

June 24, 2018
Mark 4:35-41
“Sailing Through a Storm”
Michael Stanfield

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, (Jesus) said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”
³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But (Jesus) was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but your word stands forever O Lord. For this, we give thanks. Amen.*

There was once a farmer who had a very large farm. In the late spring, several life threatening storms had downed trees all over his land. He was able to get the trees sawed up but this left a whole bunch of stumps all over the place that he needed to get rid of. But by now he was in the busiest time of his year and the work involved in stump removal was going to take too much of his time away from the essential work of farming.

One day at the seed store a young man overheard the old farmer lamenting the fact that he had so many stumps and so little time. The young man had been a demolition expert in the army and he told the farmer that he could get rid of all of those stumps in short order, using explosives. The farmer was a bit skeptical but when the young man named his price, it was so low and the stumps were so numerous and so far away from anything else the man could damage, the farmer decided to give it a try.

Bright and early on a Monday morning, the young demolition expert met the farmer at his house and away they drove in the young man’s pick-up. The farmer’s anxieties were somewhat relieved as he watched the young man dig holes around the first stump and plant the explosives. The young man also impressed the old farmer with the extra caution he seemed to take in making sure they were safe. He instructed the farmer that they must move at least 100 yards away before detonating the caps.

The farmer did notice however, that young man left what appeared to be his brand new truck only about twenty feet from the stump. But by now, since the young man seemed to know what he was doing, the farmer kept quiet. On the count of three, the young man ignited the caps. There was a terrible explosion. The dust cleared. There was no sign of the stump. Then suddenly, from three-hundred feet in the air, down came the stump – right on top of the cab of the young man’s truck. The young man felt terrible – embarrassed, angry at himself and all of those understandable emotions – of course. But the farmer was filled with nothing but admiration. He turned to the young man, slapped him on the back and said, “Just a little more practice and you’ll have that stump landing in the bed of that truck every time!”

Imminent catastrophes barely averted and given new meaning... that is what today's passage is about. A terrible storm is abated by Jesus and leaves the disciples in awe. What a great story – isn't it? On the surface, it seems to be just a simple miracle story. But on so many levels it is so much more.

First off, it is connected to a lot of the testimony of scripture that came before it... According to Genesis, God overcame the forces of chaos and subdued them before forming a good, orderly universe - and these chaotic forces are identified with or located in the waters of the sea. In fact, according to the testimony of the Old Testament as a whole, a characteristic sign of divine power is the ability to *control* the sea.

Psalm 89:9 states: "You (O Lord) rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them." Then there is Isaiah 51:10-11, which alludes to the parting of the sea during the Exodus: "Was it not you (O Lord) who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over?"

A storm and deep waters are also used in the scriptures as a metaphor for either the forces of evil in the world or for the trials that might come to challenge God's own. Psalm 69:1-2 implores: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck... I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me."

Mark's detail of our Lord sleeping in the storm-tossed boat also has scriptural precedent. The ability to sleep peacefully and untroubled in the midst of outer turmoil was seen as a sign of perfect trust in the sustaining and protective power of God. Proverbs 3:24-26 states: "If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked; for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught."

However, we note in our gospel story that while Jesus is asleep in the storm-tossed boat, confident that his father in heaven will keep him safe, the apostles, by contrast, are in a state of panic: Jesus being in the boat with them doesn't seem to help.

And can't we identify with this? Our life is going along smoothly. We are feeling confident in our closeness with the church, with Life, with God. And then unexpectedly, unbidden, along comes a terrible storm – the discovery of a catastrophic illness, when only last month our primary care physician gave us a clean bill of health

- a job that was so secure yesterday, that we find suddenly may be gone tomorrow
- our children who seemed so precious and safe only a moment ago but are now threatened by a moment of poor judgment, by cruelty from their peers, or by an uncaring adult we trusted to watch out for them

Or maybe our storm is one that is more subtle but no less terrible – depression for seemingly no reason

- anxiety that won't let us sleep
- anger that creeps into everything we do and say, poisoning our closest relations
- our sanity that seems lately to hang by a thread.

Are there storms raging in your life or the life of someone close right now? If so, this passage may be of help to you for we find that once awakened, Jesus “rebukes” the wind and says to the sea, “Quiet now! Be calm!” and the storm is gone...

But perhaps the problem is not “Is God *able* to do this?” the problem is “I know God is able so why isn’t God doing something now?” Right? The disciples are upset with Jesus for sleeping while they are in grave peril. Why doesn’t he do something? How can he sleep? He’s the Christ for goodness sake. Does he not care about us and our predicament?

We know this feeling all too well – don’t we? Life’s storms bring with them a sudden urgency and it is more than a little irritating when the world around us seems oblivious. When we are worried sick about something, it can actually hurt when those closest to us are calm and emotionless. It appears to be evidence that they are not taking us and our situation seriously.

However, when *we* are in a panic, our perceptions can be and often are very inaccurate. And a reaction of calm from someone close can, and very well may be, a sign that indicates the exact opposite of what we fear. It may indicate that, in fact, *they* are more trusting of the love that surrounds us and binds us than we are. It may indicate that *they* are confident that with God, it *will* work out like it is supposed to...

But when I feel like I am being tossed violently around on the stormy sea or feel I am perishing in the middle of the flaming desert, the demand that something be done now is as natural as breathing – whether it is faithful or not.

Alessandro Pronzato is an Italian journalist. He has written a number of books in his long and illustrious career. But there is only one of which I am aware that was ever translated into English. It is called “Meditations on the Sand”. It is a beautiful set of writings that addresses the human condition in a refreshing and spiritually insightful way.

What Pronzato has to say about being in the midst of what appears to be a life-threatening if not soul wrenching situation bears sharing. He compares it to being the desert and he writes:

“In the desert, the most urgent thing is – to wait. The desert does not take kindly to those who tackle it at breakneck speed, subjecting it to their plans and deadlines. Instead, the desert welcomes those who shed their sandals of speed and walk slowly in their bare feet, letting them be caressed and burnt by the sand. If you have no ambition to conquer the desert, if you do not think you are in charge, if you can calmly wait for things to be done, then the desert will not consider you an intruder and will reveal its secrets to you. Alessandro Pronzato, *Meditations on the Sand* (Alba House, 1983).

Similarly in a storm on the sea, it is often best to steer directly into the storm. Listen to *this* advice from the maritime web site called North Sails:

“Although everyone will remember it differently years later, a long, wet, cold sail through a storm can be miserable. As skipper, you need to make the best of it: watch over your crew, offer relief or help to those who need it, and speak a few words of encouragement to all. “This is miserable, but it will end.

“Take the time to marvel at the forces of nature, and at your ability to carry on in the midst of the storm. Few people get to experience the full fury of a storm. It may not be pleasant, but it is memorable and can be a surprising source of strength when facing other difficulties later.

“While misery and discomfort can eventually lead to fatigue, diminished performance, and even danger, do not mistake one for the other. *Distinguish in your own mind the difference between misery and danger. Don’t attempt a dangerous harbor entrance to escape misery; that would compromise the safety of the boat and crew, just to avoid a little discomfort.*”

<https://northsails.com/sailing/en/2016/09/how-to-sail-safely-through-a-storm>

Distinguish in your own mind the difference between misery and danger. Don’t attempt a dangerous harbor entrance to escape misery; that would compromise the safety of the boat and crew, just to avoid a little discomfort.

As I think about it, I believe this may be the crux of this text: the inability of the disciples to distinguish between misery and real danger. And perhaps a willingness to compromise the safety of others in the boat in order to avoid a little discomfort. It is what the current US immigration policy is all about – a willingness to scar children for life in order to avoid the discomfort of doing nothing about people who have entered the country illegally. But if God is truly with us as a country, as those who defend such policies would suggest, what do we have to fear?

Jesus is in the boat with the disciples. Spiritually speaking what could be safer? The problem is that they assumed that having Jesus in the boat would preclude them from the experience of human misery. But what they discover is that, on the contrary, having Jesus in the boat actually invites misery...

But what Jesus teaches them is they yet have nothing to fear. The misery of the storm is only temporary. The joy of the safety of the shore is most certainly ahead. And it is Christ who gives us the ability to understand that. It is the Christ who gives us the ability to distinguish our lives, our souls, our essence from any misery we may be in. It is the Christ who gives us the ability to understand such experiences as fortifying and as sources of future strength, future trust, future calm – not just for ourselves but for others – especially those others who, because they are marginalized, are faced with far more misery than I will ever have to worry about being subjected to.

But we often have difficulty distinguishing our particular miserable circumstances from the reality of life – from who we really are – don’t we? We let these circumstances define *us* and our perceptions of reality; and as the old saying goes, the misery we know is better than the misery we don’t.

Some years ago, a Buddhist monk traveled from Vietnam to New York to take part in a gathering of American veterans of the Vietnam War. All were feeling wounded in some way, either physically or deep within their spirits. Their misery as result of war was palpable. As a way of leading them gently in the direction of healing, the monk told them a story.

During the course of that terrible war, a Vietnamese man was making a living as a peddler. When his wife died, he was forced to leave his 5-year-old son with neighbors as he traveled from

village to village, selling his wares.

It so happened that the peddler returned to his home village one day, only to find it completely destroyed. Looking for some sign of his son and of the life he knew, he started digging through the charred remains of a hut that looked very much like the one his neighbors had lived in. Sifting through the ashes, he found a pile of small, human bones. He was sure they must be the remains of his child. Lovingly he gathered them up and placed them in a cloth bag. From that day onward, he carried the bones with him at all times, a symbol of his grief and loss.

Years went by. One night, just before dawn, he heard knocking at his door. The knocking was urgent. The man called out from his bed, “Who’s there?”

“My father!” cried a young man’s voice from the other side of the door. “I am your son.”

“Go away,” replied the man. “My son is dead.”

“But, father,” continued the voice from out of the dark, “when our village was attacked, I wasn’t killed. I was kidnapped and taken away. I served my captors for years, but at long last I escaped. I’ve come home to you!”

“Go away,” muttered the old man, becoming more annoyed by the minute. “Do not mock me in my grief.” At last the knocking ceased. The son went away, never to return.

And so, concluded the monk, “The son was rejected, because his father loved a bag of bones more than his real, flesh-and-blood offspring.”

This is what happens to us all when we believe that our particular misery is our lot in life – that God was asleep at the helm when our life was handed to us.

But what if that is not it at all? What if God is so much bigger than our understanding of reality? - that the stormy nature of the universe we thought was against us forever was but one memorable experience we were *meant* to have in order for our lives to have greater meaning, not just to us, but to others? What if our understanding of God’s activity in the world is just too small and limited?

Hear the good news of the gospel: It may be stormy right now and miserable but Jesus is with you in the boat. You *will* reach the shore of eternal Joy. And that experience will allow you willingly to enter the misery of others in order to guide *them* to that same shore.

Let us pray: O Jesus the storms of life are all around us. We are often anxious and afraid. Help us to distinguish between the misery of those storms and any real danger so that with boldness we can move forward knowing that you are with us in the boat. Now bless these gifts that they may indeed provide comfort and hope for the miserable, in Christ’s name we pray, Amen. ...