

June 23, 2024
Proper 7, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Job 38:1-11
Psalms 107:1-3, 23-32
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

In the Name of the One, Holy, and Living God. Amen.

This morning, we hear a question that rips at the heart: *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* This is not the usual sort of question we ask God. For example, when we pray, we tend to stay on the safe side – on the shore. We ask about our behaviors – “make me a better fill-in-the blank.” “Make me able to stop whatever-it-is.” Sometimes we try to strike a deal with God: “if you just get me out of this jam...”

But that is not what is going on in the boat. *Teacher*, (yes, you there, the one asleep on the cushion) *do you not care that we are perishing?* This is a very different prayer, welling up from a deeper place – from the very core of our being. It feels like calling God on the carpet: *Do I matter? Do I count? Do you care?*

I think most of us are afraid to go there. We don't dare say to God what has been said to us so many times by parents, siblings, teachers, classmates, bosses, and spouses. We don't dare say to God: *who do you think you are?*

Why is it, do you suppose that it's hard to ask God if God cares? I have a friend who often says, *God, I know you don't care.* But that's not the same as asking, is it? Why don't we ask the question? Maybe we're afraid the answer will be, *Do I care? Er, yeah, not so much.* At the end of the day, you and I are, for the most part, afraid.

We're afraid that we are at sea... alone, without buoys, or channel markers, or light houses, or Coast Guard. All at sea. Holy Scripture reminds us today that our emotional DNA is both fascinated, and frightened, by the sea.

In the ancient Near East, the sea was a symbol of chaos. But it wasn't just symbolic. Ships sailing the Mediterranean often experienced danger in its unpredictable waters. Even the Sea of Galilee was prone to fierce storms whipping up out of nowhere. The sea is a symbol of chaos for us, as well. With all our scientific ability to predict storms, they still scare the crap out of us.

+++

So, here's a question. How do you move from fear to faith? Both fear and faith seem to arise when we face the unknown, the challenging, the difficult, the threatening. On the surface, faith and fear seem like opposites.

But I wonder if fear and faith aren't more closely related. Maybe it isn't an either/or situation. Maybe faith doesn't banish fear but makes it possible to cope with it. Maybe it's not about whether you're afraid or not, but how you respond.

Today's passage from Mark is about Jesus calming the stormy sea. It's a important story to the early followers of Jesus, and occurs in Matthew and Luke as well as Mark. The church has a long tradition of thinking of its buildings as boats, as shelter from the storm. The part of a church where you all are sitting is called the "nave" which comes from the same Latin word, *navis*, as in Navy.

+ + +

Mark starts this passage with, "When evening had come." "When evening had come," Jesus said to them, "let's go across to the other side."

If this had been a screenplay, he might have said, "Let's go into the cellar of this old house," or, "Let's check out this abandoned mental hospital." And one of the disciples would turn to the camera and say, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Maybe they did have a bad feeling, because they knew what was on the other side – or thought they did. Philistines, like the giant Goliath were over there. Crazy kings. People possessed with legions of demons. Everyone who didn't like them and everyone they didn't like were over there, on the other side.

Yet Jesus invites them to go across to the other side. You and I also have other sides, places we don't want to go. I wonder what's on the other side for you. Growing up, growing old, losing a job, losing our health, family strife, saying goodbye.

In addition, there are other children of God whose lives we know little or nothing about. Others who don't look, or speak, or pray, or eat, or celebrate the way we do. But the "othering" of people is from our own limited perspective. In the eyes of God, there is no such thing as the Other. As the old hymn reminds us, *In Christ there is no east or west*.

And yet, Jesus invites us to the other side, into that foreign territory, to that place we'd rather not go. Jesus wants us to go there, not because it's our duty to change them. Jesus doesn't insist on a night voyage on a stormy sea to make an impact on the ones who live over there. He does it to change the ones making the voyage. He does it to change the disciples, to change us.

Jesus beckons us forward in order that we might experience a change in ourselves, so that we might discover a new reservoir of hope, that next supply of peace and courage, that grace that enables us to take the next step. And then to tell the world what we have seen and heard.

+ + +

So then, how do we move from fear to faith? Life in God, the life of faith, is not a “one and done” sort of thing. It is a, however, a “stretch and grow” sort of thing. Leaving detox doesn’t make you sober. Living a changed life one day at a time does. A wedding doesn’t make a marriage. A lifetime of commitment and companionship does.

And, as much as we dread it, we know that the movement from fear to faith to growth leads to new fear/new faith/new growth. After all, my friends, grace is gradual.

A perfect example of this pattern is Juneteenth. As it has only been a national holiday since 2021, for many of us, Juneteenth was a celebration that happened on the other side. Celebrations like Juneteenth are at their best when they do two things. First, they remind us of an important moment in our common life, in this case the final, and much delayed, end of chattel slavery in the United States. And hooray for that.

But the power of this still-new national holiday will be in its ability to call us to the work that remains. To invite us to yet another side where, one day, we may all lay down the shackles of our collective history and live, as God calls us, as the Beloved Community.

+ + +

How do we get there from here? The answer is simple. Go. Frederick Buechner urges us to, “Go...Go for God’s sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world’s sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going.”

Jesus will be with us, Buechner assures us, “Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we’re done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him.”¹

Find him. For what moves us from fear to faith is not a what, but a who. The who is Jesus. Reynolds Price tells of an 87-year-old woman who wrote to him about one of those moments in which the storm is calmed, and we see Jesus. She was facing fear as she went through exhausting medical tests before surgery.

One day she had a kind of vision. "I went out along the Galilean hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and then said, 'What do you want?' And I said, 'Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after the tests because I can't

¹ *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons.*

manage alone?' He [Jesus] thought for a moment and then said, 'How would it be if I came?'"²

This is precisely what God has done in Jesus Christ. Every time we cry out, *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* Jesus replies, "How would it be if I came?" Jesus reveals to us a God who cares passionately for our wellbeing, and the wellbeing of those on the other side; a God whose goodness is always at work beneath the surface of every storm.

As a people called by God, we gather regularly together, in this nave, in this boat, to tell stories and to sing songs (sometimes even the Navy Hymn), to pray for and with each other, and to dine at this table. We do all these things to remind ourselves of God's passionate regard for us, and to be strengthened to go out onto the sea that is the world God loves, with more faith and less fear.

And when we are faithful to this call of Jesus, you and I step into the biblical story, and we join with the morning stars, the heavenly beings, the prophets and the apostles who have said to the world – again and again and again – the four words that are the most frequently repeated command, and promise, in the Bible, "do not be afraid."

So then, my dear friends in Christ, do not be afraid, and you will find that on each voyage across to the other side, you are changed (little by little), getting ever closer to the life that God intends for us, the life that God intends for the world.

"Let us go across to the other side." Today. Together. Amen.

² Reynolds Price, *Letter to a Man in a Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 30-31.