." I would think in that moment they wanted the power of Jesus as their Lord, not so much his knowledge.)

And as we know, Jesus woke up, "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm."

Whew. "Dead calm." I imagine the sudden silence, the noise of the waves and the wind suddenly gone. The disciples able to sit without holding on, stand up, even, and balance. The boat quiet, steady, the sloshing in the bottom of the boat still. Suddenly being able to take a deep breath again. The incredible relief, and then fatigue, that comes when the adrenalin rush is suddenly over.

Ah, the calm after the storm.

And what does Jesus say – “Why are you afraid?”

He *doesn't* say “Why *were* you afraid?” He asks them “Why *are* you afraid?”, implying that, even after the storm, the disciples are afraid. After the worst was over their knees are still knocking with fear. They are in the midst of peace and quiet, and staring at Jesus, who is staring at them, nothing between them, no raging storm, no imminent threat or danger, and they are afraid.

On Wednesday evenings we have a contemplative prayer group that meets in Henderson hall for an hour. We start with 20 minutes of reading, then 20 minutes of sitting in Centering Prayer (the conduit to contemplative prayer) then 20 minutes of sharing and listening.

Thomas Keating, one of the great teachers and writers about Centering Prayer, explains it this way “Centering Prayer is a method of silent prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of contemplative prayer, prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship.”

Centering Prayer is not prayer with words, but rather an awareness of entering into a time with God. When we enter into contemplative prayer we are sitting with, in, God. There are no thoughts, explanations, requests, thanksgivings, or any other words that get between us. We are just sitting with God. Empty.

Vulnerable.

The hardest part of Centering Prayer for me, and many others, is stopping the chattering in my head – even for a second. The “monkey mind” that Buddhists refer to – jumping from one thought to another, making a plan, rehearsing what you are going to say, reviewing what you said or did – busy, busy, busy.

Usually it goes something like this: Okay, I am sitting. Quietly. So quietly. I hope I turned my phone off. Last time I forgot to and I got a text. So embarrassing. I wonder if the others remember it. Sure they do. I interrupted their time in silence. I shouldn't be thinking of others experiences. What am I doing? Get quiet. Quiet mind. Sacred word. Why is it “sacred”? What did I learn in seminary about “sacred” – everything and anything can be sacred. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich can be sacred. There is a sermon there. What should I feed the boys for dinner?

And so on...

Until you experiencing the moment of absolute ... nothing. Just being. Not thinking, or doing. Just being. And in that moment I sit with God. There is no “experience” I can describe because there does not seem to be a time or beginning or end. There is just a most delicious moment of being one with the Trinity – of having nothing between God and myself. No walls, no boundaries. I exist with God, and in God. In that moment I am totally, safe, comfortable and vulnerable.

Last week when I sat with the group I had a moment after the singing bell was rung to signal the start of our silent prayer time – I thought, “Wait – no. Hold on!” I caught my breath and held myself back. Because experiencing God directly is a little scary. You are totally vulnerable. There is nothing that stands between you and everything pure.

“Why are you afraid?” said Jesus to the disciples. The tempest had passed. They had nothing distracting them. They were safe and in the presence of Jesus. Of all that is pure and good.

“Why are you afraid?”

I wonder how much of my staying busy, noisy, always with a list of things to do is actually a way of keeping me distant from that vulnerability. It makes no sense, I know. But look at how many of us live our lives. Schedules, tasks, meetings, movies, music – noise. Lots of noise.

So imagine being a disciple in the boat with Jesus. In the silence after the storm. No noise – no storm. Just face to face with God.

Of course they were scared to death. But maybe that’s why Jesus did it – maybe it was the beginning of something new for them. Maybe in their vulnerability they were also scared to life.

Lockyer, Herbert, Sr., *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986)