

Pentecost 7B
Peace, Seattle
June 21, 2015
Mark 4:35-41

EYE OF THE STORM

The book and film, THE PERFECT STORM, tells the real life story of what happened when three independent weather systems collided over the North Atlantic in October 1991, combining their fury into a storm so massive that it might happen only once in a century.¹

To the fishermen on the sword-fishing boat the Andrea Gail who were caught in the open sea trying to survive 120 mph winds and some of the highest waves ever measured—up to 100 feet— the storm was their worst nightmare come true.

When wind and waves gather themselves with such force and fury, how can anyone survive?

That question of survival in the face of terror and the sea's fury is at the heart of our story this morning from Mark's gospel.

Jesus and his disciples are traveling from one side of Galilee to the other when they find themselves caught up in a great windstorm, and before long they're taking on water faster than they can bail it out.

We know from other early Christian literature that this story from Mark was a favorite of the early church.

One generation removed from Jesus' earthly ministry, and faced with increasing persecution and the ever-present brutality of Rome, our ancestors saw in this story a metaphor for the Christian community—a tiny boat cast about in the stormy sea of the world, facing conditions that were epic—even demonic in scale—in frequent danger of sinking.

Their questions about survival were reshaped into something like this:

When the forces of the world, the powers that be, and the destructive tendencies of human sin throw themselves against our vulnerable community of faith, how will we survive?

In the wake of the hateful events that transpired at Mother Emanuel Church AME, in Charleston, SC, this past week it's a very contemporary question.²

During the last 12 months in our country something resembling a perfect storm has been brewing. The conditions of that storm can be traced to the very origins of our nation, and deeper still to the first instance when one people determined to exert coercive power over another.

The history of Mother Emanuel echoes America's own painful passage through slavery, the civil rights movement, and into the racially turbulent present. Throughout its nearly 200 years, Mother Emanuel has been a haven for hope and an alloy for human rights; and the suffering the community has witnessed—indeed, endured—has been enormous.³

When the forces of the world, the powers that be, and the destructive tendencies of human sin throw themselves against the community of faith, how will that community survive?

¹ Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea*, Norton Pub., 1997. The book was subsequently made into a film of the same name.

² <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/massacre-at-black-church-breaks-heart-and-soul-of-south-carolina/>

³ For more history of the AME follow this link: <http://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history>

This question is really about what kind of God we have, and what we can expect from this God in the face of circumstances that threaten to capsize us and send us reeling into the abyss.

Returning to the gospel story, we find that Mark tells it with very few details. Only the most crucial elements are included—and the most important one is found at the beginning of vs. 38.

Where do we find Jesus in this boat in this storm? He is in the stern, asleep on the cushion.

Now there is only one seat in the stern of that kind of boat used by the fisherman of Galilee, and only one cushion, namely the one at which the helmsman sat and steered.⁴

Could it be, the story asks, that Jesus is asleep on the job?

For our ancestors living through dangerous and tumultuous times, it must have seemed at times as though the Lord must be asleep at the wheel; that he didn't care if they perished.

As the storm gains fury, and water pours in over the gunnels, finally the disciples, overwhelmed by Jesus' seeming indifference to their peril, shake him awake—

TEACHER, they cry, DON'T YOU CARE THAT WE ARE PERISHING?!

This cry is not only theirs, but ours.

In her letter addressing the shooting at Mother Emanuel Church, our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton writes:

We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man. But we know that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly. The Rev. Mr. Pinckney leaves a wife and children. The other eight victims leave grieving families. The family of the suspected killer and two congregations are broken. When will this end?

With each brutal wave the demonic storm of racism and its attendant violence drives us closer to the brink, closer to drowning, closer to sinking.

WAKE UP LORD! we want to cry. DON'T YOU CARE WHAT'S HAPPENING TO US?!

In Mark's story, Jesus, awakened, rises to shout down the storm as if it's an unruly, braying mule, "MUZZLE YOURSELF!" he yells, and, incredibly, his words work.

His companions have their answer. Yes, Jesus cares if they perish.

Acting from that centered place of calm and confidence and faith, Jesus becomes the eye of the storm for the disciples and for the early Christian community. Can he be that for us? What they wanted most—what we all want most—is rescue—protection from the forces within and without that set upon us, threatening our stability and even the existence of community.

In response to their cries—ours—Jesus gives two things.

- **First**, he shows he has the power to create calm in the midst of the raging storm.
- **Second**, he declares his commitment to companion his disciples through whatever circumstances they and we may find ourselves in, no matter how perilous, daring us to trust him.

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID? he says. DID YOU THINK I WOULD ABANDON YOU?

BUT WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF CHRIST WITH US MEAN?

The answer to that question is found in the rest of Mark's gospel and in the texts of our lives.

There are times that God's answer to our pleas for mercy does come in the form of rescue, and some of us here can share personal testimonies to that affect. But the God we meet face-to-face in Jesus does not always provide rescue from the perils and storms that toss us about.

You can bet the crew of the Andrea Gail called out for rescue when they found themselves staring into the mouth of that storm from hell. Yet God's response to them was not rescue from the storm.

The murders that took place at Mother Emanuel Wednesday evening took place in the midst of a gathering steeped in prayer. And the lives of nine people were taken.

What then does Christ's promise of accompaniment mean?

It means he's in the same boat with us—whether that boat be our nation's struggle with the cancer of racism, or our individual struggles with debilitating health or a failed relationship or an uncertain future.

The truth is, Jesus himself finally did perish beneath the waves of misunderstanding, hatred, and cynicism. He was nailed to the cross. He sank beneath the waves. And we are in that same boat with him by virtue of our baptism.⁵

We have drowned beneath the same waves—crucified with Christ we are. But we are also raised by the power of God, who did not let Jesus remain forever under, and who promises the same to us.

Though we perish and sink, God will fetch us, will raise us, for our lives are tied up with Christ's. We are all in the same boat. God. Jesus. Ourselves.

Yet still, there are storms, within us, and without.

The boat is threatened. We are afraid. We wonder.

And as we wonder, we listen for his voice; and we dare—dare to trust that whatever happens, all cannot be lost, for Christ is with us.

Amen.

⁵ I am indebted to Frederick Niedner for some of the language here and in what follows.