FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“God Is with Us”*

Mark 4:35-41

Last Sunday, in the Bible lesson from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has spoke about seeds and sowing. Today, the Gospel continues where we left off last week, but our story moves aboard a small boat that is put out to sea and is immediately swept up into a storm.

Given the change in venue and because we are separated from last Sunday’s reading by a week, it is tempting to think that we are being drawn into a new story. But, that would be a mistake. All of these stories are related—they inform on and build on each other—and so I would like to ask you to remember what you heard about the kingdom of God last week. What I would like us to entertain is the idea that—despite the change of scenery—this story of power and rescue is directly related to the parables Mark recorded earlier in the chapter.

And so, I ask you to remember the person Jesus told us about who went out into a field and scattered seed far and wide. The human who sows the seed does little to aid in its growth, but he or she is important, as the one who bears witness to what God is doing, and brings in the harvest what God has produced, to the benefit of the whole community.

The God of that parable is faithful and provides for the human community. Day-by-day, we are able to see the progress of God’s power to bring forth life from the smallest of seeds; to bring forth grain that becomes bread. God’s power and design bring forth large mustard shrubs from tiny seeds, and these shrubs are so large that we are told they become homes for birds and small animals; so large with such deep and broad root systems that they are difficult to remove once they have taken hold in the soil.

Take all of this knowledge about God, and now come aboard the boat with Jesus and the disciples.

Even if we are not boaters ourselves, most of us know what it is like to see the ocean during stormy weather. We know turbulence, and the tremendous power the ocean can wield. We know that we must always be aware of what the ocean is doing because it defies being tamed by any kind of human touch or whim.

The ancients also knew this about the sea—about large bodies of water. Indeed, the Bible is filled with ancient stories of deep bodies of water. Mostly, these stories tells us about life and a world that is out of order, a life and a world that is not peaceful, not filled with God’s peace.

So, in Genesis, we read of the waters that covered the earth. They are formless and mysterious; they are the very image and metaphor for chaos. Only God’s will to create brings the depths of watery turmoil under control; pushing it into place and bringing dry space for life to begin and to thrive.

Later, it is the wild, raging waters that engulf the earth, wiping away all its sinful inhabitants, leaving only Noah and his family to begin the human experiment again.

Still again, the surging Red Sea is parted—at God’s command—to save one nation. And it is released again, to swallow-up an army and punish another nation.

The sea, the turbulent, mysterious sea is always with us in the Bible. What I find interesting about this story is that it is Jesus, himself, who invites the disciples into the boat. Of course, they have traveled by boat earlier. In fact, chapter four begins by telling us that there were so many people who had come out to listen to him preach that Jesus had to get into a boat and pull a little ways out into the water so that all who had eagerly gathered could see and hear him.

So, it seems strange to me that they are on the go again. I would have thought he would have liked to stay and speak and interact with more and more people. However, that is not in his plans. So, he gathers the disciples and they go back aboard the boat. The Gospel of Mark, in verse 36, also says that there are other boats with him.

So, the disciples, *and* whoever were in those *other* boats are on hand when a mighty storm blows-up and beats down against them. The disciples are terrified—rightly so. Jesus, however, is calm and he was even able to sleep through it—until the panicked disciples awake him.

It is at this point, that it would be understandable if you and I shook our heads at the disciples. We would not be alone in chastising them for their little faith—Jesus himself does this.

The problem, as I see it, is that when we chastise the disciples for their lack of faith, we also tell ourselves that this story is about the “storms of life” we all face, and how all we need to do is have stronger faith. All we need to do is to “Turn Our Eyes Upon Jesus.” (More about that in a minute.)

Well, *yes,* actually,it is about our lives and the storms we face, and *yes*, we should do that; we should turn our eyes upon Jesus. However, it is much *more* than that too. It is about more than my life and yours and our problems. As important as our lives and or problems are, it is *also* about the on-going life of the world we live in and how we may do much more for ourselves *and* our neighbors because God’s love is available to and for all of us.

And God’s love is so great that we may, indeed, “turn to a world that is dying” with courage and hope born of a reverence for a love that is greater than death itself, greater that any and every threat that we face.

And so, what I believe it is important for us to notice in this story is the language Jesus uses to silence the storm. If it were *only* about the “storms of life,” he would have addressed himself only to the disciples—scolding or perhaps scoffing at their lack of faith. Instead, verse thirty-nine says this: *39He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.*

We will hear him speak this way again very soon as he turns his attention to demon processed people as he heals and sets them free. Indeed, the words he uses to calm the storm are nothing less than words of exorcism. They are uttered by the one being who can bring calm and order to a world out of order. As one commentator, Rev. Dr. David Jacobsen of Boston University, has written, “Jesus is not offering therapy for our fears but an exorcism for a world out of whack.”\*

Dr. Jacobsen continues saying: “Mark’s Gospel is committed to writing about the time of the destruction of the Temple around 70 CE….The [Temple in Jerusalem, the] center of worship is destroyed; the cultural and religious center of the people no longer holds. Identities among Jewish Christians and other Jewish groups are all in play—and at a time when the tide of gentiles is rising. In the midst of all this chaos when the world-as-known is ending, here this Jesus is revealed not as one more therapist or miracle worker but as a revelation of God’s extraordinary cosmic purpose in the person of this ordinary Jesus, “just as he was” (verse 36).

But there is even more than this: this is the Jesus we have known since his incarnation, since his birth was announced by angels in a field to a bunch of scruffy shepherds whose names are lost to time. This Jesus is the one who has been living in the home of his earthly father—a carpenter—seeing what life is like among men and women and children.

Jesus has been someone’s son, someone’s brother, and someone’s friend. In the story we heard this morning, he is also a teacher. He knows of our lack of knowledge and our need of reassurance.

By living in the world, by being Emmanuel, who is God-with-us, he is the One who knows who we are, knows our challenges, and remains with us.

Sometimes, I suppose it does seem like he has fallen asleep, and what of it? The thing to remember is that he does not hide himself away to sleep in some peaceful nook in heaven. He finds a cushion in a small boat—in which all of the rest of his friends are also traveling—and falls asleep there—within plain sight of them.

In a few minutes, Kathy is going to play a lovely old hymn for us called *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.* Personally, I love this old song—the melody and the entreaty to “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.” However, what I am really hoping for you and me is that as we listen and meditate on the words, that we especially take seriously the last verse that tells us who Christ really is, and how God’s determined plan to be with us is meant to surround and encompass all of the trials and challenges of all God’s beloved people. All of them!

What I hope you hear is an invitation to see Christ, and that his life, and our faith in him, does nothing less than draw us out into a world that is, indeed, dying, to tend to wounds that require deeper investigation of their source and their methods for healing.

In other words: it is going to require more than good deeds and kind thoughts. Rather, it is going to require a kind of faithfulness and steadfastness—a presence and power—which Jesus shows us here so clearly, and asks us to receive and live with.

It is going to require the love of God who came down and lived among us; a love that could not be silenced or destroyed but is with us even now, and continues on with us—our Emmanuel—God Is with Us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*\*“He was in his weakness a disclosure, a revelation, an apocalypse of the living God among us,”* The Rev. Dr. David Jacobson, *Dear Working Preacher, 2021*