

“The Church as...a Boat on the Stormy Sea”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 21, 2009

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Father’s Day

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 4:35-41

There is a work by Rembrandt which hangs in a Boston museum entitled: “Christ and the Storm.” In the painting, the boat carrying Jesus and the disciples is being pitched forward by the waves. Jesus lies at the bottom with his eyes closed while the disciples tend to various tasks to counter the storm. Some are pulling on ropes attached to the sail; another is holding onto the rudder. Two have their heads down, praying; one is leaning over Jesus – apparently trying to awaken him – while one poor soul looks to be leaning over the edge, losing his lunch – a nice touch to make the portrait seem all the more realistic.

These are all natural, understandable, human reactions to being on a boat during a storm. Some work hard to keep it afloat, while others pray for divine intervention; some call out for help, others get queasy from all the ups and downs. All of the reactions are natural except, of course, for that of Jesus, who is asleep in the midst of the storm. He, after all, had been the one to suggest a night passage across the Sea of Galilee – why not just wait for the next day? He was the one determined to leave the Galilean crowds that adored him and go instead to more hostile territory on the other side of the Sea – why not just stay among those who had already accepted him?

The image of the church as being like a boat journeying across sometimes stormy waters is one that resonates with us. We know that God is with us through Christ, and yet it sometimes feels like our cries for help are not being heard. We all stay busy doing the things that a church ought to be doing – protecting others, preserving the ship, praying, looking for guidance – but it still sometimes doesn’t seem like it’s enough to really make a difference. We know that God has called us to be in the boat: it offers us a place for rest and fellowship and worship; and yet, we wonder, why this particular boat? Might there be others that don’t require so much maintenance, or that have more hands on deck, or that seem to never veer off course because their direction is so certain?

“Many are the metaphors for our life journey – the perils of life passages, the profound vulnerability of the craft the bears us on our way, and our longing for One who can calm both us and the storm.”¹ This story reminds us both of the great comfort that we have by knowing that Jesus is in the boat with us, but also the great challenge that we have in realizing that the storms in life will continue.

¹ Michael Lindvall in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

The storms are real. It sometimes makes us sick. It sometimes even causes us to look for someone to blame. But, sometimes, it creates in us a sense of awe: a mysterious feeling of peace – a great calming of our souls – because power of God is with us and the love of God is alive among us.

This story of Jesus calming the storm might already be familiar to you, as it is told almost verbatim in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But, I would like to look at a few of the story's details and wonder aloud what these might be saying for the life of the church.

The first is a side comment in the story that caused me to think. It says that the disciples took Jesus on the boat with them, "just as he was." The simplest explanation for this detail might be that Jesus did not stop to change clothes or gather any belongings before setting out. That would certainly be in character with the man who would later charge his disciples to travel to new towns without food, without money, and without a change of clothes. But, I wonder if there is another meaning here. Could it mean that when the disciples took Jesus aboard, they did it with some understanding that he was somehow both human and divine; that his powers were beyond them, and yet that he needed to eat and sleep and be cared for just like anyone else? Could it mean that they brought him aboard knowing that he was a carpenter by trade, not a sailor, which meant they would be responsible for the safe passage of the boat? Responsible, that is, to a point – to the point that their human ability would allow – but that they still needed to have trust that his directions were sound; and that he would not let them the boat sink.

The second detail that made me wonder was the comment about the other boats that were with them. In my memory of this story – as well as Rembrandt's painting – no other ship is on the Sea that night. Jesus is out on the boat with his disciples and they are the ones endangered by the stormy sea. Of course, in the darkness of the night, no other boat may have been in sight; the others may have drifted away in the storm. But, when the disciples awaken Jesus, they ask him "do you not care that we are perishing?" I have a hunch that, in saying this, the disciples were not thinking about the people in the other boats, but primarily of themselves. If you've ever been caught sailing in a storm, as I was once in the Caribbean, your thoughts likely are not about all the other boats that might be affected by the storm; you're thinking about your own survival.

But there were other boats out on the sea that night. Could Jesus have been with them as well? Were the passengers on those boats also working the sails and praying and feeling sick to their stomachs? Somehow, we believe, Jesus is present with us and also present with others who encounter stormy seas. He is not with us more or less depending on the severity of the waves that crash upon us as individuals or as families or as any particular church. As Immanuel, God with us,

Christ is ever-present in our lives, calming us and calming the storms, and still not absent from others. The mystery of God's love is that God favors us while not favoring anyone above anyone else. God loves us all, even those in the ships that we cannot see, and even when – in the midst of the storm – we are able only think about our own survival.

The third detail about this story that causes me to wonder relates to the two questions that Jesus poses to his disciples after the storm has been calmed. He asks them, “Why are you still afraid?” and “Have you still no faith?” Jesus never says to the disciples that there is nothing to be afraid of. He knew that if the water kept coming into the boat and the waves kept crashing down, they would indeed drown. But, now the storm had passed. By the word of Jesus, a “great storm” – which had created in the disciples a “great fear” – had been transformed into a “great calm.”

After the storm had passed, why were the disciples still afraid? Why did they still have no faith? This may seem like a harsh accusation given the traumatic events which had just come to pass. After all, the disciples had agreed to set sail with Jesus, possibly despite their better judgment. They had left behind their previous lives to become his disciples, not knowing exactly where it would lead them. They had agreed to embark on this particular journey to an unknown destination, unsure about what kind of reception lay ahead for them on the other side of the sea. Surely, this required within them at least some measure of faith. And now, Jesus seems to be telling them that, in terms of faith, they had none.

I wonder if, instead of being an accusation, Jesus' questions to the disciples were meant instead to be an encouragement. “With a simple command, Jesus ordered the wind and the rain to stop, and they did. All of a sudden, there was peace and calm, something that the disciples didn't imagine that they would live to see again.”² The disciples had awoken Jesus because they thought that he could help them. It's just that they didn't realize that he was able to help them that much.

We all experience fear. Sometimes that fear can be helpful: it causes us to react without having to think, it keeps us safe, it gets us through difficult times. But, at times, our fear can be so overpowering that it lingers with us like residue. We experience post-traumatic stress. We need time for healing. We react in as many different ways as the disciples on the boat: some of us look for someone else to blame, some bury ourselves in our work, some pray looking for answers, others of us are just plain sick.

² C. Edward Bowen, “We're All in the Same Boat” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2003.

But, Jesus' question to his disciples is, "why are you still afraid?" He has proven to be their life preserver, their protector, the deliverer of peace, their anchor in the storm. As individual disciples, and as a church, we have asked Jesus to come on board, "just as he was." We have asked him to be the Lord of our lives, the head of the church, and to protect us through the storms of life. In doing so, we acknowledge that our life's journey will be like that of a boat on the sea. Sometimes, the wind and the waves will crash down upon us and toss us around. But, later on, the storms will subside and the waters will once again be calm.

So, what do we do: what do you as an individual do and what are we as a church to do? Shall we continue to be fearful because another storm might be coming, or do we take heart in the knowledge that Jesus was with us through the storm and that he will be with us always?

"Then they were glad because they had quiet," we read in this morning's psalm, "and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders."
(Psalm 117:30-32)

And so, let us continue – as the disciples did – to work to preserve the boat and the life of its passengers; let us pray and call upon Jesus to come to our aid; and let us even be sickened at times by the storms that come upon us; but let us also remember that Christ is always with us; that Christ can sympathize with all of our fears; and let us have faith that we will be carried through the storms of life and into a greater love for God and for one another, into the safe haven of peace that awaits us according to God's promise. AMEN.