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Epiphany 7A Facing the Truth
Peace, Seattle
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Mark 4:37-41

FACING THE TRUTH

In his book THE PERFECT STORM,[1] Sebastian Junger tells the story of what happened when the captain and crew of fishing boat the Andrea Gail were caught in the open sea as three massive weather systems merged over the Atlantic in October 1991.

The "perfect storm" which resulted was incredible—a meteorologists dream—something that might happen once in a century. But to those who were in the midst of it, trying to survive 120 mph winds and some of the highest waves ever measured—up to 100 feet—the storm was a true nightmare.

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

That question 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 was a favorite in the early church. The story became a metaphor of the church as a tiny ship, cast about in the stormy sea of the world, in frequent danger of sinking. The question about survival was reshaped into something like this:

> **When the forces of the world and the destructive tendencies of human sin hurl themselves against the vulnerable community of faith, how will the community survive?**

It's really a question about **what we can expect from this God** in the face of circumstances in our lives that threaten to send us reeling into the abyss.

In typical Mark fashion, this story is stripped down to its most basic elements, everything else has been tossed overboard, so we ought to pay close attention to what few details Mark does include.

And the most important detail is found at the beginning of verse 38.
As the storm gains fury and water is coming over the gunnels, where do we find Jesus?
He's 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.

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

For those living in the dangerous early days of the church, under pressure from family and culture, and under siege from an empire seeking to crush them, it surely seemed at times that **the Lord must be asleep at the rudder; that he didn't care if they perished.**[2]

And no doubt that's a question most of us have asked ourselves at one time or another.

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[1] Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea*. Norton Publishing, 1997.
[2] Portions of following come are excerpted from a sermon resource by Frederick Niedner.

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In personal lives and in community life, we find ourselves, at times, in danger of sinking. Our marriages, our financial problems, our addictive tendencies, our health issues, our future plans—all of it seems to founder at times in heavy seas, and neither direction nor rescue seems forthcoming from God.

The choices we've made as a society to put comfort and consumption at the top of our list of priorities have led us to the place where we're so afflicted with AFFLUENZA[3] that the earth itself, its waters, land and air are threatened by the rising tide of waste. **Our lifestyles, and the resources it takes to maintain them, are unsustainable.** Whole systems are changing; consequences are inevitable. Storms rage.

Facing the truth of our limitations has us yearning for a way forward without knowing how to get there.

In these times of individual and communal crisis, when everything seems up for grabs; when we feel captive, immobilized, incapacitated, fearful, the question that rises from our souls is the same one on the lips of the disciples, **LORD, DON'T YOU SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING TO US? DON'T YOU CARE?**

In Mark's story, that heartfelt plea becomes Jesus' cue. He wakes to shout down the storm as if it's an unruly, braying mule, MUZZLE YOURSELF! he commands, and his words work.

The disciples have their answer. Yes, Jesus cares.

Acting from that centered place of calm and confidence and faith, Jesus becomes the eye of the storm for the disciples and the early church, giving them two things.

- First, he demonstrates the power of God at work within him.
- Secondly, and more importantly for us, he shows his commitment to accompany them through whatever circumstances they face, no matter how perilous.

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID? DID YOU THINK I WOULD ABANDON YOU?
LET ME MAKE IT SIMPLE: I'M IN THIS FOR THE LONG HAUL. WE'RE IN THIS BOAT TOGETHER.

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

You can bet the crew of the Andrea Gail called out for rescue when they found themselves staring "straight into the mouth of meteorological hell." Yet the accompaniment of God in their situation did not mean rescue from that storm.

Oh there certainly are times, in response to our pleas, that God's mercy does come in the form of rescue. Some of us could share personal stories to that effect. I've heard some of you tell them.

But there are other times when the crisis I'm experiencing is a call to FACE THE TRUTH about myself; to "fess up" to my dead-end ways and my powerlessness over what's killing me. Rescue, in those circumstances would not be true rescue…it would only keep the veil firmly over my eyes.

[3] To learn more about where the term "affluenza" comes from, follow this link: http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/

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Rescue from the threatening storms that confront and toss us about is not always God's way with us. But what our Lord does promise—and promise always—is accompaniment.

He promises to stay in the same boat with us; whether that boat be our individual struggle with addiction or debilitating health; a failing relationship or the death of a loved one; or a lifestyle that wreaks havoc on the planet.

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

"Don't you know," Paul writes, **"that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? We have been drowned with him by baptism unto death. And having been united with him in such a death as his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."**[4]

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.

Are there implications from this truth for our lives as stewards? Yes.
Do we trust one another enough to risk talking about them together? I hope so.

Our lives of faith are lived at the intersection of our question to God—WILL YOU SAVE US?
…and God's question to us—WILL YOU TRUST ME?

And even while we wonder at the answers, we keep on praying, we keep on listening, we keep on coming to the Table, we keep on sharing our lives generously and openly, no matter what the circumstances.

For our lives are forever tied up with Christ's. We are all in the same boat together.

Prayer:
Gracious Lord, you accompany us in all of life's storms and circumstances. Help us to take you at your word when you say that we are all in the same boat together. And enable us to reach beyond our wondering, our clinging, and our fear to live lives of generosity and joy. Amen.

[4] Romans 6