

Sermon for June 20 2021 *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

Storms can come up quickly on the Sea of Galilee.
Actually it's more of a lake than a sea --
it's other name is **Lake** Chinnereth.
When Daniel and I were at the Sea of Galilee,
it reminded us both of Rice Lake.
Storms can come up quickly on Rice Lake,
and storms can come up quickly on the Sea of Galilee.
One minute it's calm; and the next,
the wind is blowing, the waves are heaving,
and hearts are pounding.

That's what it's like for the disciples,
that evening, in the boat.
Jesus has finished a full day of teaching
and he suggests they cross over to the other side.
When Jesus tells his disciples he wants to cross over to the 'other side'
he's not talking about crossing from Gore's Landing to Keene.
He's talking about crossing the Sea of Galilee to the other side --
and the other side is Gentile Territory.
Jesus was always crossing boundaries that most people were afraid to cross.
Thus far in the Gospel, Jesus' ministry has been confined to
Galilee on the Western side of the Sea of Galilee.
Now he decides to venture to the other side of the sea
the eastern side
to the land of pagans and his people's enemies.

And so they set out. At first all is well.
And then the storm hits.
This is no small event -- it's a violent squall.
The boat immediately begins to fill with water.
The disciples are seasoned fishermen, they know storms,
and they're afraid.
Their hearts are pounding, they're so afraid
and they're amazed to find Jesus asleep -- on the cushion!
I personally love that detail -- that he's asleep on the cushion.
This story of the calming of the Sea is in all 3 synoptic gospels,
Matthew, Mark and Luke.
Mark's gospel was the first one written;
Matthew and Luke both had access to it.

But neither one of them include this detail,
that Jesus is asleep on the cushion.

The disciples mistake Jesus' slumber for indifference.
"Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?"
This is the first of 4 unanswered questions in this passage.
Why is Jesus asleep during a crisis?
Doesn't he care?!"

Our scriptures were first written in Greek
and then translated into other languages.
Translation is always interpretation.
We use the New Revised Standard Version
of the bible in our worship.
But there are other translations, other versions.
Jesus gets up and rebukes the wind
and according to our NRSV version
he says to the sea 'Peace! Be still.'
The Common English Bible uses
'Silence! Be Still.'
In his commentaries, Bishop Tom Wright translates this verse
'Silence! Shut up!'
The original Greek words are very powerful,
they're the same words Jesus uses in Mark chapter 1
when he heals the man with the unclean spirit.
Jesus isn't simply manipulating the elements
into a more favourable weather pattern;
Jesus is engaging demonic powers
and demonstrating his authority over them.
Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea
and the wind ceases and there's a dead calm.

There's a common theme in ancient times, and especially in Jewish literature
that the sea is to be equated with chaos and evil.
Think of the creation story in Genesis,
when the spirit of God hovered over the unformed and unfilled waters
and creation was understood as bringing order to chaos.
Think of Revelation 21:1, the first verse of the last chapter of the Bible
'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth
For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,

And the **sea** was no more.’

Apocalyptic texts speak of a future world in which the watery chaos has been finally defeated.

In our gospel, Jesus has authority over that watery chaos, an authority typically associated with God.

His calming of the sea is a foreshadowing of the world to come.

Jesus is Lord over wind and sea;

Jesus is Lord over evil and chaos.

Jesus rebukes the wind

he says to the sea ‘Peace! Be still.’

‘Silence! Shut up!’

And then he turns to his disciples and asks

‘Why are you afraid?

Have you still no faith?’”

Two more questions that are left unanswered.

The disciples are filled with great awe and say to one another

“Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Our fourth, and final unanswered question.

Storms happen – even to the best, the smartest and the most prepared among us.

Storms terrify us, knocking us around,

threatening to destroy our stability and security.

We don’t know whether we can withstand them,

and we’re uncertain of how long they’ll last.

We may have never crossed the Sea of Galilee,

but we’ve been in that boat.

This story isn’t just a story about a boat trip and stormy weather.

It’s a story about life – our life – our fear – our faith.

Times of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger

have often been compared to stormy seas.

They come upon us whether we like it or not.

Life’s like that.

We can avoid some storms

by watching the weather forecast and using some common sense.

We can avoid some emotional, spiritual, financial, and social disasters

by being wise and following God’s instructions.

But sometimes, there’s just no getting around the storm.

Bad things happen, tragedy strikes –

even while we’re minding our own business,

doing what's right,
living out our Baptismal Covenant to the best of our ability, with God's help.
Sometimes, life places us in a boat and the storms begin to rage
– the storms of pain and loss – the storms of rejection and failure –
the storms of illness and death –
the storms of pandemic
– storms brought on by racial and political unrest.
Whenever or however they arise, storms are about changing conditions.
Life becomes overwhelming and out of control.
The waves crash, the boat fills up, and we're struggling to stay afloat.
In our gospel, when the wind ceases and the waves become calm,
Jesus asks the disciples 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'
Jesus never says, "There's nothing to be afraid of."
"There's nothing to be afraid of," is very different from saying, "Don't be afraid."
Things that cause fear are very real.
Isolation, pain, viruses, the loss of one's job, or loss of a relationship,
illness, and death are very real.
When we find ourselves in the midst of storms.
we, like the disciples, are challenged
to rediscover our faith in God's word.
The questions Jesus asks the disciples
are the questions he continues to ask us:
"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"
All healthy things grow, and that includes faith.
As we grow in faith, we come to understand
that the things that cause us despair don't have the last word.
But faith doesn't eliminate or take us around the storms of our lives.
Faith takes us through the storms, reminding us that Jesus is there with us.
We're reminded that the power of God is mightier
than any wind that beats against us –
that the love of God is deeper than any wave that threatens to drown us.
Jesus invites us to stay with him in the boat saying,
"Let's go across to the other side, I won't leave your side, I'll journey with you."
After the last winds died down from Hurricane Katrina,
there was little optimism among those
who remained in New Orleans and could venture out
to see what had happened to their city.
But in the heart of the French Quarter,
in the courtyard behind St. Louis Cathedral,
they found a sign of hope:

A statue of Jesus, standing with outstretched arms on a white marble pedestal,
still stood amid the rubble, unscathed by the destruction all around.

A giant magnolia tree had fallen a few feet away; so had an ancient oak.

Several burial vaults lay broken and smashed.

But there stood the risen Christ with outstretched arms, offering peace and calm.

When the storms of life toss us to and fro, let's remember

we aren't alone; the Master of the winds and the waves is present with us

Journeying with us, to the other side. Amen.