A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

“*On The Day of the Storm”*

Mark 4

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*“On that day”* – Mark begins this story reminding us that so much happened *on that day*. *On that day* Jesus explained parables to his recently appointed disciples; *on that day* crowds came to see him; *on that day* men and women, boys and girls came again looking to Jesus for teaching and healing; *on that day*, he shared parables by the Sea of Galilee and *on that day* he got into the boat and taught from the water to get some distance from the crowds. Then, after *this one long day*, he and his disciples must have been exhausted. They had shared, they had taught, they had prayed, they had touched with compassion and empathy and they had given of their body and soul to the crowds. I would have fallen into a heap, too tired to fix dinner but so hungry I had to.

It was dinnertime when Jesus tells them to set sail and go to the other side of the sea. *Can you imagine your response?* “Now? Are you sure?” If I was a teenager I might have said **“Seriously?”** But, the fresh disciples obediently complied. These disciples have a fresh commitment – it is still new. They are still in “orientation.” They had just dropped their nets, left their livelihoods behind and reoriented their lives to follow the Christ -- just as we all have to reorient our lives in our follow-ship of Christ. Wet behind the ears, they set out in their boat and began the journey to the other side of the sea**. Had they known what they were about to face, they might not have gotten into the boat**.

Surrounded by mountains, it was not uncommon for storms to develop quickly on the Sea of Galilee and *on that day* one began to howl and toss the boat in their journey to the other side. It came from “out of nowhere” as we might say and this was no ordinary storm. This was the grandfather of all storms. This was a big one. But these fishermen were accustomed to sea life **and this storm was not their first rodeo, or so they thought.** So when the winds whipped up and the sea swelled, they knew what to do.

First, they had to decide: ride it out or head back to shore? They pulled the sail down and tied themselves in to ride it out . . . until . . . the storm became so fierce that even these seasoned sailors panicked and feared for their lives. Fear is the natural response to danger and they were in danger.

The boat was tossing, swelling up and down. The sky was dark and they couldn’t make out the horizon. Everything seemed upside down. Seasickness looks easy compared with this and they were disoriented. The boat was overcome with waves and was beginning to fill with water to their ankles . . . and then . . . to their shins. Can you picture it? They were terrified and to top it off, instead of steering the boat from the stern where the rudder is, Jesus was asleep on the stern.

Do you wonder how bad it was before they turned to Jesus and saw him sleeping? Had they already checked on him to see if he was safe? How did they decide who might wake him and how could he sleep through such a storm? That is some kind of exhaustion!

Having just stepped out in faith and followed the Christ, having heard his perplexing parables about the kingdom of God *all this day long*, now when faced with their own dire, life-threatening circumstances, Christ seemed to be uninterested. In their great distress, when the disciples thought they needed Jesus the most, he was sound asleep. Do you see the irony? These are the very disciples who will fall asleep during Christ’s hour of terror and despair in the Garden of Gethsemane ten chapters later in Mark’s gospel.

Terrified about their safety, their stomachs in knots, lumps in their throats, fear in their muscles . . . this was a life-ending kind of experience. This storm was beyond their expertise and the fresh disciples were panicked. *On that day*, paralyzed by fear, they had forgotten a familiar song - Psalm 107 – a song they must have learned as children and sung many times. It was a pilgrimage song describing the troubles the people of God face and how God faithfully delivers with a chorus of “Thank the Lord.” You heard it earlier. Can you imagine it being sung on the way to the temple in Jerusalem:

 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
    and he brought them out from their distress;
29he made the storm be still,
    and the waves of the sea were hushed.
30Then they were glad because they had quiet,
    and he brought them to their desired haven.
31Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
    for his wonderful works to humankind. Psalm 107

When circumstances and life become disorienting, we can doubt what we know to be true. This section of Mark reminds us of Christ’s ability to conquer anything, bookended by the outward storms of life and the inner storms of grief and death that threaten our souls.

First, Christ delivers the disciples from the perils of the sea, the place where Jews believed that evil and God clash. Immediately following this experience, in the land of the Gerasenes on the other side of the sea, Christ exorcises not one demon but a legion of demons from a man who had become a danger and an outcast. No one else had been able to help him.

Jesus then saves and heals a woman who had also become an outcast because of her condition. Doctors had not been able to help her for twelve years.

Finally, Jesus not only heals a child, but also raises her from death. Jesus can certainly tame storms and trample death. The disciples and each of these who sought Jesus’ help were in a desperate situation and pleaded for Christ’s intervention in their dire need. (Garland, p. 201)

Immediately after being awakened from an apparent deep sleep to the cries of “Jesus, don’t you care that we are perishing?” Christ speaks, “Peace be still,” and the wind and sea obeyed and were calm. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters in creation brought peace to the chaos. After taming the storm Jesus responds to the disciples’ lack of faith by asking essentially: **“Will you trust me? Will you follow my call into the waters when you are tired? When I lead you into a storm, will you trust me?“**

In this story, *on this one day*, we see and feel the disciples fear, panic and doubt. Not only have those closest to Jesus experienced fear and doubt, but also the Church has a long line of saints and heroes of the faith who have endured hardships, pain and grief while wondering if God was asleep in the midst of it.

Throughout church history, Christians have clung to this account of the disciples being assaulted by waves in the boat and applied the message to the church. Tertullian commented in the second century that this ship is like the church being tossed about by the waves of the world, the “persecutions and temptations.” (*On Baptism*, 12; Garland, p. 199). But, **Jesus has already saved us, not from the dangers of this world but from ultimate separation and destructio**n. The World Council of Churches after World War II, chose the image of the church as a storm tossed boat with a cross for a mast – reminding the church universal that “God is ruler of nature and history and he is present even in the midst of anxiety and trials.” (Williamson, p. 100)

Adinirom Judson was one of the first missionaries sent from America and one of the first Baptist missionaries in Burma in 1812. After 20 months of imprisonment and torture, hunger and disease, he was released from the Burmese prison. His wife, Ann, had worked tirelessly for his release while caring for a child and fighting off disease. After giving birth to a daughter, she died shortly thereafter. Six months later, their baby died. After the loss of his wife and young baby, swamped with waves of guilt, grief and “spiritual despair,” Judson lamented, “God is to me the great Unknown. I believe in him but I find him not.” (Garland, p. 200)

C.S. Lewis, having previously taught about God’s love in the midst of suffering, then **when faced with his own**, lamented the depths of pain and bewilderment he experienced after the loss of his beloved wife Joy in his book *A Grief Observed*. Others such as Teresa of Calcutta and John of the Cross wrote about a spiritual dark night that engulfed them for years before they came out on the other side.

We are also reminded of the plight of our human situation. We don’t have to look very far to see the pain, injustice, and chaos all around us. It is evident that not only is this world broken, but we are too. So we remember the words of the Apostle Paul in Second Corinthians that “we are hard pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.” (2 Cor. 4:8-9) We must lift our eyes above the disorder of our lives and of this world and remember our Christ who has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5).

Being in a boat at sea in a storm can be horrifying and disorienting. When nature takes over, inflicting violence and destruction, you lose any sense of control and **you are at the mercy of the storm**. I do know what it is like to have the storms of life come crashing down and you do too. Whether it is damaged relationships, cancer, illness, tragedy or abuse, life can be turbulent and disorienting.

The picture on the cover of your bulletin had a caption under it when I first saw it and it said: “Lord be stronger than the storm in me.” Sometimes these storms come from within as we battle against ourselves and it can be paralyzing. Or they surface as brokenness in families or the disease and aging that eventually comes to each of us. Fear, doubt and anger can creep in and keep us from remembering that **Christ is stronger** than these storms. We have all had times – moments, days, months, years -- when it seems as if Christ is indifferent to our struggles. Most of us can relate to the disciples in wanting Christ to acknowledge our dire predicaments.

*On that day*, this storm was eventually calmed for the disciples, but it may not be calmed for you and for me. When this happens and the storm continues it is the image of Emmanuel, God-with-us in the boat, which becomes a life preserver. Isaiah 43 reminds us of the God who will not leave us alone in the storm:

But now thus says the Lord,
    he who created you, O Jacob,
    he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
    I have called you by name, you are mine.
2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
    and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
    and the flame shall not consume you.

Thus says the Lord,
    who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters.

The reality is that there are no stormless seas and in the Celtic tradition, the water symbolized the desert. We all know that some trying but amazing things happen in the desert. We have so many different kinds of storms – true acts of nature, illness, death, and internal storms that take us through hard and lonely places. The common theme in these is that we have little control over what happens. Our spiritual life, at times, demands new things from us as we grow and mature, and that path to maturation can feel long and dry. Sometimes we have to pass through the storms to get to the other side. Louisa May Alcott once said: “I’m not afraid of storms for I’m learning how to sail my ship.”

No matter the place or type of storm, it does not always dissipate quickly. Our Emmanuel enters the storms of our lives *with* us. This image of Christ in the boat in the middle of the stormy sea has been an important mental picture that I have carried with me recently. When fear rears its head, or when another trial appears, I return to this image of Emmanuel, God-with-us, who passes through the waters with me. Mark’s emphasis in this story is on who Jesus is – **he is with** the disciples in the storm. We can trust in a Savior who does not always deliver us **from** storms but who delivers **us through** the storms. ***On that day* Christ oriented the disciples to this new way of life and then immediately called them on a journey through a storm.** The greatest act of faith in this story may just be that the disciples got into the boat in the first place!

*On this day*, we have listened to this beautiful, familiar story. It’s not a new story, we know how it ends, but it’s a story for us to hear again and again because we forget. Don’t we? It’s one of the reasons we came here today:

to be reminded of what we already know;

to be fortified by the faith of our church community;

to be asked once again: Will you trust me?

To let the prayers and Word of God seep deep into our souls strengthening us to trust especially when it’s stormy*.*

*On this day*, we have followed. *On this day*, we hear the old, old story again: *on this day* Jesus is with us. Amen.

Resources:

**NIV Application Commentary: Mark, by David E. Garland (Zondervan, 1996).**

**Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark by Lamar Williamson Jr. (John Knox Press, 1983)**

**The Gospel According to Mark, The New International Commentary on the New Testament by William Lane (Eerdmans, 1974)**

**Worshipping With Children blogspot**

**Working Preacher Commentary, James Boyce**

**Working Preacher, Dear Working Preacher by Karoline Lewis, “The Other Side”**

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