

**5 Pentecost, Proper 7. Mark 4:35-41; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13.  
June 24, 2018.**

Even if we don't remember the exact details of this story from Mark, the basic images of this story are firmly imprinted on the Christian imagination. With the wind and waves raging and the ship in terrible peril, Jesus stands calmly in the stern of the boat and brings peace and stillness. The image at least is dear to us, and perhaps especially in these days when we all feel tempest-toss'd.

All of us might think of current political events and the ongoing atrocities at the border, and plenty of us also are receiving diagnoses and clinging onto deteriorating relationships and wondering how that last paycheck is going to stretch until the next one comes. And when you add all these public and private troubles together you get us very much in the place of the disciples: very frightened, and keenly aware that we are not in control. In this situation, we cherish this iconic image of Jesus erect, unperturbed, speaking peace that stills the storm.

It is beautiful and comforting, but I don't think that it actually has much to do with the story's point. What's being tested in this story is not whether or not Jesus can calm the storm, but whether or not the disciples need him to. Just set aside for a moment our mental image of a 6-foot Jesus with a blue sash standing statuesque with arm outstretched. And consider instead a guy who's been working all day teaching and arguing and healing, and then gets woken up by the kids for something that he doesn't see as a crisis.

"Peace, be still" sounds kind of poetic but I think a better translation might be "Shut up!" He rebukes the wind and then he rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. Our translation says the disciples were filled with great awe after this, but the Greek more evocatively and less felicitously says that they "feared a great fear." Jesus calming the storm is even scarier than the storm itself.

I'm trying to shake us out of our pious comfort because we know that Jesus can work miracles, but this story is really asking whether we can stay faithful without one. As the waves get bigger and the wind blows harder and we begin to realize that all our effort and skill isn't going to be enough to make the ship go the way we want, and it's not at all clear that we can bail water as quickly as it's coming over the sides, can we stay faithful? Because here's the thing, friends: there are always storms, and our miracles tend to be less on demand and less spectacular than Jesus snapping the winds and waves into shape. We have every reason to believe that the storms will keep coming and that they may not end when we'd like them to. Lately our public storms have been particularly intense. And the private storms come on relentlessly like they always have. We are missing some of the things that we have become most dependent on: safety and control. And we're afraid.

I think Paul, in our reading today from his second letter to the Corinthians, gives us a pretty good picture of what it looks like to stay faithful in the storm. He's pretty

frank with the Corinthians about what his life is like these days. He's been dealing with afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. The list tails off a little at the end there where it just sounds like he's a grad student—working and not sleeping and being hungry. But taken together it's quite a litany of lamentations, a roster of regret. Anyone would read this list as a temptation to despair. But Paul responds with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. He rejects the weapons of his enemies and relies on the weapons of righteousness.

I'm not exactly sure what the "weapons of righteousness" are. I'm not completely convinced that Paul could tell us more specifically, unless they are the list of his response to misfortune. But I think that the key here might be that the storm makes us obsessed with what we fear or hate. The wind rises and all we can think about are the waves coming over the edge of the boat. I suspect that staying faithful in the storm is above all else a matter of keeping focused on what we love. I don't mean ignoring evil and pain or shutting ourselves up with our cats and romantic comedies and never reading the news. I mean fighting evil because we love God's good. Pouring ourselves out for others because we love God's people. Beating back the forces of death because we so love the life that God has brought into the world.

We are always tempted to try to win by hating hatred with an unmatched fervor, to kill the forces of death. Paul's "weapons of righteousness" at least are surely not that. They are a refusal to take up the methods of our enemies to defeat them. Hatred is defeated by love, and death by life. And love and life are the building blocks of faithfulness.

We are in a storm and there will be other storms. And on the last day God will of course save us and those we cannot save. The question is not whether God will save, but whether we will remain faithful. Let us love through the storm. Amen.