

“Calm in the Chaos”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
June 24, 2012

Mark 4: 35-41

How many of you enjoy going out on a boat? For a lot of us, boats are relaxing and an enjoyable way to spend our time. I know some of you out there either have your own sailboats, or enjoy being out on the lake or even an ocean. Jim and Barb Williams took the four of us out on Eagle Creek on their sailboat some years ago, and I remember how peaceful that was.

Peaceful would not be the word which would describe another boat experience I had after that. Four or five years ago, we spent a week with some of our seminary friends in Holland, Michigan. One of our friends' families owned a vacation home right on Lake Michigan, and we had a great week together. One day, our friend's father asked if anyone would like to go out on their sailboat on Lake Michigan, and Erin wanted to go. Which meant that I got to go, because the other Rev. Mansell does NOT do boats, roller coasters, or anything else which might trigger her motion sickness.

Well, this wasn't a small, little sailboat – it was quite substantial, and I thought, “This will be fun and relaxing.” And it was – while we were in the harbor. Once we crossed over into the lake, though, oh my! There were whitecaps on the lake, and this huge boat tilted to the side as it rode the wind. And we started bucking, up and down, up and down. I'm sitting on the side, holding onto my oldest child with a vice grip. And there were two thoughts going through my head. On the one hand, I was thinking, “I need to show no fear, so that Erin won't get scared.” On the other hand, I was thinking, “I'm going to throw up. I'm going to throw up.” I did not throw up, thankfully! But it was one of the most unnerving yet exhilarating experiences I think I've ever had.

Being out on a boat can be peaceful and it can be exhilarating. It can also be dangerous. *Sebastian Junger, in his book The Perfect Storm, relates the fates of a number of ships during the 1991 “storm of the century.” One ship in particular, the fishing vessel “Andrea Gail,” illustrates the peril of the sea. The crew of the “Andrea Gail” entered the storm of the century the way we walk into a room: one minute all is calm with light variable winds and the next minute, the sea boils, churning up winds that begin at forty knots and then grows to exceed ninety knots. In just one hour, the barometric pressure dropped 996 millibars and the waves were over seventy feet high!*

In a storm like this, there comes a point when physics takes over. If a boat heads into a wave that is higher than the boat is long, it will get pitched end to end to its doom. The “Andrea Gail” was a large ship of seventy-two feet. In a storm of the magnitude of the one in 1991, the “Andrea Gail” eventually met a wave higher than it was long. It was pitched to the bottom of the North Atlantic (Sarah Jackson Shelton, “The Sleeping Jesus,” <http://day1.org/1326-the-sleeping-jesus>).

That fear of capsizing and sinking had to be on the minds of the disciples in our story today from Mark. Here are the disciples, who have been with Jesus for just a short while, and he asks them to come away from the crowds with him. They get into a boat with their master, and a number of other boats are alongside them out on the Sea of Galilee. We read, “A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped” (4:37). Clearly, that little boat was starting to feel

more like the “Andrea Gail” amid the perfect storm of 1991. At least, that’s how the disciples viewed their situation.

And this is juxtaposed with the image of Jesus at the back of the boat: “But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion” (4:38). I love that line. It’s almost like the disciples wrote this for the Gospel writer. Can you hear them retelling the story to Mark? “There we were, out on the lake. The winds were howling, the water was coming over the side. We were beginning to think, ‘This is it!’ And we turn around and what’s Jesus doing? He’s snoring like a baby! Unbelievable!”

Nadia Bolz-Weber, however, defends the disciples in the following way: *If I were in some rickety first-century boat in the middle of a terrifying storm, with water rising around my feet, everyone panicking around me and Jesus in the back of the boat taking a nap on a pillow, I’d be a little irritated. You can’t really blame the disciples on this one. You can’t blame them that they thought, “Jesus, why don’t you care that we are, you know, dying here?”*

If they were freaking out it was not due to neuroses or an anxiety disorder: their boat was about to sink. As human beings we are wired for certain responses when our lives are in danger. Adrenalin is released in our brains, our heart rate increases, our pupils dilate and we become hyperaware of what’s happening around us. Yet although we don’t exactly choose to react like this, Jesus rebukes the wind and waves, then turns to his disciples and says, “Where is your faith?” It feels like an accusation.

That’s what it sounds like, doesn’t it? It sounds like Jesus is accusing the disciples – and us – of not having enough faith to survive. It feels like if they – if we – only had enough faith, the winds would stop blowing, the rain would stop falling, and the boat would stop sinking.

But is that what Jesus means? *Maybe when Jesus asked, “Where is your faith?” he said it not as accusation but as invitation – not a rhetorical question but an invitation to reflect on where God is in the midst of storms. Maybe he was inviting his disciples to reflect on what it means to be alive on the other side of a situation they thought would kill them. For us, that situation might be a divorce, an illness, the death of a parent or even a child, the loss of a job, depression, or middle school. It can feel as if it’s going to kill us.*

Maybe, if we survive the situation, we are being encouraged to ask questions. Where was my faith? Where was God? What did I fear? (“Living By the Word,” *Christian Century*, June 13, 2012, 21).

The storms of life can be terrifying. We struggle with our physical or emotional health, and we feel like the boat is about to tip over. We wrestle with feeling helpless as we watch a loved one succumb to addiction, and we feel as if the water is rising inside the boat. We are battered by the winds of change – in our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our families – and we wonder if we will survive. The storms of life can be terrifying, indeed.

I believe those storms of life transcend our ministry within the church. We put our energy into programs and ministries which we hope will attract and inspire people, and we feel battered and winded when the response is not what we had hoped. We seek to be faithful disciples in a world with much need, but we become swamped by pettiness and disagreements over mundane details. We seek to grow in our outreach, mission, and ministry for a hopeful future, but we feel anchored in the past by malaise, indifference, or confusion. There is no doubt that we know the storms of life within the church.

But in that boat on the Sea of Galilee, there is a calm amid the chaos. In the turbulence of our personal lives, there is a calm amid the chaos. In the instability of the church's life, there is a calm amid the chaos.

That calm and peace is the one who stands amid the storm, says, "Peace! Be still!" and tells us, "Do not be afraid." The disciples did not calm the storm. Jesus calmed the storm. We do not calm our turbulent lives; we look to God for our peace and strength. We do not do ministry as the church ourselves; we are empty vessels, filled with the Spirit, to serve as Christ's Body in the chaos of this world.

For those of us who work in the office during the week here at church, one of the things which feels like a storm ready to overwhelm us has been answering calls for assistance from the community. Kim Grant, our secretary, keeps a record of how often she answers calls or interacts with people who stop by the church, needing help with food, gas, rent, utilities, or some other emergency need. Some weeks, it can be as low as one or two people asking for help. Some days, it can be as many as five or six. Some months, it can be fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or more.

The storm and chaos is not just about the number of people, though. It is the feeling of helplessness in trying to meet someone's need. It is the feeling of skepticism as to whether someone really has their stated need. It is the feeling of dissatisfaction that what we've given will never be enough to help them move in a healthy direction for their lives.

We are not alone in this experience as a congregation. Many around Indianapolis are in the same boat on a stormy sea. That is why the Indianapolis Center for Congregations invited us and other churches in Marion County to participate in a learning experience on extending help and hospitality to the community. Kim, Lisa, Betty Orr, and I have participated in two of three workshops thus far. It is not necessarily an exercise in how to help people "better," or give us more funding to give more aid. Instead, it is an exercise to discover how to improve our experience of helping others, so that we have a greater sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in connecting with people who come through our doors.

Our first step in finding those answers is by talking to people - people in the community, people in the church, some of you. We have spoken to some of you already, and others of you might be getting a call from one of us. We are learning from you about situations when you have helped others - friends, strangers, anyone. And in so doing, what you learned from that experience, and how you were changed by that experience. As those stories are compared, we begin to find the threads which show us a positive path in terms of sharing help and hospitality.

Rather than an experience which seems hopeless and terrifying, it becomes transformative and nurturing for the community. Rather than the church feeling like there's no way we can help everyone, we feel empowered to change lives in the way God chooses, through our resources, our time, and our abilities. Rather than running away in fear, we embrace the challenge before us, knowing that Christ is our strength, our rock, our calm amid the storm.

"Where is your faith?" May we accept our Savior's invitation to see, feel, and know his presence with us at all times of our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.