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Mark 4:35-41; 2 Cor. 6:1-13

### ***FOUR QUESTIONS***

I can relate to those poor disciples in that boat. I have vivid memories of the wildest, scariest boat ride of my life. It was in the spring of 1976. Leamington, Ontario, Canada. I sang in a college men's choir and we were on tour in southern Ontario. Some members of our host church for that evening's concert thought it was a great idea to take 16 young men and their two adult leaders out on Lake Erie on a fishing boat. They contacted a local fisherman who said, *Sure, I'll take them out. The lake's just a bit rough today but we'll be OK.* Right. Just a note of caution here: Be wary whenever a seasoned sailor says *The lake's just a **little** rough today.* Be very wary. We hadn't even gotten out of the channel when the boat began rocking and as we moved out into the lake it was very nasty. We clung to the side rails of the sharply rising and dipping boat. It was a roller coaster ride on water only there were no tracks to guide us. I believe the captain of the boat began having second thoughts about this little venture because he soon turned the boat around and we began to head back to the harbor. I will never forget the fear and terror I felt that afternoon. Somewhere on that trip I made a bargain with God that went something like *God, If I ever get off this boat alive, I promise I will...* I forget just what that promise was now. But I do remember the joy and relief in setting foot on solid ground after that experience.

Most of us here today can relate to boat rocking experiences in life. Perhaps not literally but in a symbolic way. Paul describes in the 2 Corinthians reading about afflictions, calamities, sleepless nights and hunger. These are times when we wonder will happen next. Unexpected events come out of the blue like a sudden storm at sea. A quiet journey on

cruise control suddenly turns into a series of events that jolts us out of a sense of security. Faith is surrounded by doubt. If you've had those kind of experiences then you'll have no trouble identifying with those disciples in the boat this morning.

In the story today did you recognize the four questions? The first question is asked by the disciples: *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* The next two are raised by Jesus: *Why are you afraid* and *Have you still no faith?* The final question is one the disciples asked each other in response to all that Jesus did: *Who then is this that even the wind and seas obey him?*

It had been a long day of teaching to the crowds. In the beginning of chapter 4 Mark describes the setting: *And Jesus began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.*

This is offshore teaching at its best. Jesus spoke for hours to the masses. Later he privately explained many of his parables with his disciples. Now it was evening and he was tired. So exhausted was he that he fell asleep on the pillow in the stern of the boat. As they were crossing the lake a windstorm arose, which was not uncommon on the Sea of Galilee. Even experienced fishermen like Peter, James and John felt threatened with their lives by the furious winds and waves that crashed against the boat. But through it all Jesus was sleeping. To us it might seem that Jesus was displaying a strong trust in the disciples to get them through this storm. But to the disciples it was a lack of concern, even to the point of wondering if he cared about them. They raised the first of the four questions: *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* This is a normal initial human response to God when things seem to fall apart in our lives. David lamented in Psalm 13: *How long O*

*Lord? Will you forget me **forever**? How long will you hide your face from me? and again in Psalm 74: O God, why do you cast us off forever?*

Two significant national calamities in our nation occurred in the morning hours. On the morning of April 19, 1995, at 9:02 a.m., the Oklahoma City bombing left 168 people dead and many more injured. The tragic morning events of September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington D.C. resulted in the deaths of more than 3,000 people. We lived only 3 hours north of Oklahoma City at the time of the bombing in 1995 and were very much impacted by the stories of the people who died and those who survived this senseless bombing. We visited the memorial that is now in that place where the Federal building stood. While perusing through books in a bookstore there I was captivated by the title of one book. It read *Where Was God at 9:02 A.M.?* A similar book title was used after the September 11<sup>th</sup> event: *Where Was God on September 11<sup>th</sup>?* It's the same question of the disciples: Why are you sleeping? Don't you care about what is happening to us? A tragedy that shook the Bluffton University campus and many others including some of you here today took place in the early morning hours of March 2, 2007. The trauma of the bus accident that took seven lives is still felt by many people and their families.

Where is God when we face adversity? How should we even begin to answer this question? Exploring the human need to ask the question will probably be more revealing than the possibility of answering the question to any satisfaction. We do look to God in distressing times. In the midst of those times when we feel helpless we need to be able to address a power much greater than our own. We search for a meaning to the madness and so we look to God. We question God's concern for us when life does not unfold as we think it should. Where are you God? Are you asleep? It is healthy to

raise this question even though there are often no satisfactory answers as to why storms come up. In the process however we have addressed God and simply acknowledged our concerns to the One we believe in.

Then Jesus got up and stilled the storm. He rebuked the wind. The waves leveled off and the sea became calm again. Now it is Jesus' turn to ask questions 2 and 3. They are closely related. *Why are you afraid?* and *Do you still have no faith?* Question 2 *Why are you afraid?* Jesus comes right to the point and asks the disciples to name their fear. What is it that you fear? Being willing and able to articulate our fears is often a first step in overcoming that very same fear. We name them. We recognize and acknowledge what it is that is causing us distress. If we live in denial that we have any fears we only perpetuate them and push them deeper into ourselves.

I was in a large city once sitting on a park bench one evening reading a book. It was a quiet spot and not many people around. Soon a man came along who looked like he was headed to a homeless shelter. He was mumbling to himself and when he saw me he stopped. He sat down across the sidewalk from me on another bench and just looked at me. At first I pretended not to notice him. But fear began to mount up inside me when he began to talk. It was a kind of babbling and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or to himself. I sensed he was upset about something. Soon some people came by and I got up and walked away with them so that I would no longer have to deal with this man. As I walked away I began to question and talk to myself. *Why was I afraid? What did I fear in this man? Was it my own personal safety that concerned me or did I simply not want to be inconvenienced?* As I asked these questions I felt my fears melt away. And I began to wonder: Had I stayed on that bench and named my fears would I

still have been afraid? Could I have faced this man and perhaps even had the courage to acknowledge him if I had simply identified my fear? Naming our fears takes us on an inward journey. Question 3 that Jesus asked: *Have you still have no faith?* forces us to look outward, away from ourselves. After naming our inner fears we look in faith to one who helps us to hope again even in the midst of a difficult situation. It is a time to reach out in trust to one that we believe cares for us.

David gives such a good example of this in Psalm 42. Listen to the progression of thought in verses 9-11 of this psalm. *I say to God, my Rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully while the enemy oppresses me? As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me while they say to me continually "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.* His inner searching and naming of fears led him to trust in God.

Do you know the national motto of our country? *In God we trust.* It was signed into law by President Eisenhower in 1956. It is on all of our currency. Now think of all the financial stress that exists in our nation today – all the fears and worries that people experience because of finances. Fears of changes in a global economy. Will my pension be safe? Is my job secure? How should we plan for the future with children and higher education costs? How will we handle medical emergencies? These are all valid concerns and we need to use careful planning in our finances. But isn't it just a little ironic that in the midst of all these fears, on our currency we say *In God we trust!* Perhaps we need to pay a little closer attention to the fine print on our currency.

The final question is again asked by the disciples after the wind is stilled and the sea is calmed. *Who then is this that even the wind and the seas obey him?* Again the disciples seem almost agitated by the calmness of the sea just as they were during the storm on the sea. **In both situations- the storm and the calm- they are uncertain about Jesus.** Who is Jesus? This question still echoes today. Mark's gospel is filled with references to Jesus casting out demons and the destructive powers on earth. In the ancient world the sea was considered a place of terror, the unknown, insecurity and disaster. The extraordinary image of Jesus commanding the storm and sea has less to do with managing nature or a literal storm than it has to do with portraying Jesus struggling against demonic and destructive powers. The same Greek verb used for him rebuking the wind is also the verb used in his rebuking a demon to leave a man in the synagogue. This is a gospel story of Jesus the liberator, the one who sets us free.

This is the good news then, that Jesus is liberator from the dark and destructive powers of the world. Jesus as the embodiment of God's power is over and against destructive powers which the storm symbolized. In our own time this gospel message of Jesus is that he comes into our world to save us from such storms- from powers that distort, destroy and endanger our lives. This liberation will have both personal and social/political implications for liberation. The social/political storms in our day center around pride, the use of violence as a deterrent, militarism, war, greed, corruption, and nationalism to name a few. Personal demons engulf humanity in a sea of self gratification, addictions, materialism, racism, and the forces that tear people away from each other and abundant life in Christ.

Later in the passion story and the resurrection account Mark answers the disciples' question about Jesus *Who then is this that even the wind and sea*

*obey him?* The one who rebukes the wind and storm is also the one who will cry in despair on the cross. The coming of God's reign will come with a price. We who follow this liberator are also challenged to take up our crosses and follow him (Mark 8:34). The way of the cross is suffering love. This is Jesus's way of pointing us to liberation from the storm. What does a Jesus response look like when faced with a national storm situation like Oklahoma City or 9/11? What is a response that is Christ like and points to liberation from the evil acts which we deplored in these two events? What would Jesus be teaching us as we face our own personal storms?

As you can tell these four questions lead to many more questions. There are no easy answers here to any of these probing thoughts. But in order to be a faithful community of followers of Jesus we do well to ask these questions of each other and to search for our answers on how Christ not only meets us in difficult times but guides us through them. The disciples faced their fears together on that boat on the Sea of Galilee. They were not perfect but Jesus stayed with them as they found their way. The church is a place where we can find our way through wind and storm. Just as Jesus stayed with the disciples so too he stays with us. May we be faithful to each other to find ways to dialogue around these questions and together to discern how we understand Christ as liberator from the storm.