

The Rev. Dr. Cornel Barnett  
Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
June 24, 2012

Mark 4:35-41  
"Owning Our Faith"

It is said that today's gospel text is one of the most widely quoted stories in scripture. It's a popular passage for preaching. I'm preaching on it because it's in the lectionary. The sermon works through the text.

As we just heard, it begins: "On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'"

Jesus and his disciples have spent a crowded day in ministry and Jesus wants to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He doesn't consider the weather. He simply wants to go.

Commentators make something of going to the other side. What might this mean? What is the other side for us? It could be our journey home, or a trip from one country to another, or the final passage to the other side of life. Where are we going and what are we leaving behind? For Jesus it's a simple journey to the other side of the sea.

The text continues: "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him."

Notice here that they took him with them in the boat. The disciples were experienced sailors. They knew their boats and the sea. They were fishermen before Jesus came along. The boats probably carried four or five people.

The plot thickens: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But Jesus 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?'"

They set sail into a light wind. Dark clouds loomed on the horizon and the wind increased as they progressed. It short order the clouds were upon them and the weather became bleak and a storm burst upon them. We know how fast clouds can come. The sea turned dark and rough. In dramatic fashion the boat crashed its way through the waves with the fearful disciples holding on with dear life and Jesus incredibly asleep on a cushion in the stern.

I want Jesus' ability to sleep. He must have had a rough day to be so soundly asleep in the commotion or he was a great sleeper. Some people are concerned that he is sleeping while the boat is sinking. He doesn't know it's sinking until they wake him.

Questions here are: What are the storms in your life? More pointedly, what are the seeming insurmountable storms in your life? Where is God when people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Does God care?

What do we do when the road gets rough?

There's the cliché: "When the going gets tough the tough get going." Or, "...the tough go shopping." Charles Sasser wrote a book of accounts of faith from the American Civil War to the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict called *God in the Foxhole* which prompted a reviewer to say: "When the going gets tough a miracle or two doesn't hurt." That's the story of the disciples in today's gospel story.

They wake Jesus and say: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus cares and he does what's expected of him: He calms the storm.

The text continues: "He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'"

This is the kernel of the passage. Jesus stills the storm but he's not happy. A member of the session said on Tuesday that if he was in a storm and there was a sudden "dead calm" he'd think he was in the eye of the storm. The next phase of the storm was on its way, with fury, and soon!

In the gospel text, Jesus was the other end of the storm. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" he says, not kindly from my point of view.

Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello, tells this story in his delightful book *The Song of the Bird*: "A disciple once complained, 'You tell us stories, but you never reveal their meaning to us.' Said the master: 'How would you like it if someone offered you fruit and masticated it before giving it to you?'" De Mello comments: "No one can find your meaning for you. Not even the master."

Jesus is no doubt amazed that these experienced sailors caved so easily in the storm. It was easier to turn to Jesus. They had experienced his deeds of power and now they simply and quickly appeal to him.

Excuse while I drink some water. [Drink from a glass of water]

That was delicious and I have just demonstrated faith. I have faith in the Marin Municipal Water District to supply us with high quality drinking water and so I drink their water from the tap and I feel pretty good afterwards. There are places in the world where one would not drink water from the tap. You wouldn't trust their systems.

It is surprising to Jesus that these qualified sailors would so easily turn to him for salvation in the storm. His rebuke of the weather is a rebuke of his disciples. Why are they now suddenly so utterly dependent on him? "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Jesus is exhorting them to own their faith. He's saying: Believe in yourself and your abilities. Believe in your experience and know-how. How come when I arrive on the scene you forget who you are and turn so easily to me to rescue you? You know also the faith of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the words of the psalmist who spoke repeatedly of God who aids and rescues us, a faith for you, and you forget it all and simply call to me. And why are you ruled by fear and not by faith? I didn't say that I have come that you might be dependent on me. I said I came that you might have life and have in all its fullness. You of little faith...

Jesus is a little ticked off.

Excuse me while I have another drink of water. [Drink again from the glass of water.]

Now an irony: While Jesus turns the faith of the disciples away from him for good reason we are expected as Christians to turn to Jesus in difficulties and storms. For Jesus to say to us, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" he expects us to affirm our faith in him since we are on this side of his life, death and resurrection.

When we are caught in storms, rough roads, dilemmas, difficulties and places where fear can so easily overtake us, we own our faith by drawing on our own resources to cope and pray for the strong and gently presence Jesus Christ who dwells in our life and empowers us. God in Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit gives us the perspective, insight and courage to handle any situation in life.

One would think that the disciples learned something about drawing on their experience and the faith of their ancestors which is faith in God.

They didn't for the last words of the story read: "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

"Awe" in this context is fear. They are still fearful but this time with how amazing Jesus is. One hoped that they would respond by saying, "Yes!

Thanks! That's true! Thank you for pointing out to me that I have faith and can apply it even in this difficult situation. And thanks for reminding us that we have each other in the boat and we probably could have pulled through without you, or you and us together. And, by the way, we're sorry for waking you."

Instead, they go back to how great Jesus is. He's the man!

Jesus is "the man" but never at the expense of our full personhood and faith. There's a real danger in spiritualizing our faith when Jesus is in fact calling us to more groundedness. He wants us to own our faith which is our head (reason) and faith in God (now through Jesus) that casts out fear.

We own our faith in the church when all of us realize that we are individually and corporately responsible for the well being of the church and world. After this worship service we will gather in the library to brainstorm ways we can be stronger and healthier as a church. Church growth and health depends on all of us – our resources and abilities – and our faith in God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Addendum: The disciples call out to Jesus and Jesus tells them that they have no faith. This pertains to this story alone. There are other stories in the gospels where faith in Jesus is affirmed, especially in the healing stories. This sermon made the point that it was too early for the disciples to call to Jesus. The disciples would develop a more integrated theology of faith as they continued in ministry with Jesus. And so we all develop as we grow into Christ.