

“Wake Up, Jesus!”

Nothing will test faith like a crisis. It's worth noting as we hear this story from Mark's Gospel this morning, that the storm on the Sea of Galilee represents the first crisis that the disciples have faced with Jesus. Up until now, their experience with him has consisted of a series of positive experiences. They have heard him as a powerful preacher, one who teaches with authority. They have seen him heal the sick, even a paralyzed man and a leper, and cast out demons. Oh, there's been a little squawking from the Pharisees but they were a bunch of killjoys anyway. One suspects that the disciples had a little laugh at their expense as Jesus deftly overturned their concerns about who could eat with who and how much and when. Life with Jesus was a celebration, a party, even if he did sometimes tell stories that left them scratching their heads.

But being caught in a storm in a small fishing boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee was no party. That was a full-fledged crisis, sure enough. Mark stretches things a bit to refer that body of water, more often referred to as Lake Gennesaret, as a sea but I'll come back to that in a moment. It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world, 209 meters below sea level in the deep Jordan Valley, the Great Rift between the Plates of Arabia and Africa. The lake is surrounded by mountains and a gap in the encircling heights funnels the prevailing winds in the area across the relatively shallow water of the lake, whipping them into dangerous peaks and drops with almost no notice.

As illustrated in the video by “The Work of the People,” our modern lives often seem as storm-tossed, as full of crisis, as the dangerous waters of Galilee. The pace and complexity of our lives, the bewildering level of interconnectedness that we experience when happenings on the far side of the globe can have almost immediate impact on us, all this can make it seem as though we live in a wind tunnel of events and trends and pressures not dissimilar to the winds that whip through the Great Rift Valley and create such havoc in the shallows of the lake. And even when the external realities of our lives seem calm, a rare enough occurrence in our tumultuous times, there are the internal storms that rage within our bodies, minds and souls: sudden illness, depression, stress, a sense of alienation and aloneness that seem to typify the human condition as we move from modernity to post-modernity, from empirical certainty to quantum uncertainty. Little wonder, then, if we find a point of connection with the panicked disciples and their insistent cry, “Wake up, Jesus! Wake up, teacher! Do you not care that we are perishing?” It is a cry that has been given contemporary voice by two Christian poets of our age, Paul Hewson and David Evans, better known as Bono and The Edge of U2. The final song on their 1997 album, “Pop,” entitled “Wake Up, Dead Man,” has been called the modern equivalent of a Psalm of lament. In a high tenor backed by music reminiscent of the keening of an Irish wake, Bono sings, “Jesus, Jesus help me / I'm alone in this world / And a (messed) up world it is too... Jesus, I'm waiting here boss / I know you're looking out for us / But maybe your hands aren't free / Your father, He made the world in seven / He's in charge of heaven / Will you put in a word in for me / Wake up, wake up dead man / Wake up, wake up dead man.”

Understanding, then, that there is a great deal in common between the crisis faced by the disciples of Jesus on that stormy sea and the crisis of our lives as the disciples of Jesus in this time and place, what lessons are there for us in this brief story? It is a story, I think, of power; a story that affirms the power of God over all things, a story that reveals, for the disciples and for us, the divine power of Jesus, and a story that challenges us to make use of the power available

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to us to adapt to new circumstances in our lives and to find the courage to embrace those new circumstances.

As I mentioned, Mark seems to have chosen to refer to the body of water in this story as a sea rather deliberately. It is believed that this gospel arose in Rome during a period of persecution and that it was originally addressed to an audience of primarily Jewish Christians. For them, the mention of the sea in this context would have evoked certain other Scriptures. Despite the activity of fishermen on Lake Gennesaret, the Jews were not a seafaring people. In the Old Testament, the sea is used as a symbol of chaos and of demonic evil. But wherever the sea is mentioned in this way, there is also the affirmation that God has ultimate control over it. Consider one of the alternate Psalms suggested by the Revised Common Lectionary for this morning, Psalm 107. The Psalm is one of praise to God for God’s great acts in the history of God’s People. Verses 23-30 speak of God’s protection against the power of the sea: “Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.” In Psalm 65:7, God’s power over the sea is linked with God’s power over the Gentiles, the often-hostile nations that surrounded Israel: “You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.” Other examples of praise to God who rules the sea are in Psalm 89 (“You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.”), Psalm 104 (“You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.”), and Psalm 106 (“He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry; he led them through the deep as through a desert.”), a reference to the most important act of God in controlling the sea in favor of the Children of Israel. In telling this story in this way, Mark was reminding his audience of the ultimate power of God against evil at a time they needed that comforting word.

But in raising in their minds the picture of the Creator God, whose Spirit brooded over the face of the deep, who shut up the seas and destroyed the spirit of chaos that lived in them, Mark was also making some remarkable claims about Jesus of Nazareth. In the study of this story in his book, The Meaning in the Miracles, Jeffrey John writes: “In all the Old Testament passages that underlie (this story), the point is being made that *God alone* rules the waves and walks through the waters; *God alone* defeated the primal sea-monster; and *God alone* can defeat the demonic powers of chaos and evil. When Mark gives us the chorus of the disciples at the end of the... miracle, ‘Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?’, he is forcing us to draw the inevitable conclusion... Jesus *is* Yahweh himself present on earth... Because we are so used to these stories, we risk missing how totally extraordinary this fact is: that writers who were Jews, trained in the Law, raised in the most monotheistic of faiths, should believe that in Jesus Yahweh’s own power and authority had literally walked this earth in a human being.”

The way in which Mark tells this story, whether exactly in the words he would have learned from the eyewitness Peter or with his own embellishments, give further cues to the revelation of the power of Jesus. Jesus is not simply a great teacher, not just a healer. He not only casts out the

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petty demons of sickness and insanity but he commands the wind and the sea as well. As South African theologian Lawrence Moore puts it, “Mark’s Jesus is a Liberator... Mark casts the stilling of the storm in terms of an exorcism. Jesus “rebukes” the wind and the “sea”, literally saying to them, “Be muzzled!” “Rebuking” and “muzzling” are technical terms for an exorcism (compare this with the very first exorcism at Capernaum in Mark 1:25). The power of Jesus that is displayed here is not that of a “miracle worker” so much as an exorcist and liberator. The biblical tradition describes creation as disordered. Paul talks about it “groaning in bondage”. Its deadly power is a sign of disorder: creation is meant to give life. Yet all of created reality is symbolically described as being under a “malign power”. It isn’t free. One answer, therefore, to the disciples’ question... is, ‘This is the Liberator king of the universe!’”

In telling this story, Mark was reminding his beleaguered fellows in Rome that though the might of the Empire seemed set against them that they actually had the upper hand, for they were allied with the Liberator King of the Universe, with the Creator and Redeemer of all, who has power over all things in Creation. History and our own presence here today tell us that those persecuted Christians persevered as have countless others over the centuries. They faced their fears and found their faith in Christ, a faith which enabled them to live faithfully regardless of the cost. Our own Baptist forebears faced imprisonment and death to live faithfully to their calling. They, too, faced their fears and found their faith.

It is a lesson for us, as well. We do not face the wrath of a physical storm today. Nor do we live under the threat of persecution for the way in which we worship. But there are things in our lives that cause us to fear. There is our tottering economy and the loss of security in our employment, in our savings, in our retirement funds. There is continuing unrest all over the world that threatens at any time to spill over into worldwide terrorist activity or nuclear engagement. There are the deeply personal fears of broken relationships and loneliness, of epidemic or an immune system collapse, of failing health of all kinds. We fear for our aging parents, who may live too far from us for us to tend to them regularly. We fear for our children and for theirs – what kind of world are they inheriting from us? An artist and writer who draws her inspiration from the Scriptures and from her faith in Christ, Jan Richardson writes, “Anyone who’s not feeling some anxiety probably isn’t paying enough attention to what’s going on. Living in denial is not the same as having faith. Whatever the sources of our anxiety, faith helps to provide the tools we need to maintain our vision and to see the truth within the waves that seek to command our whole attention. Faith asks us where we are turning our sight, and what we are allowing to define our reality.”

All truth is God’s truth, so I feel confident in citing the work of a Buddhist teacher on this same topic. In her article, “Choosing Faith over Fear,” Sharon Salzberg offers this wisdom: “Faith demands that, despite our fear, we get as close as possible to the truth of the present moment so that we can offer our hearts fully to it, with integrity. Faith is willing to engage the unknown, not shrink back from it. Faith doesn’t mean the absence of fear. It means having the energy to go ahead, right alongside the fear. The word *courage* in English has the same etymological root as the French *coeur*, which means “heart.” With courage we openly acknowledge what we can’t control, and place our hearts wisely on our ability to connect with the truth of the moment and to move forward into the uncharted terrain of the next moment.” I would add for those of us who follow the Christ that we can move forward into that uncharted terrain, into those billowing

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waves, knowing that we do not do so alone. The one who keeps Israel, and us, neither slumbers nor sleeps.

The Psalmist cried out, “Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.” His prayer was answered and the Children of Israel live bearing the promise of God to this day. The disciples of Jesus cried out, “Wake up, teacher! Do you not care that we are perishing?” They, too, were answered and lived that day and for many days to come, learning from Jesus and carrying his Good News to the ends of their world. Our songwriters cry out, “Wake up! Wake up, dead man!” But the one who was crucified and yet lives cries out in return to us, “Wake up, Church! Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus, the Christ of God, did not simply challenge his disciples in that boat so that their fears would relent and they could sleep well at night. Nor is his challenge to us now meant to simply put us at our ease.

This is the final lesson of Mark’s story and to find it, we must return to its beginning. “On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’” It is easy for us to forget the geography to which Jesus referred. By going to the other side of the lake, they were leaving the predominantly Jewish fishing villages around Capernaum and traveling to the region of the Decapolis, ten Gentile cities and their surrounding villages. They were going to “the other side of the tracks,” crossing over to “the dark side.” If we read in this story that the disciples were frightened by the storm and terrified at the revelation of the power of Jesus as Immanuel, then we must also realize that they were at least apprehensive about this foray into what had for centuries been and still remains enemy territory. It begs the question, who is it that makes us apprehensive? What for us is considered enemy territory? To whom is Jesus calling us to minister and to share the Good News, if not the ones who are so different they make us nervous? Jesus calls us to get out of our comfort zones, to “share faith,” as Berry French writes, “across boundaries – boundaries that may challenge or even offend our religious institutions.” We must leave the comfort of our socio-economic levels, of our national origins and ethnicities, of our age cohorts and our political parties and the groups who read the books and listen to the music we do. We are called to befriend and to serve and to preach the gospel, with words if necessary, to those for whom mere contact requires an effort. Whoever it is that you can least imagine receiving you as a sister or brother in Christ, that is the one to whom you are called to go. Can you imagine who it is? I’m starting to draw up a list for myself and praying for God to give me the courage to face my fears and reach out.

This little story of Mark’s has inspired much beautiful writing and I want to leave you this morning with two short examples. First, from a sermon by the great writer Frederick Buechner, which you can find in his collection, Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons: “Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we’re done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him.” And from one of the Fathers of the Church, the Fourth Century Algerian theologian and former actor, Augustine of Hippo: “Blessed are all thy saints, O God and King, who have travelled over

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the tempestuous sea of this mortal life, and have made the harbor of peace and felicity. Watch over us who are still in our dangerous voyage; and remember those who lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptation. Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide; but as in thy mercy thou hast set our course, so steer the vessel of our life toward the everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at last to the quiet haven of our heart’s desire, where thou, O God, art blessed, and livest and reignest for ever and ever. Amen.”