

MIGHT AWE INFORM OUR FAITH?

I Chronicles 16:23-36

Mark 4: 35-41

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Mason Presbyterian

More than 90 years ago, in his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt spoke words we still remember, "The only thing we have to fear is - fear itself." In the midst of the Depression, when most people were anxious about their future, FDR seemed to be saying that fear is the emotion that has a way of feeding on itself. He went on to say in that same sentence - "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror." He meant, I take it, that we cannot always identify the origin of our fear. Fear may well up from some past traumatic experience. It may reflect a present dilemma that we cannot see our way out of. Or it may come from some future dread, even our approaching death, whose time we can't know, but it's coming.

What can we say about the terror the disciples of Jesus experienced as we read in our lesson from Mark? For sure, their fear out in that boat has a sufficient cause: they feel they're about to capsize and drown. There they are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, which was and still is notorious for sudden and violent storms. Years ago, I was on that body of water on a boat bigger than theirs when a storm came up in the middle of the day, and it was scary enough. For the disciples, they were in the middle of the night, in the middle of the lake. The winds were too strong. The waves were too high. They had good reason to fear they would die.

Remember, at least four of the twelve disciples were fishermen; they were at home on these waters, and maybe because of that, had a healthy respect for the dangerous conditions. If they feared what they faced on this night, what about the landlubbers among them? In our time, we understand far more about the workings of heaven and earth than those ancients did. But we still have reason to tremble when the volcano erupts, when the tornado roars, when the floodwaters rise, when the earth under our feet quakes and rolls and threatens to undo us. We have legitimate concern when our puny selves come up against nature's fury. As recent experience shows, even here in good old Michigan, we are not exempt.

But back to that boat on the sea of Galilee. While the wind and waves mounted up, what was Jesus doing? The disciples looked around, and there they saw him in the stern of the boat, curled up in the comfort of a cushion, sound asleep. They wake him up and then they rebuke him: "Teacher, do you not care that we are

perishing?” Or, another translation, “Teacher, are we to drown, for all you care?” After all, it was Jesus’ idea to go across in the boat just as dark was coming on, and now he doesn’t seem to get the seriousness of the situation. He doesn’t care.

What kind of charge is that? It is hardly a new one, when brought up against God. The question has been asked of God millions of times and in just that many ways. “Where are you when I need you? Where are you now?” God may appear to be sleeping right in the midst of the storms of human need. The entire second half of the long Forty-fourth Psalm is a diatribe against God’s seeming uncaring. Here are just a few lines: “Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?” Psalm 69 draws a connection between drowning in the deep and God’s involvement: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.”

Some but not all of you will remember our organist and choir director some forty years ago, John O’Brien. At some point John and I were sharing our admiration for the musical “Carousel,” which Richard Rogers called the best work he and Oscar Hammerstein had created. Not just its music but what John and I recognized as a certain theological content led us to contemplate whether our own Mason church might produce some version of it. That never happened. But we agreed, again, on our appreciation for the musical’s final song. Many of you will know, “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” That’s always been a favorite of mine, even before I took part in two productions of “Carousel,” one in high school and one in college. The ending words of that song promise that “at the end of the storm comes a golden sky and the sweet silver song of the lark.” But the title itself, “You’ll Never Walk Alone” reminds us of what for the Christian should ring ever true: It’s not just at the end of any storm, but in its very midst, that we know we don’t march solo on our way.

“Lord, do you not care that we perish?” Yes, God cares. God saves. Jesus awakes and immediately rebukes the wind and says to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Another translation, still more direct, might be, “Be muzzled, be gagged.” Whatever, it was so: “Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.” But next then Jesus turns from the mysteries of the natural world to the anxieties of the human heart. He challenges them: “Why were you afraid? Have you still no faith?” This is early in his ministry, early in the disciples’ time with him. Yet, when Jesus asks, “Have you *still* no faith?” it’s as if by now they should know to put their trust in his person.

But such trust, such faith, as we know, is not always, not usually, a sudden, once for all arrival. We come to trust in God step by step. And for the disciples, this was such a moment to advance in their faith. When they wake him up, they address him simply as "Teacher." A moment later, after he stills the furies of Nature, a far deeper sense of his person overwhelms them. We read "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?'" First comes calm, then comes wonder. With the peace that surrounds their little boat comes a new realization inside that boat. Even as one kind of fear is put to rest, Jesus' words provoke a still deeper feeling, now of a profound awe.

Their initial fear causes them to babble and badger. Their second fear - this awe - reduces them to silence. The point of the passage comes not just when Jesus stills the storm and settles their natural fears. Rather it is when the disciples leave off focusing on themselves and begin to realize that they must be in the presence of the divine. So for us. When we are finished and done with the things we fear today and are gone tomorrow, when the worst that Nature can do, or that other people can inflict on us, then in our more faithful moments we may lean back into the grace of God. Then it can be that we come face to face with our Lord who is for us both power and peace. This realization is not to deny that common fears are unbecoming to a Christian. They fall upon us as they do to any human. But our faith teaches us that the presence of God is greater than any fear. This is what we Christians claim that others, succumbing to the depths of their fear, may not.

We have seen that when the disciples rebuke Jesus, he rises and stills the wind, and then turns and confronts the Twelve: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" God does not rebuke us into faith. But he challenges us, wherever we are in our Christian journey, to measure the degree of our faith, and then to increase it. God will continue to use the occasions of life's uncertainties - even life's fears - to draw us closer to his holy presence. He calls us back home, even as the prodigal son, to a deeper trust. Troubled times will continue to come upon us and the ones we love. The wind and the waves will arise. A Scottish poet I once met told of a fisherman who was out in his boat, in the midst of what the Scots euphemistically call "weather." The man said, "The wave went up and up and up. *And God was in the wave.*" That same kind of faith-filled awe that came upon the original disciples can be ours, urging us to deeper worship and devotion. We may ask as they did, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And then let your answer carry your heart. Allow that Person continue to grow on into your future.

Charles Herrick