

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 21, 2009
Lessons: Psalm 69:1-3,10-17 and Mark 4:35-41

IN THE SAME BOAT

Throughout the Bible, water serves as an image for life, cleansing, and rebirth, and so we use water as our symbol in Baptism. The sea, however, functions as an image of chaos beyond human control, a looming threat. Only by the command of God is the sea prevented from overwhelming all life and civilization on earth. “Come this far,” God commands the sea, “but no farther.”

Today, we’re in a small boat with Jesus and his disciples caught in one of those sudden, remarkably violent storms for which the Galilean lake is known. Jesus is asleep, as God sometimes seems to us – inattentive, perhaps occupied elsewhere. Panicked, the disciples awaken Jesus, and their frustration with him is apparent: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” First, Jesus speaks to the sea, the raging chaos that threatens their lives: “Peace! Be still!” Then, turning to his disciples, Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Why are we afraid? Well, you see, Jesus, there’s this storm that’s sending waves crashing into our boat and any moment might swamp it or even break it apart. So, we thought it seemed pretty reasonable to be concerned or, more truthfully, terrified. The better question seems, “Why would we not be afraid?”

Trust God. For Jesus, that was and is still today the one daily necessity in life, which is always bigger than we are: faith in God’s love and care, with the understanding that God cares not only for me and my family but for all people and for the entire created order. For Jesus, every concern begins with that trust and is guided by it. So, we need to explore a little what it means to be human in this world and to trust God in practice, especially in times of distress when life feels more like the seas of chaos swamping our boat than the quiet waters of our familiar fishing grounds.

*Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.*

How many people can relate to that, even feel what the psalmist describes? All of us can at times, some have to live in circumstances that are distressing and overwhelming every day, and many carry the chaos around inside them, with the sea raging in their own minds and churning in the bodies. Distress can become a way of life, and it does no good for someone else to say, “You need to relax.” *No kidding, but how do I relax when the waters are constantly up to my neck and I am sunk in deep mire?*

When we lived in Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal region, the father of a woman in our church told me of the day he and some other miners got caught in an underground mud slide. He was already waist-deep when it saw it coming toward him: a flow of mud higher than his head, almost to the ceiling of the tunnel. He could not move but could only stand and wait to be buried in the oncoming mud. Then it stopped. The flow just stopped, and there the men stood until others came and pulled them out.

Why did the mud flow suddenly stop? Well, if it could have been examined sufficiently, scientists could tell us *how* it was stopped – *how*, not *why*. In everyday speech, we confuse those two questions: how? and why? “How?” asks what conditions and forces down in that mine tunnel stopped the mud flow in its place. The findings might be interesting and might aid in mine safety, but the question of *why* would remain unanswered. By the time I met the man, he was an elder in the Panther Valley Presbyterian Church in Summit Hill, and had long since decided he had to answer the question of why that mud flow was stopped by the way he lived the second lease on life he believed God had given him.

What message can we hear in Mark’s story of the sudden storm that threatened the lives of Jesus and his disciples? Certainly, we can say that God is greater than life’s storms, but we know that, and by itself that’s not particularly helpful. Surely, if God is God, then God is greater than (from the perspective of the universe) a very tiny disturbance in the waters of a lake on a small planet. Besides, God’s not the one in the boat, or is that statement not quite true?

I was waiting to pay for some items in a stationery store when a woman entered and stood back, probably waiting for me to check out so she could ask a question. The two women behind the counter were talking about a news flash that had just come over the radio. There had been, it was reported, an explosion in the kitchen of a restaurant outside of town. The woman who had just entered went out of that store as though she had been shot from a gun. Then, the two who worked in the store realized who she was. She owned that restaurant, and her son was working in the kitchen that morning. As it turned out, no one was seriously injured. But if we understand why she went out of that store so quickly (and, of course, we do), then we understand why it is not quite true to say God was not the one in the boat caught in the storm.

Now, a cynic might remark that if you happen to get caught in a storm, it's nice to have Jesus in the boat with you, which comes remarkably close to the truth but stands back from it, probably out of contempt for the sentimentalized and sometime arrogant claims of Christians of the type that communicates to other people, "I have Jesus with me; too bad you don't." But the gospel's message is different. Jesus is one of us, and in him we see how much God cares. God is not indifferent, unconcerned with what you and I are going through in life. That God's Son was put into the same boat with us is meant to open our eyes to the truth that God is always in the boat with us. Jesus' one overwhelming message was, *Trust God*, not casually but wholeheartedly, not now and then when we get scared but throughout every day. Trust God, and take steps to assure that trust in God becomes the strongest force in our psyches and the decisive motivation in our choices and actions.

We know all mud slides don't stop in time, and all boats don't make it safely through the storm. In this world, chaos battles life in countless ways every day everywhere. But God is in the boat with us, and there would be a lot less chaos in this world if only we realized and affirmed by our actions that we are all in the same boat, together, and that God is there wanting to care for all of us and waiting for us, not Jesus, to wake up. Our human systems grind up more people and lay waste more human lives than we seem willing to admit, because admitting it would force us to make changes in who benefits and how. Did God put the miners into the tunnel? On the interpersonal level, we would have to replace indifference with compassion, judgment with empathy, and scorn with respect. On the societal level, we would have to challenge greed and assumed privilege. We would have to stand up for the exploited and all kept at a disadvantage for the benefit of relatively few.

We all know how confusion and distress feel. So does God. Some of us know only too well what "overwhelmed" means and how it is to feel like you're drowning as other people carry on their lives all around you. God knows also, and God cares. Life does not have to be a matter of "sink or swim" on your own.

I'm going to conclude with lines from a hymn I used in a sermon some time ago. The stories of its origin seem to vary, but it comes to us through missionaries caught in the midst of the worst kind of human-made chaos – warfare, torture, and violent death.

*I will not be afraid, I will not be afraid;
I will look upward, and travel onward,
And not be afraid.*

Amen.