

“Of Change and Fear”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 5, Proper 7, Lectionary 12

Text: Mark 4:35–41

Preached: June 24, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the Eternal One, strong to save, and from Christ Jesus, the wave calmer. AMEN

I’ve never been a big fan of being on boats. I don’t know if that’s because I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Texas and heard frequent stories of people drowning, or because I watched *The Poseidon Adventure* at an impressionable age, and can still see in my nightmares Shirley Booth trying to swim her way through the flooded lower decks. “There’s got to be a morning after...” So a few years ago, when Tom’s brother gave us a boat, I was not thrilled...particularly since it was given to us free of charge because the man who had originally owned it had tried—unsuccessfully—to sell it for nine years, and just wanted to be rid of it. We immediately christened it “The Garbage Scow,” if that’s any indication of its seaworthiness. It had mildewed carpet, seats that were no longer anchored to the deck, strong gas fumes from the bilge (which had a tendency to slowly fill with water so when you came to the dock, it was always riding pretty low in the water), and an unnerving propensity for stalling and not wanting to restart. So it was asking a lot of me to even get on the thing.

But I gamely went along for the ride one Saturday afternoon when Tom decided we should head to Boater’s Beach, a remote spot on the Indiana Lake Michigan shore, accessible only by water. It’s only about 20 minutes from the harbor, so I was able to squelch my fear long enough to get there...but I was glad to be on the sandy beach. After a couple of hours over there, though, we looked off to the west, back toward the harbor, and there were threatening clouds...dark as pitch. A storm was coming, and it was moving fast. Tom suggested we pack up and head back to the marina. Actually, what he said was more along the lines of “Put the crap in the boat. We need to go. Now.” My anxiety began to rise. By the time we had pulled up anchor, the wind was picking up, and the waves were starting to get choppy. And I, like Jesus in today’s gospel story, was on the cushions in the stern...but unlike Jesus, I was wide awake...and I was terrified.

Tom headed the boat into the waves to leave the shore, and immediately it began rocking. He gunned it, the nose of the boat lifting high, as heavy raindrops began to splat down on us. And so we headed directly into the storm. With every wave we hit, I was bounced up and down, clinging to the side rail. The twenty-minute trip on calm water now became an ordeal as we battled wind and wave, struggling to make headway. By now I was panicked. In my fear, I kept yelling angrily at Tom “Slow down!” while in the next breath yelling “Hurry up and get us back to the dock!” And he, like Jesus speaking to the waves, told me, “Peace, be still!” But not exactly in those words. We were being drenched by the torrential rain, and pummeled by the waves. I was miserable with fear, convinced we were going to die. At long last, we reached the safety of the channel that leads into the marina. When we pulled into the slip, I stepped out onto the dock with a relief that is hard to describe, and resolved I would never again set foot in that stupid boat. Only then did my fear subside.

So today’s gospel story brings up the memories of that fear, that panic, that sense of being completely out of control and at the mercy of something bigger than myself, something that could destroy me. You can hear that in the voices of the disciples as they yell at Jesus over the din of the storm, through the pitch black night made darker by the storm, saying, “Teacher, do you not *care* that we’re perishing?? Get up!” It’s hard to know from the story whether they’re asking him to do something to save them, or if they just want him to wake up and be terrified along with them...misery loves company, and why should they face death alone? After all, Jesus is the one who got them into this mess in the first place by telling them he wanted to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. At night. In a small boat, maybe 30 feet. They’re out there because of him, because he’s called them to go there. So Jesus wakes up, and he kind of grouchy yells at the wind and the waves. The translation we use has Jesus say, “Peace, be still,” which sounds kind of sweet, right? But the word there is not the normal word “peace.” What Jesus literally says is, “Shut up! Muzzle yourself!” It’s a forceful command that demands response. And immediately, the gale stops, the waves subside, and there is a dead calm. And Jesus turns to them and asks, “Why are you afraid? Why are you so timid? Do you still not have faith?”

Now, you would expect that the reaction of the disciples to this miraculous intervention would be a sense of profound relief and joy and amazement. But that’s not the reaction the text tells us they have. Again, our translation says “they were filled with great awe,” but what the Greek says is “they feared with a great fear.” The real terror comes when they are faced with the power of God that Jesus has just demonstrated. There is a mixed sense of awe and terror as they ask one another, with a curse word, “Who the hell *is* this guy, that even the winds and sea obey him?” The real fear comes when they realize they’re in the presence of the Holy One.

Author Leif Enger, in his book *Peace Like a River*, has one of his characters say, “Real miracles bother people, like strange, sudden pains unknown in medical literature... People fear miracles because they fear being changed.” Prof. David Lose cites that passage, and goes on to comment, “[This] is the source, I think, of this other kind of fear that stands somewhere between a holy awe and mighty terror: the fear of being changed. And make no mistake, Jesus is asking the disciples to change. In this very moment he is drawing them from the familiar territory of Capernaum to the strange and foreign land of the Garasenes. And he is moving them from being fishermen to disciples. And he is preparing them to welcome a kingdom so very different from the one they’d either expected or wanted. The change they are facing is real, and hard, and inevitable, and all of this becomes crystal clear as they realize the one who is asking them to change has mastery over the wind and sea and is, indeed, the Holy One of God. That change, of course, will also and ultimately be transformative, but I doubt if they see that yet.”

Does anyone else here fear change? Does anyone else here tremble at the thought that a genuine experience with the Living God, the Holy One, might just change everything? You are not alone. Throughout scripture, over and over again, that is the response of the people whom God deals with, the people God demonstrates his power to, the people God calls out into unknown territory... there is always that response of terror mixed with reverent awe. And there is always that natural resistance to the change that necessarily comes about when we encounter God and are transformed by the encounter.

We modern folks have a very hard time dealing with the miraculous. We want to dismiss it in embarrassment, or we want to explain it away. But try to set that aside for a moment, and just put yourself into the story. As David Lose says, “In this story, the disciples witness a miracle, and they know in a flash of terrifying insight that this miracle will change them forever. And that terrifies them.” And then he completes the quote from *Peace Like a River*: “People fear miracles because they fear being changed, *though ignoring them will change you also.*”

So what is the miracle facing this congregation? How is God encountering us, where is Christ calling us to go, what awaits us on the other side of the lake? How is God calling us to change? How is Christ going to demonstrate power among us? What is the new, and perhaps unnerving, new insight that we need to have about who we are as the people of God in this place, and what changes we need to make to deepen our relationship of trust and dependence on the One who has power to command even the winds and the waves?

Notice that this story is not about any individual’s encounter with God. It is a shared and communal encounter. The twelve are crowded onto that one little fishing vessel. They’re literally all in the same boat. And a detail I had never noticed was once pointed out to me in a Bible study: Their boat is not the only boat out there. The text says, “Other boats were with him.” See, this story isn’t just about you, though your personal experience of God’s Spirit is vital. It’s not just about our little band of God’s people we call Immanuel Lutheran Church. There are lots of other boats out there with people who have also set out to follow where Jesus has said he wants us to go. We’re all crossing the lake in the dark. But what matters in the story is that even though a storm rages, and even though it seems as though the whole lot of them are going to go under, and even though they don’t know it yet, but when they get to the other side they’re going to be faced with huge and immediate challenges in the person of a violently mentally ill man who will terrify them all over again, but who needs to be healed and restored to community, what matters is that Jesus is there with them, the very presence of God, the very power of God, even though at the immediate moment he seems not to be awake and listening, and seems to them not even to care. But he does care, and responds with power to their distress. But that’s not the end of the story. The story, which will bring new perils and new joys and new fears, is just beginning.

What they don’t know yet, what they can’t trust yet, is that the very same power Jesus demonstrates is being given to them, the power to rebuke those forces that threaten to destroy, the power to shout with authority “Shut up!” to those forces that seek to tear down and swamp with hatred and negativity, such as we saw in the family separation crisis this week, to yell “Muzzle yourself!” to those forces of chaos around us in our lives and in our society, the power to weather the storms and head on into the waves together to go where God wants us to go, so that we can heal and restore those who are in need.

A final quote from David Lose: “Here’s the thing: We may fear encounters with God because we fear being changed, but ignoring these encounters will change us also. There is no choice about whether we’ll be changed, it’s what kind of change, and whether we seek God’s help that it may ultimately prove transformative.” Sisters and brothers, as scary as it may be, we come together here to encounter this power, to open ourselves to change, and to receive that power for ourselves, to be used for the good of our world. Can we open ourselves to encountering the fearsome power that changes everything? AMEN