

THIRD SUNDAY OF PENTECOST
LECTIONARY YEAR B

by Rev. Emily Chapman
June 21, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77004-6917
713-528-0527
www.stpaulshouston.org

Lectionary Texts:

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; and Mark 4:35-41

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he 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?”

³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”

Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Sometimes Jesus asks hard questions. Who do you say that I am? What are you looking for? Why are you afraid?

You may notice that the people he asks questions of don't always answer, and here is no different. Why are you afraid? I don't know, but I am.

Maybe we are just hard-wired for fear. Fear is our natural response to things we do not understand. Like many children, when I was little I was afraid of the dark. Even with a nightlight, I was terrified of the moment my parents would turn off the lights and shut the door. If I called for them, their response was always the same. There is nothing in the dark that isn't there in the light. I was assured that there was nothing out of the ordinary under the bed or in the closet. And we would say our prayers for God to stay with us through the night. My parents never dismissed my fears, never told me there was nothing to be afraid of or that it was silly to fear the dark.

Jesus doesn't do that to the disciples either. He doesn't tell them there is nothing to be afraid of and knows better than to tell them not to fear a storm. Even though a storm is worthy of fear, he asks why they are afraid.

Here on the Gulf Coast, we have certainly learned that there are storms worthy of fear. Even for these disciples, some of whom are professional fisherman who had been weathering the Sea of Galilee's storms for years, this was a monster storm. And we all know the feeling of being powerless in the face of a great storm...though most of us may have felt more keenly aware of being powerless in the days following our storm.

But no matter how many storms you have weathered, the loss of control is still frightening. The terrified disciples did everything in their own power to overcome the storm. When the boat was finally swamped beyond rescue, they woke up Jesus, who was sleeping in the stern – why wouldn't he be? And they are naturally angry at his indifference. Do you not even care that we are perishing? We're dying out here, and you don't even care! So Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace, be still."

And after the storm is calm, he turns to the surely exhausted disciples and asks "why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Notice he doesn't say "why *were* you afraid?" Just because the storm was calm doesn't mean they aren't still trembling and more than a little dumbstruck. Why are you afraid? They are afraid for the same reason as we are always afraid. They have no control over what is happening. They couldn't control the storm that was about to claim their boat and maybe their lives and they surely cannot control Jesus. Perhaps this is the most fearsome thing of all. Perhaps it is why they did not wake Jesus in the first place. They have left everything to follow this man that even the winds in the seas obey. How could they admit their fear and inability to handle the situation to him? How could they give up that last bit of control? Suddenly their own control over their own lives doesn't seem possible and that is the fear that drives all others.

We don't like to give up control. So much of our existence is focused on creating controlled environments – we live behind walls and gates, we store up money, we

befriend the right kinds of people that won't throw things too off balance. And our biggest fears are the things that threaten those safeguards. Things like storms, be they physical or emotional or financial. But perhaps the greatest threat, if we really think about, to our control is Jesus. This Jesus who has the power to calm the storm and restore order has the power to turn life as they know it, and as we know it, into disorder by asking us over and over again, why are you afraid?

I could almost hear Jesus asking me as I read this passage this week, "Emily, why are you afraid of my people so often? Why are you afraid to talk to the mentally ill person who sleeps on the bench outside your apartment gate? Why are you afraid to tell that man on the train who needs help that you are pastor?"

Jesus is asking all of us this question all the time. Why are you afraid to talk to that friend of yours who is struggling about your faith? Why are you afraid to talk to that homeless man on the corner? Why are you afraid that if people who are different, who maybe speak a different language or use different practices come into the church you'll no longer be able to encounter God there? Why are you afraid that things will change so much that you'll no longer recognize your church, or your city or your country? You are you afraid to let God be at work in you? Why are you afraid of experiencing the joy God offers you? Why are you afraid to let go of your inhibitions and do what God has called you to do? Why are you afraid of so many of my people? Why are you afraid to see their suffering? Why are you afraid to face your own?

Jesus asks: why are you afraid to have me come and calm the storm? Have you still no faith?

Let's remember that this is not the disciples' first trip with Jesus. They have already seen him do things that defy logic and the way the world works. Yet for all the miracles they have seen, when the moment comes and they feel powerless over the storm blowing around them instead of turning to Jesus, they try to use their own strength first. Faith does not come easily, even to these people who have had the closest contact with Jesus.

So don't think I am about to finish a sermon that just tells you not to be afraid. Our world has taught us to fear everything. Fear is a tool of political campaigns and financial institutions. It is a tool parents use to get their children to behave. Leaders of all kinds of groups and institutions use it to build consensus and keep order. And it is a threat to power when people are not afraid —look at Iran right now. There is chaos and violence and much to fear — a fear that we cannot understand but the people are willing to face their fear because they can see hope on the horizon. We know there is much to fear — we live in a time of nuclear powers, of terrorists, mega storms, and a thousand other things that are perfectly reasonable to fear.

How do we, most of whom are rational, aware people who know how the world works, how do we respond to Jesus' question?

We cannot tell him that we aren't afraid of the storms of life. We know what it is to be battered and tossed about; we certainly know what it is like to feel swamped, as though your ship might sink at any moment.

Jesus never promises the storm will always calm right when you need, never says that there will be nothing to fear — only promises that in the face of fear, one thing is certain, and that is Jesus' presence with us. Perhaps the early mystic Julian of Norwich said it best: "He said not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'"

Whatever our fear — of the dark, of storms, of change, of people, God's promise is steadfast — you will not be overcome. It will not be easy. I hate to tell you this, but the more closely we follow Jesus the more likely we are to have to face our fears and surrender the control we all imagine that we have over our lives. We may have to do what he says with our money, we may have to surround ourselves with the ones Jesus called "the least of these," throwing our well-preserved and stable world into possible chaos — after all, have you looked at the people Jesus spent time with — people who were ill and unclean, thieves, prostitutes...it's a messy bunch! Life with Jesus is as likely as not to be full of chaos and what's more, we won't be able to control it. At times we feel as though it's too much, but as surely as we will face challenges in this world, the challenges of being people of faith in a world of fear, God

has given us the most magnificent promise — that we do not face anything alone, and we do not face our fears as those who have no hope. As he said through the prophet ¹Isaiah, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... and they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

So why are you afraid?

¹ *Isaiah 43:2-3a*