

Calming the Storm

A sermon preached by the Very Rev. James A. Diamond at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, June 25, 2006.

I learned to sail at summer camp on the Finger Lakes of New York State. The eleven glacial-cut lakes of clear blue water surrounded by high bluffs on both sides and blessed by good wind are a sailor's delight. I learned the many elements of maneuvering a sixteen foot sailboat and once I had passed the "proper sailing" test I was allowed to be the skipper of my own boat. But unlike those who sail the inlets and bays of the oceans with their generally predictable winds, lake sailors know about sudden shifts of wind and fast moving storms. Racing on a summer afternoon in a small sailboat is an exhilarating experience but it can also be treacherous. More than once my boat swamped, filled with water, and capsized; but I was much too young and inexperienced with life to be afraid.

The Sea of Galilee is, in fact, a lake. It is seven miles long, thirteen miles wide, only one hundred fifty feet deep at its deepest point and there are bluffs on two sides of the lake. It is now known as Lake Genneserat and it is a sailor's delight though it is prone to fast shifting winds and sudden storms. That is the situation in which Jesus and the disciples found themselves on the evening we just heard described in the Gospel of Mark.

We also have a fairly clear picture of the boat in which they were traveling. In 1986, during a severe drought in Northern Israel when the lake of Genneserat was low, members of a kibbutz at the northwest shore of the lake saw the timbers of a first century boat just below the surface. Subsequently that boat was excavated and very carefully preserved and you can see it today. Twenty six feet long and seven feet wide, such a boat would have held about fifteen people. These boats had a round bottomed hull with neither a keel nor a center board for stability so when a strong wind came up the boats would have been buffeted by every wave and they would have been easily swamped.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that the boat was already being swamped when fear gripped the disciples. Most of us know the chill you feel when you first experience fear. When panic strikes, fear can isolate us. When we are anxious or afraid we often expect others to share our fear, to experience our distress. But if those around us remain calm - our anxiety increases. We think they are detached from us. We think that they are unsympathetic and we accuse them of not caring for us. That is just what happened in that small boat on that stormy evening. Jesus was so unfazed by the storm that he was napping on a cushion in the stern. The disciples were undone by *his* calm in the midst of *their* panic and so they turned on him and they accused him of being insensitive. Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

Fear is a powerful emotion. It is probably a remnant of the fight-or-flight response. We do not summon fear. Fear comes and seizes us but we have the ability to control fear rather than allowing fear to control us. In the face of imminent danger, the prayer "God, where are you?" isolates us. The prayer, "God, please help me" brings us into a relationship.

We experience fear for a lot more reasons than immediate danger. Some of our fears are very personal. When our doctor speaks of cancer, when our children are in trouble, when we are depressed and have lost our way, we know fear. Part of the message from this morning's gospel, the calming of the storm, is that God is always nearby. We may feel that God is napping on a cushion but, "please help me" awakens our awareness of just how close Jesus is to us.

Some of our fears are global. We are afraid of the impact of global warming and the degradation of the environment, of the seemingly intractable nature of the genocide in Darfur, of the war in Iraq, and of our damaged reputation in the community of nations, and of the condition of our economy and the size of our national debt. Worry and anxiety will not address any of these global problems. Collective action that involves others is what will release us from the paralysis of fear. Gathering to act is one way in which we can make a difference.

Some of our fears are neither personal nor global but arise from the daily-ness of life. The most common fear that we all share is the fear of change which underlies the deep divisions in our nation, the growing possibility of schism in the Anglican Communion, the separation that we all know is hurting our city, even some of our disagreements within this congregation. The fear of change creates anxiety and distress. How can we go on? What will the future be like? I cannot imagine life any different than it is than right at this moment. Out of that anxiety we accuse those who do not share our anxiety of insensitivity or worse, we demonize those who disagree with us. This has been the sad story of our own Episcopal Church right through the adjournment of the 75th General Convention this past week in Columbus.

But we are Christians and as Christians we always ask, "Where is the Good News?" "Where is the Word that sustains us?" Perhaps we find it napping in a cushion at the stern of the boat. Jesus understands all of our fears. He has lived all of them with us. He may not share our anxiety but he is our most reliable source of reassurance. At this time in our history, in the several layers of our lives, it is important for Christians to remember that Jesus does not manipulate fear but instead offers his own vulnerability to demonstrate what the reign of God looks like in our world.

From the time the shepherds in the field heard the words "fear not", throughout a ministry of radical and transforming life, to the moment Jesus laid aside his own fear and accepted that symbolic cup that God offered to his lips and with it all the pain and humiliation of the cross, Jesus motivates all of the disciples and every one of us who hear him by great awe and inspiration, but never by fear. We who look to Jesus today for encouragement and inspiration can see through the example of his life that once you have encountered the Cross, his cross, the cross in your lives - fear has no power to control you. Only the vulnerability of love has any meaning.

How do we find the courage to free ourselves and dare to live by the vulnerability of love? I think we begin by acknowledging that in addition to our fear of change we are

afraid of difference. We overcome estrangement by approaching those who are hardest for us to love. Who do you find who is hardest for you to love? Someone who has disappointed or hurt you, someone who looks very different from you, someone whose values, politics and theology are the opposite of yours, someone who is poor or homeless or who may not look very good or even smell very nice, perhaps someone you do not like whom you know is very much like you? Who do you find who is hardest to love?

Regardless of what separates us, by surrendering our alienation and distrust and opening ourselves to the story of “the other” we lay down our fear and we abandon our isolation. A life guided by turning to Jesus will not be free from disagreement nor will it be cleansed of discomfort. But living with our faith centered in Christ can deliver us from being shackled by fear. Remembering that Jesus refused to use fear will sharpen our awareness when others are trying to employ fear to control us - and therefore to divide us. God offered us Jesus to bring us together to be reborn from sin and fear so that we would bring relief to the poor, justice to the oppressed, and ourselves become instruments of peace. If our lives are about God in Christ, this is what defines how we live and what we do.

We are all sailing in a small boat. We are not the skipper of this vessel nor do we have control over the wind and the waves. The journey is often pleasant but it is also sometimes frightening. If you are old enough to know fear then you have lived long enough to know that Jesus is always there abiding quietly in the stern. Amen.

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