

STORMCENTER FAITH

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

June 21, 2009

Mark 4: 35-41

Ministers are often asked in a good-natured way if we can't do something about the weather on the day of a wedding, a graduation or a football game. John Buchanan, the pastor of The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, says, "Fathers of the bride sidle up after the rehearsal on a rainy Friday evening and say, 'Come on now, Reverend. You must have some pull upstairs. Can't you do something about the weather and get us a sunny day tomorrow?'" John says that over the years he has learned to smile and respond, "Sorry, I'd like to help, but I can't. I'm in sales, not production."

Today's story about Jesus being in the boat with the disciples and calming the turbulent sea raises many questions for us. "There is a huge issue here, a deeply profound issue of the relationship of the creator to the creation. Can God intercede in natural processes? Is that what God's sovereignty means, and if so, why doesn't God do it more consistently? Or did God set it all up and then sit back to watch stuff happen---wonderful, marvelous, tragic, and terrible---prevented from interceding by the very natural processes God

created?” (From **“Faith—When The Water Is Choppy and Your Boat Is Sinking”** by John Buchanan, Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago; June 22, 2003)

We all have differing views on how involved God gets in changing the circumstances of our lives and because of all the suffering and dying I deal with on a day to day basis, my view may be more skewed than yours. While I do not pray for miracles, I believe God knows that I am open to them. What I do pray for in my life and in the lives of the dying people I visit, is for God’s peace to calm the chaos that threatens to destroy us by reminding us that we are not alone. In difficult times, we quickly learn that peace is not the absence of pain and struggle but the presence of love and courage.

I share this story often but it fits here today so pardon me for repeating myself. A few years ago, I had the privilege of hearing John Claypool speak at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Lubbock. He spoke intimately about the events surrounding his 11 year-old daughter’s struggle with leukemia and eventual death some 35 years ago. He said that about two months after Laura Lue’s death he ran into the local rabbi who offered his love and friendship and then asked John a most startling question, “Did God do anything for you in all this pain and suffering? Was there any hint of the divine in the darkest of times?” John said that as he stood there with his

friend and was honest about how God had not performed a miracle and rescued Laura Lue from the horrible circumstances of illness and death, he became aware of the grace that had truly sustained them all in their darkest of times. He said that although the Holy One did not change Laura Lue's destiny or the circumstances surrounding them, he became overwhelmed by the gift of endurance, grace, courage and peace that the Holy One had given him and his family during this most difficult and discouraging of times.

One of the things that I learned this week from my studies of this story is that in ancient times the sea was the place of evil. The Psalmist tells us that the evil monster was there; the Leviathan was there. The enemy of all that we know as good and right is there in the water. In the Bible, the water is the abode of all the forces that are against us. In Job, in Isaiah, in Habakkuk, in the Psalms, and in Matthew, Mark and John it is God who calms the water of the storm and brings order out of chaos.

This story is a powerful reminder of how God comes to us in the storms of life and assures us that there is no power, no storm, no wind, no force in the world that God cannot conquer, no evil over which God is not superior, nothing that can destroy our life

because God loves and cares for us each. **(Rev. Fred Craddock in The Cherry Log Sermons; p.33)**

John Buchanan said, “The early church loved this story because the first Christians knew what it meant to be in a little boat in a stormy sea. Small, insignificant, a tiny minority in every city, and then tormented, persecuted, hunted down, arrested, tortured, executed by the most powerful entity in the world, the Roman Empire---the early church loved this story of the disciples in the boat and Jesus calming the storm. They heard in that story that they weren’t alone in that boat. They had each other and they had Jesus, who was very much in the boat with them and whose commitment to them produced calm and comfort and peace even in the midst of the most violent of storms.

Just yesterday morning, I received the phone call from our Hospice nurse that Tom, the 54 year-old man with a brain tumor had died and his wife and family asked that I come. When I arrived, we talked about how they were all physically and emotionally exhausted, and still numb that Tom’s diagnosis and death had occurred within the last six months. Just a week into this new year, he went blind one day on his way to work and at the emergency room, an MRI revealed a brain tumor. While Tom’s death was a peaceful one, getting there these last few

days was difficult and harrowing and his dear wife said this, “I can no longer say what is God’s will and what isn’t. I have no idea how I will go on and what I will do next. The only thing good that I can affirm today is being aware of how many angels we were given along the way that truly helped us to see what to do in the darkness and how to navigate in the midst of the storm. Many people have been a gift to us from God that helped us to know love and affirm love even though I’m so, so sad.”

In my day-to-day work with people who are dying and the families who care for them, I observe people in the midst of stormy seas. Life for them is very chaotic, painful, and filled with the dark turbulent unknown. A month ago I visited with a man whose 52 year old wife was dying in their home and the Hospice nurses were trying different medical strategies to get her pain better controlled. Karl was very tearful as he talked about his thirty some years with Gloria and how he knew he would have to go on with his life without her but was at a loss as to know how he would be able to do so. Karl said he has learned from observing people in his church who have experienced significant losses that he will need to give himself at least three years to heal and find a new sense of normal. Karl knows that he will face much darkness, grief and pain but that God will give him people and strength and resources from which to draw upon that will truly make him whole again. I

was very humbled by Karl's honesty, wisdom and genuine faith and I thanked him for allowing me to be with him and his dear family in the midst of this most difficult of times.

Another Hospice encounter I had this spring also left me in awe of how people's understanding of God and their life of faith truly makes a difference when their boat is overloaded and they are being battered and bruised by the storms of life. A few months ago, I visited with a woman in Littlefield about the services Hospice of Lubbock had to offer and how Hospice might help her care for her dying father. In the course of our conversation, she told me that in the last four years she had experienced the deaths of her beloved husband, her dear mother, and two cherished grandsons. She explained that her grandsons had both died suddenly, one from a heart attack and the other in a car accident, and that her husband and mother both died of brain tumors. She said that she didn't know if she really needed Hospice to help her now care for her father as she had cared for her husband and mother in her home and received no outside services.

When I expressed my condolences and asked her how on earth she was able to be so calm and at peace with so many recent and significant losses, she said, "I learned a long time ago to wait upon the Lord and be open to the blessings and the difficulties that come

my way. Everyday I receive great strength and peace from my faith, my friends and my family. Even though I get very tearful, angry and sad, I feel that God is truly with me and even now, as my father is dying, my faith guides me and enables me to care for him and continue to be open to the life that will unfold for me.”

I have not been able to shake off my holy ground encounters with Tom’s family, Karl or the woman from Littlefield. I have been perplexed and humbled by their quiet and genuine faith; faith that gives them strength, courage and the necessary endurance to live in the midst of the storm---faith that helps them to know that God is with them, God gives them companions for this journey and ultimately all will be well.

At the end of one of my all-time favorite books, **It’s Always Something**, the actress Gilda Radner, wrote about wanting to have more certainties in her life. She wanted to believe more than anything that she would recover from the ovarian cancer that had wreaked havoc on her for so long. A few months before she died, Gilda wrote, “I had wanted to wrap this book up in a neat little package about a girl who is a comedienne from Detroit, becomes famous in New York, with all the world coming her way, gets this horrible disease of cancer, is brave and fights it, learning all the skills she needs to get through it,

and then, miraculously, things are neatly tied up and she gets well. I wanted to be able to write on the book jacket: "Her Triumph Over Cancer" or "She Wins the Cancer War." I wanted a perfect ending, so I sat down to write the book ending in place before there even was an ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle or end. Like my life, this book has ambiguity. Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next.

Life is always most ambiguous, chaotic, and unclear when we are in the midst of a storm. When it seems as if everything familiar is being threatened and we are unable to think or see clearly, we, like the disciples, are reminded that we are not in total charge of our fate. As we are being battered and thrown about, it is clear to us that we can, without warning, lose love, work, home and life itself in the blink of an eye.

“A marriage that started the way all marriages do
with the highest and holiest of hopes and love and
laughter and passion slowly dies and painfully
ends.

An elderly parent in another city, alone, falls and
breaks a hip.

A promising career ends twenty years too soon.

The company is bought out and employees are laid
off.

The stock market falls and pension security
disappears.

A child with Downs Syndrome struggles every day to
keep up, struggles to speak, spell, understand, run
and play.” (Edited in part from John Buchanan’s
sermon quoted earlier)

Fred Craddock says, “Sometimes the storm is violent and life
threatening, but the good news is that we are all in the boat
together. Some of us are rowing, some are bailing, some are
pulling at the sail and some are praying. We can whistle and
sing, we can cuss and cry. We can give each other pep talks and
it helps us to know that there are others in the boat with us.”

This story also reminds us that there is not storm, no threat, no
chaos that can undo us or negate us or destroy us because our
Lord is also there with us in the boat. No matter what is going
on in our lives, we are ultimately safe. Although everything

may be literally breaking loose, we are secure in God's presence and love.

Saint Francis of Assisi once said about his relationship with God, "All my life thou hast been at the helm, though very secretly."

When times are tough, we pray that our faith would give us the eyes to see the many ways God is in the boat with us, and the strength to continue to row against the winds that batter us. May we also be open to the gifts of companionship and peace our Lord seeks to provide us in the midst of the turbulence. When we choose to trust God in the ordinary days of our living and when we choose to trust God in the storms that shake our foundations, "we are more than conquerors through him who loves us and neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God, we gather on this beautiful summer day in this place hoping to experience a sense of your presence that will enliven us and encourage us to be more open to your gifts of grace, mercy, hope and promise in our midst. Life can be messy, difficult and very stormy and we sometimes find ourselves in the midst of chaos and darkness by the illness and death of a loved one, by the loss of a relationship, a job, or our fragile health, or by times of uncertainty and discomfort when we are at a loss of what to do next. We pray on this day for the faith and the perspective to not only survive the storms of life that batter and bruise and change us forever but to be able to trust you O Lord in the midst of them that we will be given the people, strength and resources we need to be whole and well again someday.

Remind us in our living, our relating, our doubting and our searching that God gave us a brain and a heart and that the life of faith is more about mystery than certainty, more about presence than preaching, and much, much more about doing the right thing than believing the right thing. We are grateful for the good that comes from the bad and we are always thankful for occasions of celebration and joy that enliven us and bring us together.

We pray on this day for the healing and speedy recovery of Joel Dennis and for the lives of our friends and loved ones affected by illness, loss and grief. Give us the gift of endurance to weather the difficulties and tragedies that come our way and then enable us to see with our eyes of faith the healing, the hope and the promptings of new life that will eventually give us promise and peace once again. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us now pray together...