

In the Midst of Fearsome Things
Mark 4:35-41
20 June 2021
sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae

You can imagine it, can't you? Jesus' friends in that boat with him, travelling to the other side of the lake, getting a break from the crowds and getting a bit of a breather before their next bit of work. They probably didn't even look at the sky. I mean why would they? They trusted Jesus, they were looked after by him, if things ahead looked ominous or threatening he never would have suggested they travel. When they were in his hands they were safe. Weren't they? But then that storm came up. The boat was tossed about, water broke over the edge. They all felt ill from fear, from worry, from the waves. And still Jesus slept. How could he sleep though this? How could he not be awake, on his feet, calming them and taking control. How could he let this happen? Did he not care they were perishing?

This wouldn't be the last time Jesus' friends, in the midst of terror, fear, or heartache would cry out to him, admonish him, wonder where he was in their time of need. If you fast forward in the

Gospels, Jesus' friends rage at him when Lazarus dies – “If you had been here,” they say, “this never would have happened.”

Today his friends cry out to him, “What is wrong with you, don't you care that we are about to die? Do something.”

It is an easy place to go, isn't it? Raging at God when things go awry. As we look at what is happening in the world right now, as we hear about the bodies of children, taken from their communities only to die far from home and be buried in unmarked graves, 3 generations of an innocent family murdered in a terror attack because of their faith, here in our country ... as we hear about the suffering around the world from covid, ... as we realize we will never be safe as long as so many in the world go without vaccines ... it all seems overwhelming and it is easy to rage at God. To wonder whether God cares, to demand action and question. It is so easy to cry out, “God, where are you. Do you not care that we, your beloved, are perishing?” When we find ourselves in these deep valleys of life, it is easy to question where God is, in fact it is one of the most presented arguments to deny the existence of God – if there was a God the world would not be as it is today. When things are at their darkest, it is easy to put the responsibility on God, losing sight of the fact that

the responsibility is on us ... and even in that God is with us exactly where God has always been ... right there in the boat with us.

Strengthening us, empowering us, and encouraging us to act.

The scripture today acknowledges that even in relationship with Christ, fears and anxieties and that sense of powerlessness we can get in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties, is a reality of human life. And faith doesn't just banish those fears, that weakness. Rather than ignore this challenge, rather than pretend that a life of faith, a relationship with Jesus banishes those fears and anxieties, the gospel writer confronts them head on, with the unabashed humanity of Jesus' friends, and tries to remind us of where God is in the midst of all the bad stuff. He puts Jesus, adrift with us, in a small boat in a stormy sea – a fitting metaphor for these days. Jesus, is put right there in the midst of it all, with them, a non-anxious present in the midst of chaos.

“Why are you afraid?” he asks them.

It seems like a ridiculous question, as we imagine all that his friends have endured, the gathering storm clouds, brutal winds and their little boat being swamped with ever increasing waves. It seems ridiculous as we imagine their sense of helplessness.

Why are we afraid?

Because we are in pandemic.

Because our country has not been a space place for all.

Because we have lost our sense of security... because too many are not safe.

Because we don't know how to make it better.

Because the world has been turned upside down.

Because there is so much pain around us.

Because we don't know what the future holds.

What I love about this passage is that fear is confronted honestly and authentically. We don't see any sudden burst of courage or a digging deep to find personal reserves of bravery they never knew existed before. They don't even pretend to be brave. In the course of this storm, Jesus' friends never pull themselves together. They never take charge of this situation or work toward a solution. Instead they reveal this utterly honest vulnerability they feel and they cry out for assurance.

And they are calmed.

The sea around them is calmed.

They are reminded they are not alone.

What is most striking for me in this passage, and in a way, most comforting is that at no point does Jesus say, “there is nothing to be afraid of here”. The reality is never ignored, or denied. There is no attempt to make light of the situation in which Jesus’ friends find themselves. Because although we often confuse them, saying “there’s nothing to be afraid of here” is a very different thing from saying “do not be afraid.” “There is nothing to be afraid of here” feels like a bit of a scolding, doesn’t it? Like we’ve failed somehow, haven’t been able to rise to the challenge. Like we’re blowing it all out of proportion. “Do not be afraid” on the other hand, that is biblical. It is relational. It harkens back to the angels and the prophets and the ones who walked with God everyday. It speaks to a promise that we are not alone, that we have a friend with us on this journey, in this boat, and we always will. It is a reminder, and an invitation to remember a deep and true covenant God made with God’s people. Remember. Do not be afraid.

You are not alone.

That is the message that Jesus gives his friends, and us, today in this lesson. The truth is that there are some things in this world that will frighten us, and the grip they can have on our lives is

incredible. Whether it is a fear of economic insecurity, the instability in the world, covid, the brokenness in a relationship, difficulty healing from trauma, the unknowns of the future, or maybe it is something that you haven't spoken to another soul, that haunts your thoughts at 3 am. There are many things in this world that will frighten us. This is a truth that our scriptures will not deny. But the rest of the truth, the deeper truth that faith in the God who bring new life from death, is that even though there are real and fearsome things in this life, they don't need to paralyze us; they don't have to have complete control over us or own us, because we are not alone in the boat.

In the midst of all the fearsome things we encounter, all the difficult stormy waters we cross, we are not alone. May you feel the presence of God calming you and comforting you, always. In the midst of fearsome things, may you be not afraid.

Remember. We are not alone.