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Mark 4:35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'

³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

³⁷A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

³⁸But 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?'

³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

⁴⁰He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Mark 4;35-41
Preached at TAPC June 24, 2012

It is a funny thing about the Bible—after awhile of reading it, you can begin to tell how a story is going to go simply by noticing its geography. Gardens are good places where bad things tend to happen. A wilderness means that things are about to get very, very hard. Mountaintops are places that God tends to show up. And the stories that start on the sea almost always come with a storm.

In the scriptures, the sea is a place of chaos. It has been so ever since the beginning of time, when the Spirit of God hovered over the primordial waters and began beckoning creation forth from the deep. On the second day of that week, the hand of God swept through the formless void, like an orchestra conductor delivering a downbeat, and with that one smooth motion, pushed out lands to the left and waters to the right. The dry lands he called Earth, and the waters, he called Sea.

Ever since that day, humans have lived out their lives on the dry ground of Earth, but on occasion—sometimes by an act of God and sometimes by an act of their own will—they have found themselves in the chaotic waters of the Sea.

Wade very far into the sea, and there is no telling what you will find there. A artifact from Noah's ark. A wheel from one of Pharaoh's chariots that got stuck in the mud as the Israelites raced ahead on dry ground. A giant fish who still talks about Jonah, telling the story about "the one that got away." And perhaps, if you go very, very deep, you might catch a glimpse of Leviathan, the massive sea monster that God pointed to as proof that Job had tread into deep theological water. The sea swims with pieces of chaos...of evidence of the futility of human power when it is matched against the power of the sea.

All of this is to say that, when Mark begins his story of the day that Jesus and his disciples make their way across the sea in a fragile fishing boat, the reader who has been paying attention will see the sky start to darken and hear the background music grow foreboding. And indeed it is no time at all before the wind starts blowing and the waters rise up in mutiny.

You know it's a bad storm when a bunch of fishermen go looking for the only carpenter on board. The terrified disciples find Jesus—unbelievably—asleep on the deck and waste no time in rousing him with words as ancient as the psalmist: “Lord, don't you care that we are perishing?”

“Lord, don't you care that we are perishing?” That is a prayer of the sea. It is raw and vulnerable and desperate. So different from the carefully worded, highly sanitized prayers of the freshly-scrubbed faithful who speak in dulcet tones as they read from their bulletins in their downtown church....a far cry from breakfast table prayers, where heads bow dutifully to recite a blessing. “Lord, don't you care that we are perishing?” is the prayer of people who have felt the waters come up to their necks and have nowhere else to turn.

I wonder when you last prayed the prayer of the sea. When you last felt the wind and waves besieging you, tossing your weathered vessel to and fro. Maybe it was in the midst of a flood of bills that pushed you further and further underwater. Maybe it was the doctor's visit that brought life-changing news. Maybe it was the taunts of enemies—real or imagined—that berated you from all sides. Or perhaps it was when you uttered the same prayer for the three-thousandth time and still heard only the silence of a God who might as well be sleeping on the job. It takes no great

stretch of the imagination to put ourselves in that boat, beside the disciples in that storm.

The plea of the disciples wakes Jesus from his slumber and propels him into action. And here again, anyone familiar with the Bible's geography cannot be surprised. Because there is one other thing that is true about sea stories in the scriptures: as surely as they are stories of chaos and fear, they are also invariably stories where the saving power of God is revealed. Noah, the Israelites, Jonah, even Job are picked up out of the waters and set safely on dry ground. And so also in Mark's story, the power of Jesus proves stronger than the power of the storm. A word from the Savior's lips—be still!—and the wind and waves fall silently into submission.

If the story ended there, it would be a beautiful miracle story illustrating the saving power of God, ending with one big happy family of disciples sailing off into the sunset.

But the one they called Teacher isn't finished teaching. As it turns out, this is not only a story of the power of God, but also about the life of the disciple. No sooner than the surf has settled does Jesus turn to his disciples and ask, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" It sounds like a rather insensitive first word to speak to men who have come within inches of losing their life. It breaks every pastoral care rule in the book—you don't berate trauma victims with questions, trivializing their fears, and questioning their faith. But Jesus wants to set his disciples free from the power of the storms, and so he needs them to know this truth: fear and faith do not share space very well.

Fear and Faith are both jealous masters. They have no patience for partitioning off pieces of a disciple's life, but work to consume the whole heart, mind, and spirit. And so when Jesus sees the disciples' knees knocking and teeth chattering with fear, he knows that their faith is being pushed out the back door.

In fact, there are good students of the Bible who say that the opposite of Faith is not, as many would venture, Doubt; no, the opposite of Faith is Fear. After all, when Jesus asks the disciples if they have faith, he does not expect them to produce a theological treatise on the relationship of the human and divine natures in the second person of the Trinity. He is not looking for a list of essential tenets of the Christian faith to which each disciple has dutifully subscribed. He is not hoping the fishermen will belt out the Apostles' Creed at the top of their lungs, swearing fervent allegiance to its contents. No, when Jesus goes looking for faith, he is looking for people who can see the storms swelling around them and then see the one whose power is greater still.

Time and again in the scriptures, God appears to the faithful and speaks these words: "Do not fear." "Do not fear"—those words commission every prophet from Moses to Malachai. They are God's calling card when he introduces himself to Abram, Joshua, and a bunch of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. They bracket the earthly life of Christ: Mary's first encounter with an angel comes on the day she learns she is to bear the Son of God in her womb, but first the angel says to her "do not fear." And thirty-some years later, she goes seeking that Son of God in a cemetery, and there the angel is again—he has unbelievable news that Easter morning, but first he reminds her, "do not fear."

Fear may keep us up at night...it may tie our hands and hold our minds hostage...but these are not its greatest powers. The greatest power that fear can wield is to obstruct our vision of Jesus. That is the reason the command “do not fear” comes to us so consistently—not so that we might rest more easily, but so that we might see more clearly.

A few years ago, an artist in New York named Brian Rea started keeping a casual list of things that people are afraid of. The more he wandered around the city listening to conversations, the more he became aware of just how many things in this modern day world cause us to fear, and so he turned his list into a mural. He took up an entire wall of a gallery, painted it black, and then, using plain white chalk, starting in the middle and spiraling out to the edges, he started writing these fears down. Now spectators can stand in front of this gigantic wall and scan the list of terrors that radiates out from the center like winds from the eye of a hurricane. There are hundreds there, ranging from the mildly perplexing—lost luggage, telemarketers, and bad haircuts—to the truly terrifying—child abduction, genocide, and the hole in the ozone layer. There is a corner listing all manner of mental and physical illness, from amnesia to west Nile virus. There is a section of political nightmares—hijackings, riots, suicide bombers, and (for reasons I want your help with after the service) preachers. There are circles of emotional hell—loneliness, humiliation, depression, and failure.

If you gaze at this mural and attempt to take in its sea of words, you will experience a sensation very much like being in the thick of a storm—each word pulls you deeper into anxiety and pushes you further away from the center of safety.

This is the way that the waters of chaos overwhelm us...one fear triggers another and then another, until the storm only grows in size and strength.

But it's a funny thing about this mural. If you stand back and fix your eyes on the very center of it, those hundreds of fears just sort of fade out of the corners of your eyes, vague outlines of chalk dust. It's not that the west Nile virus has been eradicated or that the depression becomes any less dark. It's just that where you train your eyes has a way of shifting the power that the different parts of the mural have over you.

Brian Rea didn't draw Jesus at the center of his mural. But our faith tells us that at the crux of the chaos of this world...right there where the torrents of disease and injustice bump up against the surges of violence and heartache...right there is where Christ stands.

He is Lord over all chaos. The wind and waves cannot overwhelm him; the nails and thorns cannot hold him; the shroud of death cannot enfold him. He stands in the center of the storm, opening his arms wide in welcome to his fear-stricken faithful, whispering to them, "Peace, be still."