

Mark 4: 35-41 True Power

My aunt is a very talented artist. When I was in elementary school I spent most of the summers with my grandmother in Wilmington. She had an oil painting that Billie Jean had done and given to her. To me it showed a very gripping scene. It showed a violent nighttime storm at sea with a boat nearing a rocky shore. You could see a lighthouse up on a cliff, but the light seemed to be pointed away from the boat. In the way of lighthouses the light turns in a circle. It seemed to be coming toward the boat, but the scene was frozen in place with the light shining away from those caught in the stormy sea. In the painting you could almost feel the fear of those on the boat. You were left wondering if the light would move toward them enough for them to see and avert the danger of wrecking on the shore. Whenever I read scripture about storms somehow the image of that painting comes to mind. There is a possibility of safety, but it depends on recognition gained through the appearance of the light. Our passage today occurs on the Sea of Galilee, not the ocean. And there is no lighthouse on the shore. So what is the connection? The fear that was present in those on the boat. The Sea of Galilee is not actually a large body of water. The River Jordan flows into it at one end and leaves at the other. It is a long body of water, but even sailing in the middle of it you can see both shores at the same time. Because of its orientation it can however become very rough if the wind comes down the length of it. On my first two trips to Israel, the water was very calm the whole time we were in the Galilee region. It was hard to picture a storm that would be frightening to men who had made their living as fishermen. The last trip however was an eye opener. It was a day we were spending at various locations along the shore. It was a bright and sunny day, not a cloud in the sky. In the morning the sea appeared calm. But while we stopped for lunch the wind began rising. There were still no clouds, but the wind was high and coming in the right direction to stir the waves. Suddenly you could see whitecaps and high waves on the water. Unlike other days, there were no longer fishing boats out on the water. In our passage, it is evening, and Jesus tells the disciples that they should get in the boat and go to the other side. Jesus has spent the day teaching a very large crowd by the sea. The crowd is so large and pressing upon him that he teaches from a boat so the sea must have been calm. At Jesus' invitation his companions got in the boat and headed out for that other side. The reference to the other side refers to leaving the area where the Hebrews lived and heading toward the area where Gentiles resided. Perhaps the intent is just to leave this demanding crowd behind or perhaps it is so Jesus can continue his ministry there among the Gentiles. Our passage doesn't concern the reason for the trip, it only tells us Jesus is essentially headed toward a place where one following Jewish tradition would not go. But Jesus and those with him in that boat are accompanied by other boats as they begin this trip across the sea. Mark makes no more mention of those other boats. Whether or not they were also caught in the storm is not evidently relevant to Mark. Instead Mark narrows his focus to just the boat occupied by Jesus. Mark tells us that as they were crossing a great windstorm arose and water began to swamp the boat. Jesus, evidently exhausted from his day, has found a place in the stern with a cushion and has fallen asleep. The others in the boat are afraid. Having been in a fishing boat in a similar situation in Canada, I can understand their fear when water began to come into the boat. In their fear for their lives, they wake Jesus up with this complaint: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" There are several interesting little details in this story already. In

Mark's gospel the men with Jesus have already been appointed as apostles—those who would take Jesus' good news to others. However, although they have come at his call, in this passage the term disciple is not used. And when they awaken Jesus, they do so by calling him Teacher, not Master or Messiah or Lord. This indicates that they do not yet realize just who Jesus is. At what point does this story interact with our lives? We have professed our faith and desire to be disciples of Jesus as they have. We have gotten in the boat with Jesus, so to speak. But are we willing to go to the other side? Jesus by proposing this trip has indicated they are going to a place where there is hostility toward them. Their destination alone may have made them fearful. Now to top it all off, they are in the middle of a windstorm on the water in the evening—even if it is not totally dark, all their surroundings are sources of fear. And Jesus is in the stern of the boat—--asleep on a cushion. When we get into the boat with Jesus and ask to be led according to God's will and purpose, we often find ourselves in places which challenge—and yes, frighten us. And sometimes in the storms which come into our lives we have the feeling that God is not steering the boat we are in, but that Jesus is in the stern asleep. The cry that those frightened companions of Jesus expresses the fear that they are going to drown, that they will die; in literal terms the translation is that they are being destroyed. Fear has taken hold of them. Fear often takes hold of us as well. We view others with suspicion if they are different. After the events in Charleston this past Wednesday, where those who welcomed the stranger as their faith bade them were murdered by that stranger, one fallout is likely to be the spread of fear. Fear of one another. Fear which causes church doors to be locked and strangers not welcomed—especially if they are different. Yes, getting into the boat with Jesus can be dangerous because he asks us to be welcoming—to be caring—to accept others into the circle that is the body of Christ. We are fearful of doing this. Jesus' words to those fearful men who awaken him are not very sympathetic, are they? "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Instead they are challenging. Jesus is not actually asking them about their belief in or about him, which is what we often understand faith to mean. Instead, Jesus is asking them about the strength of their trust. Fear often paralyzes us, making it hard to trust. Perhaps, Jesus is not sharp with them because he is grumpy that they have awakened him, but because their question assumed the worst. Fear made them assume they were dying. They did not awaken him saying, "Teacher, we need your help." They don't respond to their fear with a faithful request, but with a fearful accusation. Of course, despite their response to the storm, Jesus does care for them. He responds by stilling the sea. The same is true for us. We don't have to have the perfect trust of David which allowed him to face Goliath knowing that God would support him. God's mercy and grace are still available to us. Jesus' response has calmed the waters with just a few words. Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace, Be still." The wind ceased and there was a dead calm—not even a ripple left from those waves which had been coming over the side of the boat. In the story of David and Goliath, God's power acting on behalf of Israel to win a victory over a mighty army through the actions of a young boy is amazing. But the impact of that power is filtered. In the calming of the storm, those in the boat see the direct demonstration of God's power. This man they called Rabbi has a power they did not expect. It is interesting that despite those calm waters now surrounding them, the fear doesn't evaporate. Instead it transforms into something else: "Who is this then, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" That doesn't sound exactly like the joy you would expect over their rescue from being destroyed. There is no thanksgiving expressed only a great awe. One

of the articles I read this week about the gospel passage from Mark began by posing this question: "Do you think the disciples were more frightened before the stilling of the storm or after?" That to me is an interesting question. The translation of verse 41 from the passage I read goes as follows: "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" But many other translations differ in the description of the disciple's reaction. The King James Version tells us they feared exceedingly while the New International version tells us they were terrified. A Greek lexicon will give you the option that the word used in the original here could mean fear in the sense of reverence. But that is way down in the list of options. If you go back to the beginning of the passage and consider Mark's description of the events, do you think awe is truly the emotion prevalent in the disciples' minds? They have just witnessed the true power of God; a power that is beyond what was expected. They thought they knew Jesus, but now they have to wonder if they truly did. Encountering the power of God is a life changing experience. It is an invitation to greater trust. It is an invitation to understand that while God may be so much bigger than we think; while God does not fit into the boxes we make, God will not abandon us to the tempestuous storms of life or even to the gale force winds our fears can generate. Jesus asks those he called to change as he prepared them to be disciples. Jesus asks us to change. We are called to leave behind many of our ideas, our fears of others and enter the strange world where we view all as children of God. But just as Jesus calmed the storm, so can our fears be calmed with trust. Our role as disciples is to live out that trust that God will come into our lives, stilling wind and wave to calm the fear-filled heart. And when we do that we find the courage not just to survive, but to flourish; not just to live, but to live with abundance, and not just to get by, but knowing the favor we enjoy in and through Christ, to dare great things, expect great things, ask for great things and share great things. And not the least of this to share the words: Do not be afraid to one another, trust for Jesus is in the boat with us and possesses the true power to calm the storm. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.