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# EXPERIENCED SAILORS

Mark 4:1-2, 35-41

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I am not an experienced sailor.

When I was a kid, growing up around the rivers and lakes of northeastern Ontario, I absolutely spent time in small boats – canoes and paddleboats – and I loved to tie off an inflatable raft and just float on the river after a hard day on the farm. My uncle even took us out in his speedboat a time or two. But paddle-boating and canoeing on a placid lake, or floating in a river eddy on clear, sunny summer day, did not prepare me at all for my first time on a boat in the north Atlantic.

I absolutely loved it! It was a grey, breezy day, so there was a very exciting swell on the ocean. It was May, and freezing cold – we were off the north coast of Newfoundland doing a whale and birdwatching tour – and I stayed out on deck long after the rest of the group gave up and went in the cabin.

There were no whales; there were very few birds. There weren't even any icebergs that year!

But there was something about being caught up in the powerful grip of the ocean, going up and down the waves, spray coming over the prow, having to fling yourself across the deck to move around, timing your movements with the roll of the sea, it was exciting – but I also felt so very small and not-in-charge.....like I was clinging onto the back of a great beast that was taking me where it wanted to go. And that was on a relatively calm day, as days at sea go; I cannot even begin to imagine how caught up and small and not-in-charge the disciples at sea on shallow, wind-tossed Galilee must have felt in the grip of that terrible storm.

I'm going to go out a limb and say that this is probably a familiar story from Jesus' life for most of us. If you haven't been reading and hearing it throughout your life, I know for sure that you've heard it in the last couple of years, because we read it together during Lent in 2020, a couple of Sundays before COVID hit and upended us in a very turbulent sea of trouble indeed. Generally-speaking, when we read this story or when a minister preaches it or we encounter it in a Bible study, generally-speaking, we think of Jesus calming the storm as making a powerful point about who Jesus is.

For his disciples, who had grown up and lived reading the Scriptures that have become our Old Testament, they knew that only God creates; so only God has power over creation. And here is Jesus, their teacher and friend, having the power that only God has. It's a huge hint that Jesus is God in some new way, a new expression or revelation of God, right there in the boat with them. I don't think they got all the way there in the moment, but eventually, the disciples came to realise that Jesus was vastly more than a good teacher, a wise person or even a prophet. In some deep, significant way, Christ present is God present.

But a second way that you may have heard or understood this passage centers on the questions Jesus asks. The climactic moment of this story comes when, after Jesus finally wakes up, he calms the storm with only a few words. In the version of the story we read today, Jesus got up, shouted words into the wind, and commanded the waves. And then he said: That's enough! Be still! And the wind and the waves stopped.

This version of the story is a bit different than the one we usually read. It's from a new translation of the Bible, made more readable by using modern language. In older, perhaps more familiar, translations what Jesus does to get the storm to stop is described as a "rebuke." Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves, gives them a bit of a scolding, if you will, and they settle down, obedient. And then Jesus turns to his disciples in the boat with him and asks his questions: How can you be so afraid? After all you've seen, where is your faith?

I don't know about you, but I have always sort of carried Jesus' rebuke of the wind and waves over into the question he asks of his disciples, rebuking them, too, for their fall-at-the-first-hurdle, blown away by the storm, weak faith. Jesus' questions are easy to read as constructive criticism at best, in a tone of "I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed." At worst, we might hear Jesus' questions as rhetorical, not meant to be answered, and delivered with frustration, a rebuke – a scolding – for times when our own faith has been wind-blown and knocked sideways by a storm.

So when I came across this old familiar story in the new version we read together today, because that word "rebuke" was gone, I heard Jesus' questions differently, for the first time.



Jesus shouted the storm into obedient calm, and then turned to his frightened disciples and spoke to them without a leftover disciplinarian tone from dealing with the storm. And hearing those questions in this new way left me wondering, what if, just maybe, Jesus really wants us to answer those questions? What if we are not meant to be rebuked and scolded like the wind and waves, made to feel bad or like we've disappointed God by being afraid? What if those are real questions that Jesus is asking?

Jesus never says in this story, "don't be afraid of the storm." Being unafraid is not what Jesus wants from us, it seems.

So let's re-read Jesus' questions, moving the emphasis away from the fear and perhaps any guilt we might be holding onto because of it, and let's put the emphasis on the "you" rather than the fear. "

How can \*you\* be so afraid? After all you have seen, where is your faith?"

In the absence of any imagined divine disappointment or frustration to distract us, we are suddenly confronted with good questions that Jesus would probably like us to actually put some thought into answering...because there will always be another storm coming. In the space of calm that Jesus created for his disciples, in the spaces of calm that he creates for us, Jesus invites us to answer those questions: to look inside ourselves, to look back, and to look for our faith.

In asking us to look inside ourselves – as he did with his disciples – Jesus is not telling us that we can't be afraid of things that genuinely scare us. He's giving us permission to be afraid when life throws an unexpected storm our way. He's giving us permission to be anxious, to worry, to be pre-occupied, to be angry, to be distracted, to be stressed out. But – and this is so important – Jesus is also encouraging us to unpack those anxieties, those frustrations, those fears; to dig under our knee-jerk response and consider how it is that we are feeling or experiencing the storm in the way that we are.

I wonder what it was, specifically, about the storm that made each of the disciples on the boat so afraid. Perhaps some of them felt very small and breakable in the face of a violent power that was so large and uncaring; perhaps some didn't trust the construction of their boat or the sailing abilities of their fellow sailors. Maybe they'd tried everything they could think of to make their situation better or safer, and now they were out ideas and without any resources of their own left to draw upon. Maybe they felt out of control and

out of options for regaining that control back again. We know that, at the height of the storm, they thought they were going to die, swamped and sunk under the crashing waves. The only possible help they had – Jesus –was asleep and not doing anything, it seemed, to save them; they had to shake him awake in the midst of the storm.

Jesus asks, “how can you be so afraid?” and once we’ve figured out the answer to that question, we can do what Jesus advises next: invite faith into the conversation again, by looking back at where faith has already been in our lives.

The Bible is a really great place to find examples of how to do that. All those Psalms that celebrate and praise God by re-stating the history of God’s mighty acts and miracles for his people, worship services in the Bible, like the one in Nehemiah that tell stories about how God has stepped in and done the impossible for his people...retold anew as a central part of how they worshipped him. The amazing list of what people did “by faith” from the book of Hebrews: by faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went, not knowing where he was going. By faith, Sarah conceived, even though she was old, since she considered God faithful about keeping his promises. And the list goes on...

All of these are examples, models, of what looking back looks like; and it’s an essential part of our answer to Jesus’ questions, in the calm after the storm: after all that we have seen.

It may be that some of you have seen a fair bit, have seen a lot of Jesus in your own life, over the years, calming your storms and being present with you on ordinary days, too. And that is a wonderful gift to have, a resource to draw on in new times of anxiety or challenge or fear. But if you haven’t seen a lot of Jesus yourself yet, if you are new crew member in the boat, so to speak, it’s a good thing to draw on the experience of others as you go, whether that experience is part of Scripture or from the witness of other Christians.

And that brings us to another phrase in our Scripture reading that caught my attention this week: “experienced sailors.” And how even they were afraid, as the storm whipped up and the boat began to fill with water.

It occurred to me that sometimes “experience” actually means that you know just how bad a situation really is compared to someone who doesn’t know much about it. Jesus’ disciples were former fishermen, familiar not just with boats and storms, but with the sea of Galilee itself, how wind and rain affected it; they knew firsthand what kind of weather was safe to sail in and how bad the storms could be. And these experienced sailors were afraid.

They knew that they couldn’t safely sail through this one, and that wasn’t because they weren’t good sailors or brave men...sometimes the storm is simply bigger than we can manage on our own. And that’s where Jesus comes in, whether in that storm at sea so long ago or in our own storms, in our own lives today.

Churches are full of experienced sailors with Jesus, who have seen and known God’s presence and power, carrying them through all sorts of storms. That experience is a resource that we can share, that capacity to have faith in Jesus in the storm, that past history of having seen, first-hand, what Jesus can do and be for his beloved friends even in the most difficult and hopeless situation. Sharing our experiences, drawing on the experience of others when we need it, that is the value of Christian friendship and fellowship.

And it goes a long way to answering the rest of Jesus’ question about where our faith is.

The experienced sailors among us will tell us that our faith must be first in our minds, and placed entirely in Jesus. If you’re wondering what it might be like to have your faith somewhere else, though, I invite you to imagine for a moment, how frightened the people in the boats that didn’t have Jesus in them must have been in the midst of that storm on Galilee.

Had you forgotten about them? After a long day of teaching and preaching, Jesus and his disciples set sail across Galilee in their own boat, but some of the crowd came too, in a few other boats that followed along. I don’t know about you, but I have always focused on this story from the perspective of being in the boat that had Jesus in it, witnessing Jesus’ powerful act in calming the storm, hearing Jesus’ questions for his disciples. But there were other boats at sea that night in the storm, and no doubt a few experienced fishermen and sailors among them, too. I wonder what was scarier for them: the familiar terror of the storm, or the sudden, inexplicable calm?

Without seeing or hearing Jesus shout at the storm to be still, I suspect that the whole boat experience that night was all-round pretty terrifying for them. As bad as the storm had been, the sudden and eerie calm of a still sea and no wind must have been confusing and frightening, too; the unknown always is. Either way, far better to be in the boat with Jesus, whether in the midst of a storm or with clear sailing ahead, than to be at sea without him.

I'm going to jump over to our Psalm for today, just for a moment, to finish up; there's a line in it that perfectly sums up a life of following Jesus: they grow stronger as they go. Throughout the whole book, Mark's gospel takes great pains to show us that following Jesus is a whole-life, all-of-our-life kind of commitment. When we read this familiar story of Jesus calming the storm from the perspective of discipleship, of spiritual journey, it becomes an opportunity to learn how to grow as we go. It's a teachable moment, as so much of what Jesus said and did was. Jesus is teaching us about himself, about his power and who he is as God in Christ. And he's teaching us something about ourselves, too.

His questions – “how can you be so afraid? After all you've seen, where is your faith?” – those questions aren't meant to make us think of ourselves as weak because of how we respond to trouble or to make us feel bad or guilty about the state of our faith; those questions are meant to help us, and our faith in Jesus, grow stronger as we go. And they also remind us that being with Jesus on stormy days is better than being anywhere else, even on a calm sea, without him. Thanks be to God! Amen.