

What might all of this mean for us as individuals and as a corporate body, the Church?

Moving beyond the literal of the account in Mark and the words spoken by God to Job, we move into the metaphorical. It does, indeed, take us into the realm of faith and trust. I think of some of the words from Charles Tindley's gospel hymn, "Stand by Me," which is petition to God for guidance and presence. The first stanza relates to the account from Mark: "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me. When the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me."

The storm of wind and water can be viewed as a descriptor for the storms of life. Similar to the waves beating over the sides of and beginning to swamp the boat, we see in life those other storms that overcome the things we build to protect ourselves from them. I suspect the majority, if not all, of these storms of life result from relationships being tested or not honored. We can use Jesus' words, "Peace! Be still!" to calm those storms.

The story of what happened as those in the boat with Jesus crossed the sea concludes with "...and they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?'" Being Jews, they knew then quite well who it was, for command of the sea, according to the note in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, was a characteristic of the Divine. Jesus did not do what they expected; hence, they were in awe.

Aren't we often awestruck – made silent – when things don't go as we expect, or when we learn something that alters and, likely, clarifies our perceptions about people and things? The thing we usually think or say in such situations is, "I can't believe it." The reality is that we come to believe it because the evidence – the "getting straight of facts," per God's rant at Job – demonstrates it to be true. Think about the number of things we hear about or read in the news each day that give us straight facts, or when sitting in a meeting or having a face-to-face conversation with a friend, family member, colleague, or co-worker and being informed of things positive or negative that surprise us. We're usually a bit "stunned" into silence. Another aspect of being "awestruck" is that we are made humble by something far more powerful, far more unexpected than we can comprehend. Think again about the chosen readings for this day: Job humbled through quite strong language; those in the boat humbled through Jesus' action and the simplicity of the words "Peace! Be still!"

And, it's not limited to Job's experience or the experience of those in the boat or the many other encounters with the Holy recorded in scripture. God demonstrates again and again – in the present – how we need to let faith, rather than fear, lead us and inspire us. The well-known phrase is "We have come this far by faith." It isn't "We have come this far by fear."

It's all about faith. It's a faith that is awe-filled. It's a faith that is humble. It's a faith that embraces and honors the unexpected. It's a faith that is intentional about listening to God through those still, small voices. It's a faith built on hope and trust instead of fear and control. It's a faith that is informed by an ever-expanding testimony about a God who continues to speak, continues to do, and continues to be.

Let's encourage one another to take such faith-filled testimony to heart, experience God in it, and allow each other to go further by it. Amen.

Let's revisit the question posed: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Please indulge me as I ask it again, this time with a different inflection in my voice, "Teacher, do you not CARE that we are perishing?" With that inflection, we sense a level of challenge to Jesus. Think about that: Hadn't they already witnessed many things that demonstrated Jesus' abilities? The previous chapters of Mark talk of Jesus' teachings and accounts of healing. Perhaps, more than a challenge, there is a level of expectation in the question, especially if we recast it into a statement, something like, "You need to help us, lest we die." It's a not-so-wise choice of words that stems from rising fears. Jesus – or, at least, Mark – have set up those in the boat, and, therefore, us for a "teachable moment" about faith.

With that thought we travel for a while to Job.

Chapter 38 is the beginning of a lengthy come-uppance from God to Job. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" Whoa! That's an elegantly stinging way of saying, "Get your facts straight!" Then God chastises Job for, in our modern lingo, "...putting God in a box." That means defining who, what, where, how, and why God is. There is contained within the discourse the admonition to not place any expectations on God. If we can define it and place expectations upon it, then we can control it. Yes, there are times in our student and professional lives when we are placed under the control of others or have control over others or situations, but I'm talking, ultimately, about the relationship of God to, with, and through us. If – and that's a big IF; meaning, it's a choice — we accept that God is in control and therefore seek more and more God's counsel through prayer, listening to others, and looking beyond the surface into the heart of the person or the matter or of God, then our anxieties and fears will begin to subside and our faith will increase. That brings about an increase in knowledge and makes our own counsel and judgments wiser. It allows us to discern more what it is God would have us be and do.

We return to those in the boat with Jesus.

Rising fears and ebbing faith led to the challenge – yea, expectation – of Jesus via the question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" I love Jesus' response: instead of entering into an all-too common, reactive, argument with those in the boat, he rebukes the wind and commands the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Is it possible these are instructions to the fear-filled persons in the boat, and to us, too?

"Be still" leads me to think of other times of stillness and the ways God chooses to speak through stillness. Think of Elijah. God spoke to him not through earthquake, wind, or fire; rather, it was through a still, small voice. The adage, "Silence is deafening," becomes true when we find ourselves in an environment where there are no natural or man-made noises to grab the attention of our ears. In those instances, our ears search for something to hear. Perhaps those are unintentional moments of finding the "still, small voice." What if we were intentional about finding God speaking to us in the "still, small voice?" It's very difficult for us to control – to define, to "...put into a box..." – what happens when we are silent. We are at the mercy of others. Maybe that's why most of us get fidgety when asked to observe a time of silence.

We really don't know what those in the boat were expecting of Jesus – perhaps some form of apology to their "question," perhaps helping them to bail the water out the boat. What Jesus DOES, instead, is issue the kindest "Chill out!" that I can think of. Then, after the "sign" has been witnessed by those in the boat, Jesus turns their question back on them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The set-up has run its course.

Center Church – The First Church of Christ in Hartford

Sunday, June 24, 2012

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

SERMON

"It's All About Faith"

Texts: Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-32; Job 38: 1-11; and Mark 4: 35-41

Jason Charneski, Director of Music and the Arts

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Hear again the first words of those in the boat to Jesus as the great windstorm on the sea they were crossing was producing waves that were beating over the sides of the boat and beginning to swamp it: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" There's a question mark there – it's the end of verse 38. In the workings of language, however, is that really a question? The word "teacher" connotes someone who knows, or should know, what to do or how to approach a situation. I think there's something else at play here, and we'll come back to it.

First, though, we need to put this account from Mark's gospel into the very real life context of some two thousand years ago. The initial item to note is that it was Jesus who wanted to cross to the other side of the sea. Next, we must consider the time of day: we are told it was "...as darkness descended." Let's remember life in those days, days long before electricity had been harnessed and crafted to create artificial light. Any light from shore would be dim, at best. One might fare better were the moon visible, but that could make navigational stars difficult to see.

It's getting dark and they're traveling on water. I suspect those two factors already were reasons for increased concern, if not fear. Then the great windstorm comes up, creating, at first, likely, an increase in chop and then the much larger waves that were breaking over the sides of the boat. Their safe haven was threatened. You can imagine the anxiety those in the boat likely were experiencing.

I can testify to the power of wind-driven waves exceeding man-made boundaries, as I was fortunate last summer to be in Provincetown as Tropical Storm Irene's winds, sustained there at just over 40 miles per hour, drove the water from the harbor up and over many docks and shore-abutting parking areas. The neat part was that there was no rain; in fact, as it was daytime, the sun shone at times through broken clouds. Yet, I certainly would not have wanted to be in a boat out in the bay! Even on land, as the condo in which we were staying was just a few feet up from the beach, the water came up quite high. I was concerned that the patio area and adjacent lowest level of the unit might become flooded. Had the storm been stronger or closer by, with higher-speed winds and rain, I have no doubt the water would have washed over the patio and found its way into the lowest level of the condo.

Back to the account in Mark.

How could Jesus have been sleeping through such incredible wind and, likely, spray from the waves? Perhaps that was the thing that got into the craws of those in the boat. One would think there would have been quite a bit of commotion, the result of which would be Jesus' own natural awakening. We are not told if those in the boat were working to bail out the water.