

“Surviving the Storms”

Mark 4: 35-41

August 15, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

This summer we have been considering the life of Peace Presbyterian Church which was organized in June 1984, 37 years ago. That history has shaped who you are today much like who our parents and grandparents were shape our individual lives. How we respond to crisis, to conflict, is a part of any family system. There will be times when we do not function well together, when we disagree or even passionately argue. We experience the world differently and sometimes those differences create tension, conflict, or outright hostilities. Throughout the nearly forty years of Peace’s history, you have disagreed about things like parking lots, pastoral leadership or more specifically the pastor’s role and authority within the congregation, money and ministry priorities. It is during those times of conflict that Christ calls us to exercise patience, self-reflection, an intentional attempt to listen and understand one another, and have charity for all and malice toward none (as President Lincoln said in his inaugural speech at the close of the Civil War).

Once a fireman was invited to visit the kindergarten class in a local elementary school and he was teaching them what to do in case of a fire. He said, “First, go to the

door and feel the door to see if it's hot. Then," he said, "fall to your knees. Does anyone know why you ought to fall to your knees?" One of the little fellas said, "Sure, to start praying to God to get us out of this mess!"

Most systems/companies/churches view conflict as a fire; a negative force they must put out, avoid, or control. By its very nature, this approach is reactive and outward focused. It provides little opportunity for self-reflection and growth. It is primarily driven by fear and such an avoidance of conflict contributes to a prevailing culture of distrust and aggression. Alternatively, we can consider conflict as a fire alarm. It alerts and reflects what is happening with an organization and it creates an opportunity for growth and understanding, an increased trust in God, our Creator, and connection and dialogue.

This morning I want us to consider conflict and the resulting change which occurs. Sometimes that change feels like we are caught in the middle of a storm in which we have no control. I am reminded of the stories of Noah, Jonah, Elijah and Job. Once we live through a raging storm, we experience a new way of living and being together. If the past year has taught us nothing else, it is how we might be adaptable in the face of raging storms and learn to trust God as we hang on.

This morning's scripture reading is about a storm in which the disciples find themselves caught up in and it occurs at the beginning of Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel was written during the time in the life of the early Christian community when the

Roman Emperor was regularly executing and torturing Christians. However, the crisis in which they were embroiled was not just churned up from external sources. Within the Christian community itself, storms of debate and disagreement were also raging, threatening the life of the tiny ship of Christians. Out of this context of chaos and fear, the gospel writer shares a story which describes how we are to live through the storms of our lives.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Mark 4: 35-41

Jesus commands the disciples to set sail and travel in their tiny fishing boat across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. In the gospels the “other side” always implies uncleanness, something foreign, alien, and remote. The other side of the Sea of Galilee was the location of nine cities that were part of a Hellenistic federation that were not on good terms with the Jews. In other words: leave the place where the crowds are like us and love us and travel to the other side, where we are probably not going to be graciously received.

What is the other side for you? Jesus’ command may be for you to journey from where you are now to the other side — in your work, in your relationships, in your beliefs or perceptions. What is the other side for you? What is the other side for this church? For the church of Jesus Christ as a whole. Remember now, mainline

denominations were all, across the board, struggling with relevancy as we have experienced membership decline over the past several decades, before Covid ever hit. In the 1970's and 80's there was a building boom of churches, particularly in the South. And then the church became sidelined, so to speak, by other activities available to us on Sundays and our culture changed. Going to church became one of many choices families could make for Sunday participation. So, again, what is the other side for us; where is it Christ is instructing us to go? One thing's for sure - the other side will be decidedly uncomfortable and you might experience a storm before you get there.

The Sea of Galilee is approximately twelve miles long, eight miles wide, and its surface is 680 feet below sea level. Sudden, violent storms are common there. Cool winds blow down from the Golan Heights on the east and collide with warm air which rises from the sea. When these two very different kinds of wind meet, like in our communities, our nation, our world and in fact, within our own families, a sudden, unpredictable, and violent storm might descend on us.

Sure enough - a storm hits the disciples as they are trying to cross the Sea of Galilee. And, the disciples panic. They cannot envision how they will get through the storm. Do you remember the movie "Star Wars - the Empire Strikes Back"? There is a great scene in the movie when Luke Skywalker, a good guy who is trying his best to fight the forces of evil in his galaxy, crashes his spaceship in a swamp. It is there that he meets the older and wiser Jedi master Yoda; the little green guy with the big pointed

ears. Yoda reluctantly agrees to help Luke and begins by teaching him how to lift rocks with his mental powers. Lift rocks with our mental powers; telling ourselves we have the capacity to lift rocks which sit in our way. Then one day Yoda challenges Luke to lift his spaceship out of the swamp by using those same mental powers. Luke complains that lifting rocks is one thing but lifting a spaceship is quite another. Luke, not surprisingly, fails the challenge. Yoda then focuses his mind and slowly lifts the spaceship out of the mire. Luke exclaims “I don’t believe it! How in the world did you lift that spaceship out of the mire waters?” To which Yoda replies, “You failed to lift the spaceship out of the swamp because you didn’t believe you could.” Sometimes we fail when confronted with a challenge in life because we don’t believe we can succeed.

As the disciples panic, consider what Jesus is doing? Jesus appears to be sleeping as the disciples battle to prevent their boat from capsizing or filling with water. Jesus is curled up using the bench at the stern as his pillow — a hard cushion at that. It is no wonder that the disciples perceive that Jesus is indifferent to their plight. “You were the one who commanded us to cross this sea to the other side, in the first place; to enter into an unfamiliar place where storms might rage. And now you sleep? Don’t you care about us anymore?” This was a time of crisis for the disciples. Not only did they fear the storm, they also feared that Jesus didn’t care for them. Crisis raises issues of faith and doubt. During the storm we experience that God is absent or Jesus

is not attentive to our needs. Time and time again, in my own life and as I walk with other people who are living through the terror of a storm, the ultimate question is “Where is God in this? Where is Jesus now? I thought the promise was that they would be with me?”

The truth is that God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer is present - in the boat with us. The promise of God is not that storms will never threaten us if we just have faith, but that God in Jesus Christ journeys with us through the storms. You know the poem entitled “Footprints”. A man dies and goes to heaven. As he looks back over his life there are times, the most painful, life-threatening times of his life, when he sees only one set of footprints in the sand - his own. The one question he has for God is “why were you not present during those times, when you promised to always be present?” God’s response is “my precious child I was always with you; the one set of footprints in the sand were not yours; they were mine. Those were the times I carried you.”

I commend the disciples for asking the question; many of us don’t ask the questions that haunt our souls; the questions which need to be vocalized in order for us to work through them. The disciples’ questions were not born of unbelief, but of belief which is, at times, uncertain and searching. However, afraid to consider the answer to the question, humanity often scoffs at the questioner, blames the ask’ers for their unbelief. The world is convinced that the questioners have somehow created the

storms. Consider how Job's friends respond to Job's storms. You, Job, must have done something to deserve God's wrath! The storms must have been created by your own doing; your own sinfulness or lack of faith. Yes, I think we need to commend Jesus' followers because they do look to Jesus for their answers.

And Jesus responds to their questions.

After the storm is quieted, the disciples continue to be afraid. Now what are they afraid of? The story ends where it began, with the disciples standing in fear and trembling. At the beginning of the story the disciples are terrified by the external storms that rage around us. At the end of the story the disciples are in awe and fear of this Jesus Christ who even the winds and waves obey. Maybe that is where we always are - either in fear and apprehension about the storms that are raging outside which can change our lives and destroy all we have created and perhaps even take our lives, or we are in fear of what may happen to us if Jesus Christ moves powerfully and redemptively into our lives and our community and brings us that new way of being and holding together. Both the storms outside and the Christ in the boat will change us, and we will not be able to dictate the terms to either but we will be able to choose how we will respond.

"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"