

# Chaos and God's Presence

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

**June 24, 2018**

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## **Mark 4:35-41**

She was twelve years old and a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student at a school near Atlanta. Her father was in the Army, and they lived on base. The date was April 5, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been fatally shot in Memphis the previous evening, and this initiated a wave of riots and protests. Sitting in her classroom, the young girl saw the Assistant Principal enter. He came to her desk, asked her to take the books she might need and follow him to the office. She was also given her school records in a sealed envelope. At the office she found all the students who rode the bus to and from the Army base. They were taken outside and loaded on the bus to return to the base, though it was early in the day. As the bus pulled out, the students asked what was going on. The black driver told the children, "A great man was killed in Memphis last evening, and people are afraid." When the bus arrived at the base, and all the children began to leave the bus, the girl noticed that the driver, Mr. Grooms, was whispering something to each child. She was the last off the bus, and he whispered the same thing to her, "God loves you and so do I."

**1968** was a chaotic year. There were frequent protests and many riots over racial discrimination and the war in Vietnam. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, and many others were killed. University campuses

were disrupted by student protests, and college administrators were sometimes barricaded in their offices. Fear and anger were rampant. It is now 50 years later, and fear again dominates the thinking of many. Those who have may be afraid that what they have will be taken away—opportunities; assets; control over the circumstances of their lives. Those who have little may be afraid that what little they have will be taken away.

The disciples in the storm that we just heard about were also afraid. Jesus was taking them in a boat from a Jewish section of the Galilee across the Sea of Galilee to the eastern coast, which is in Gentile territory, where Jews were not inclined to go. If we think this story is just about a storm and Jesus' power over the wind and waves, I believe we are missing the real point of the story. This story is a metaphor of the church in chaotic times; it is also a metaphor for us when our lives are battered by chaos. Chaos, you will recall, was the state of things before God created order, and the term is used to describe any state of disorder. Think for a moment about what feels chaotic now in June 2018. I will give you a minute to ponder your own perception of chaos in this present time, and you may share your thoughts with someone near you in the pew, if you wish....

Now let's see what this Gospel story is saying to us. There are three very revealing elements in the story to consider as we try to understand its message. The first is one I have already alluded to. Jesus told the disciples, when it was dusk, "Let us go across to the other side." Why would Jesus choose that time, when darkness was descending, to make a trip across a large body of water to a place where the threat was greater? Could the writer be talking about the circumstances the early

church was facing—a time that felt dark and foreboding? And the Gospel writer adds an interesting detail: the disciples “took him with them in the boat, just as he was.”(verse 36) Consider how we take along with us, in turbulent times, the Jesus about whom we have particular expectations. We want Jesus to help us achieve certain goals. These may be personal goals. They may be political goals. They may be as broad as the survival and flourishing of the boat we are in—the body of Christ, the church. The disciples are aware of the darkness, and they are aware that they are heading toward foreign territory. Indeed, we know that when they get to the other side, they will confront a man with a legion of demons, not a welcoming party. But we are getting ahead of the storm. And don’t forget, the storm is surely a metaphor for any chaos we experience in or around our lives.

The second revealing element in this story is the fact that a great windstorm comes up quickly. The waves are high, the boat is being tossed to and fro, the boat is being swamped with water—and Jesus is sleeping in the stern on a cushion. How likely is it that a person would be asleep under those circumstances? The disciples were afraid they would all drown, and they wake Jesus up. This is another clue that the story is a metaphor. It is revealing a truth about Jesus in the midst of chaos, not just then in the first century CE, but anytime we experience chaos and an uncertain future. Jesus has complete trust in God, he believes that the disciples can handle the situation, and he wants them and us to live into the future with the same trust and confidence he has that God’s purposes will be fulfilled.

The disciples are not so sure that they can trust a sleeping Jesus to get them through this crisis. Perhaps they want him to get up and help bail out the boat.

What Jesus does and how the disciples react to it is the third revealing element. When Jesus awakens, he immediately rebukes the wind and the waves, saying, "Peace! Be still!" There is a "dead calm." As we all know, a boat in a dead calm goes nowhere. Jesus certainly has their attention now. He asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Remember that in the verse just prior to this morning's reading (verse 34) we are told that Jesus spoke to the people in parables, but "he explained everything in private to his disciples." They had the inside track. They knew what Jesus was about. We know that and more. We know Jesus to be the risen Christ. We know that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. So, Jesus is disappointed when his disciples show a lack of trust in the presence of God. The disciples, on their part, are literally terrified by the power of Jesus to calm the storm. Again, it seems clear that we are hearing a parable with meaning far greater than one isolated story about Jesus' ability to calm a storm at sea.

We can confidently conclude that this story is a metaphor, a parable, with meaning for our own lives today. It is a metaphor for the church and a parable for us as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is about chaos and the death it threatens. It is about the activity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the midst of any chaos, any disorder we experience in our lives and in the life of the church and society. The message of this passage is striking. Most importantly, we must take Jesus "just as he is." We are not to take our own revised versions. The disciples are terrified by Jesus' ability to calm the storm because this power is unexpected. The word for "storm" is the same as that for "whirlwind," when God comes out of the whirlwind to address Job in 38:1.

The disciples now realize that this Jesus, just as he is, displays the power of God. And recall that Jesus was awakened not by the storm but by the terror experienced by his disciples. Jesus, just as he is, is the person who responds to our fear. He is the person who steps into a boat without hesitation to confront an unknown threat, trusting totally in God's presence to guide him. It's not about his safety; it's not about his comfort; it's about responding to human need in foreign territory on the other side of the sea, where the people are different and the threat is real. From Jesus perspective the storm and its threat are only a distraction.

There are times when we will cry out to God, "Do you not care that we are perishing." The Holy Spirit may be disappointed by our lack of trust, but Jesus was certainly aware that fear is part of being human. Jesus is most concerned about his disciples' progress or lack of progress in having faith amidst chaos. He had told them the parable of the sower before they took this trip in the boat. He wanted them to be good soil, not the well-traveled path where seeds of faith never take root, or the rocky soil with no depth. Like the disciples in the storm it is easy to forget the power of God's presence with us. And the point of the story is not that Jesus protects us from chaos, but rather that in him we can receive a word of peace. It is peace amidst the chaos that assures us of God's love. Remember the story we began with about the twelve-year-old child getting off her school bus. When Mr. Grooms told her, "God loves you, and so do I," she experienced a wonderful sense of peace. She new that whatever bad was happening, whatever chaos was around her, everything would be okay. How do I know that? I spoke with her just the other day.

She has carried Mr. Groom's words with her since the day they were spoken, and they have shaped her life and her vocation.

This is the challenge for us today. Think about the chaos in your own life or in the world around you that you identified earlier and perhaps shared with someone near you. It feels overwhelming. Chaos and disorder are like that, particularly when one's life appears to be threatened. Having moral leadership, believing that a moral compass is guiding us through troubled waters, certainly helps reduce our anxiety. However, we all need to be able to trust in a power greater than the situation we are in. Jesus reminds us through the Holy Spirit, just as he reminded his disciples on the boat: I am here with you. Why should you be afraid? Where is your faith? When storms come up, when chaos fills our consciousness, Jesus wants us, and I am quoting Henri Nouwen, "to look upward instead of inward, and embrace the gifts that are given." When we do that, we set aside our inner turmoil and, like Mr. Grooms, the bus driver, we reach out to people around us who need to hear the message that brings peace even in a raging storm: "God loves you, and so do I." That is divine love, and it brings the assurance we all need. You can put your trust in that.

Amen