

## **“Tossing the Tempest”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

June 20, 2021 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

One of the highlights of my day is coming home after a day of work here at the church and preparing dinner while watching the Weather Channel on TV. This brings me great joy, not only because I'm a nerd and love the weather, but because, over the course of the last many months of strange covid-time isolation, I feel that the quirky, nerdy meteorologists on the channel have become my close friends. This is sad, I know. It's also sad when the time comes for my meteorologist friends to sign off for the evening and the programming shifts to pre-recorded tales of storms and how they impacted peoples' lives. These storm stories are about how individuals and families faced adversity thrown at them in the form of hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and the like. I feel that today's gospel lesson of Jesus calming the raging storm on the Sea of Galilee would serve as perfect material for an episode of this series, for it is a great storm story.

We also have something of a storm story in our first reading from 2 Corinthians as we read a bit about some of the storms that raged in the life of the apostle Paul and his response to them. We tend to think of the early church as though it were some harmonious, unified collection of people, almost a utopic community, where everyone gathered in peace, shared all of their possessions with one another, and held hands as they sang “Kum-ba-ya” around the campfire. Most of the evidence we have, however, tells us that reality was quite a bit different than this rose-colored vision. According to the writings of Paul, which were written well before the Gospels or other writings of the New Testament, there was actually quite a bit of conflict and discord in and between the early Christian communities and their leaders. Paul, throughout his years of ministry, struggled against the teachings of other traveling preachers, who often came to the churches that he founded and offered the people of these Christian communities messages that conflicted with those from Paul. He struggled to get the people of the churches he led to follow not the teachings of other so-called apostles, but *his* teaching for them to love one another. He struggled with leaders in the synagogues. He struggled against the Roman authorities and endured beatings

and imprisonment at their hands. And yet, throughout these storms he faced, Paul remained full of faith in God and continued to boldly proclaim with an open heart a message of God's great love.

Paul followed in the way of Jesus, who likewise faced stormy opposition and other difficulties, yet remained full of faith and was steadfast in continuing his ministry to proclaim and demonstrate God's love for all people. According to today's gospel reading from Mark, Jesus faced the storm "just as he was"-- unguarded, unshielded, and without outward symbols of power. According to Mark, as he proclaimed with his own open heart God's message of love, people did not understand him. More often, they misunderstood who he was and what he was calling them to do. In Mark, the disciples, his other followers, the religious and political leaders, the crowds of people he taught and healed, and even his friends and family *all* misunderstood Jesus and responded to him with fear more than with faith. In today's story, when Jesus commanded the angry sea and blustering winds to be at peace, the raging storm was calmed. The disciples, however, do not respond to this life-saving miracle by being at peace themselves or by being filled with joy or giving God thanks or praise. Mark writes that *after* the storm was calmed, the disciples were filled with *phobon megan*, Greek words meaning "great fear."

This response of fear is echoed throughout the gospel. Even those who *kind of* got Jesus and his message, the women who followed him, who were usually much more full of faith than the 12 disciples, responded to his miraculous power with fear. The gospel itself ends abruptly by telling us that three of the usually faithful women who followed Jesus, "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome," ran away from an empty tomb *in fear*. The end. In Mark's gospel, there is no happy, Hollywood ending. Jesus does not appear to the disciples again. He does not share a meal with them. There is just an empty tomb, an angel telling the women that Jesus had risen and that they would see him again in Galilee, and them running away, not in faith, but in fear.

One of the reasons I love Mark's gospel, is that it is so easy to see ourselves in the lives of Jesus' followers. With them, we often respond to the storms of life not with faith, but with fear. We also respond to God's storm-calming and life-resurrecting miracles with doubt and disbelief rather than faith and praise. The

good news of the gospel, for ancient and modern disciples alike, is that Jesus calms the chaos of our lives, effectively speaking peace in the midst of the stormy blast.

This is good news for us as there are many storms raging in our lives. There is the storm of a bad diagnosis, the storm of addiction, the storm of financial trouble, the storm of a breaking relationship. The world is still facing the storm of a deadly pandemic. Our nation is plagued by a storm of violence that holds us tightly in its terrible grip.

But even with these storms raging around us and in us, we must trust in God, who commands and calms the storm, knowing that the one we trust, who was more powerful than an ancient storm on a Galilean lake, is still more powerful than *any* of the tempests in our own lives. So, when you find yourself in tempest-tossed times, toss the tempest out of your heart. Though the inevitable tempest is fearsome, do not face the storm with fear, but with faith and with an open heart. Let God calm you and give you peace.

Pay attention to God's storm-calming work in the world and respond with thanksgiving and faith. When you think of where we are now here in our struggle against Covid-19, with infections, illnesses, and deaths plummeting rapidly, let gratitude and peace displace fear from your heart. Consider that even in the midst of our nation's divisions, we have just embraced a new national holiday in Juneteenth, a celebration commemorating that the blessings of freedom are accessible to *all* the people of this land. Take hope in knowing that the movements to include all people in the promise that we may enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are strong and growing even amidst the fear and violent pushback of many.

Yes, there are storms in life, and you may be living through a storm story right now. But take comfort in knowing that God is the boat with you and is at work, calming the storms in our hearts and in our world. Whatever you are facing in this moment, may you enjoy God's peace and give thanks. Amen.