

June 21, 2015

“God in Our Boat”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young



Mark 4: 35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

As people who live close to water, I imagine some of us have had experiences when we’ve found water at least somewhat scary. Perhaps we’ve been in a boat that hit stormy seas, like the disciples in today’s Gospel reading, or maybe we’ve experienced riptides or crashing waves when we were swimming or surfing. I still remember a hair-raising rafting trip some years ago on the Snake River up in Wyoming. I was in the front end of the raft; and when our rafting guide learned I was a minister, he decided it would be fun to “dunk the preacher” as much as possible. So we went sailing over the rapids in such a way that I got a thrill and a drenching every few seconds!

Now some experiences like rafting or a water ride at an amusement park may feel scary while at the same time we really believe we’re in safe hands. But it’s different if we sense the danger is real and threatening. That of course is what Jesus’ disciples were experiencing in that storm on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea was subject to sudden windstorms that would create great waves and swells. And remember, some of the disciples were fishermen who knew the lake and what it could do. And this was a storm that had them fearing for their lives. And in the midst of the storm Jesus is asleep in the bottom of the boat. So of course they woke him up so he could see the danger they were in. The passage doesn’t say they expected him to deal with the storm; they did want him to be with them in facing the danger. The words Jesus speaks bring calm to the sea—but they also are words of challenge to the disciples’ faith—and yes, to our faith. “Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks. Do you not know who is with you in all the storms of life?

It’s interesting when we do check to see if God is with us in our boat. When we sense our lives are in danger, or when we feel ourselves to be up against overwhelming odds, we, like the disciples, may call for God’s help and pray fervently for our rescue. But how many other situations are there where we are feeling alone and fearful, and yet it does not occur to us to check whether we have help on board? Our family may be threatened by divisiveness or false values or drugs or alcohol. We may face friendships that fall apart on us, or commitments that disintegrate. Sometimes it may seem as if the world all around us is hostile; and sometimes we may even feel at war within ourselves, feeling angry or adrift for reasons we can’t even sort out. What does Jesus have to say to us about storms like these? Have we come to the point where we can trust God’s power and grace to be present and working with us for good—or like the disciples, do we assume we’re on our own at such times, and faith is not a relevant factor?

There’s a crucial theological matter at stake here. We know that many of the founding fathers of our nation were what we call Deists in their understanding of God. Deism sees God as like a great clockmaker who created the world with all its scientific structure and then put the whole business—the “clock”—into motion. And that’s what we have today—the clock ticking away as it was designed to do, but the Clockmaker—God—off in some remote eternity and totally uninvolved in the clock’s working. Now of course the value of this approach is that it underscores our human responsibility for making the clock work well. The belief in rugged individualism is alive and well in our national psyche. But that does not reflect our Christian understanding of how God is at work in the process. Jesus bears witness that the God who created us and gave us life has not left us to our own devices but cares about us more than we can comprehend. God is always in our boat, present to give us the guidance, comfort, and strength we need at every point. You see, God is not “out there” somewhere. God is “in here”, wherever we find ourselves and in whatever situations we face. We are not spiritual orphans in any part of our lives; and laying hold of that truth matters much in how we cope with life’s situations and challenges.

In this season of graduations, the news media on occasion give us snippets of the commencement addresses. And have you noticed they all seem to revolve around one theme: how are the graduates going to count for something and make something worthwhile of their lives? It's one of the biggest questions we all have to face, which we recognize in our better moments. And not surprisingly it's a matter at the heart of what our faith tells us. Now of course most commencement speeches appropriately focus on the role of the graduate in building a worthwhile life. But what a burden that can be, to think that the worthwhileness of my life all depends on me with all my limitations! Jesus is telling us we have an Ally who cares even more than we about where we come out—One who can give us guidance, courage, and strength for the journey. The apostle Paul once referred to himself as “the least of the apostles” with no claim on that title. “But by the grace of God I am what I am,” he said, “and his grace toward me has not been in vain.” I have often found comfort and assurance for myself in that verse.

There is a philosophy of life that advocates trying to avoid as many of life's challenges and storms as possible in order to make for a smooth journey. I think none of us wants to go out of our way looking for trouble. But life's challenges and issues don't go away just because we try to avoid looking at them. Alienated relationships and poor choices and illness and hunger and poverty don't just disappear because we want them to. The only question is how we will deal with them. And surely our dealing with them is God's way of enabling us to grow and to go deeper. So God does not spare us from life's storms, even when we think they're unfair.

A Chicago pastor went to keep an appointment with his doctor one day; and as he was waiting for the doctor, a nurse put her head around the door and said, “You're the pastor at Fourth Church, aren't you?” “Yes,” he replied, wondering what would come next. “My husband and I have attended your church a few times,” she went on, “so I wanted to tell you about my experience.” And then her story came out: “God saved me—I gave my life to God—and guess what? It all tumbled in. I developed a heart problem. My husband lost his executive job, and recently died of cancer.” The pastor assumed he should try to say something comforting about God's mysterious ways, but the woman cut him off: “So what? What else is new?” And then she went on with these words: “What do you think God told me? God told me, ‘Why not? Why should you be spared the crises of life that everyone else must go through?’ And so one day I said to God, ‘Lord, you've forgiven me. Now I forgive you.’”

Was that sacrilege, one might ask. I think rather that was a woman who had come to terms with the reality of a God who doesn't let us off the hook, but who is there with us with the grace and strength to face what comes to us. And perhaps some of us need to forgive God for not sparing us so that we can allow God to give us grace for dealing with our storms.

I know today is Father's Day. I'm not a father, but of course I had a father, and a grandfather I remember well. And I am grateful they never proposed I should try to avoid the hard things that would come my way, but rather deal with them, knowing that God was with me as I did. I would offer a similar counsel to you who are actively parenting. There's a strong current in our culture to “chill out” and simply not face hard realities; and the means are readily available to help one do this. The far better alternative is to help young people find in God an ally and resource for meeting their challenges. That's the kind of parenting that will truly be life-giving.

The good news of our faith is that God is in our boat. But friends, let's not be too hard on ourselves if we're slow to take that at face value. When Jesus asks the disciples in the boat, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” I can't believe he was being as harsh with them as those words may sound. I believe God knows our fear and anxiety in an often scary and stormy world. But God knows also we don't need to be so afraid, for we have a partner in our boat. And learning to know and to trust that partner is what the journey of faith is all about.