

Storms Like Ours
Proper 7B, Mark 4.35-41
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Have you ever heard of the Beaufort scale? In the 19th century an admiral needed a reliable way to measure the speed of the wind. Figuring wind velocity from a moving ship is tricky. Here's the beauty of what necessity forced Admiral Beaufort to devise. His scale didn't give wind speed in knots or miles per hour. It *described* the wind. The Beaufort scale described windspeed in terms of what was going on in the observable world.

So a one on the Beaufort scale does not tell us that the wind is moving at zero miles per hour. At one Beaufort "smoke rises vertically." At two on the Beaufort scale "wind felt on face, leaves rustle, ordinary vane moved by wind." At five "crested wavelets form on inland waters," and at six "telegraph wires whistle, umbrellas used with difficulty." At nine we read "chimney pots and slates removed." And for the hurricane force of 12 Beaufort, the scale states simply "devastation occurs."

Other scales were developed later in imitation. We are used to hearing the intensity of earthquakes in terms of the Richter scale. But the Richter scale is logarithmic, which means that a 6 is not 20% more powerful than a 5. It's 10 times more powerful. It's hard to wrap our minds around that. But at 4 on the Mercalli earthquake scale we read that "wooden walls and frames may creak." At 5 "pendulum clocks stop, start, change rate." At 7 "large bells ring" and at 12 "objects [are] thrown upward into the air." Imaginable events in a world you and I can recognize.

I like the gospel of Mark. You might call it the Beaufort gospel. In contrast, say, to John, it provides clear and vivid details from a world we recognize rather than all those parenthetical commentaries on the motives of a character or the purpose of some cryptic statement. In just the handful of verses we just read, we're told it's evening on the sea, and boats are bobbing around. We can easily imagine the gathering force of the winds and the waves beating the sides of the boat, splashing over the gunwales. We see Jesus asleep, not just in the stern, but on a cushion. Did anyone else notice the cushion? For all Mark's efficiency with words — it's the shortest gospel, after all — he sure knows how to fill out a scene with things we've seen before... things we've heard... things we've felt.

I want a faith and a language about faith that delivers me more fully to the world I'm alive in and matters to the life I'm actually living in that world. Don't you? If I hear a phrase like "Jesus saves," which I very much believe, I don't want it to register like a number on the Richter scale. I want to be thinking about being saved from forces that might stop a pendulum clock, cause walls to creak, or throw objects upward into the air. I don't want to hear about the saving power of Jesus in ways that don't relate to the ways I know I need to be saved. Wouldn't you agree?

Maybe you've never been on a boat in a storm, wondering if you'll reach the shore alive. But you're very much alive in a world in which that fear makes emotional sense to you. We can know enough about how our minds and bodies and hearts respond to the world to know what situations wouldn't phase us and which ones would send us reeling. Which means we can be very much in the boat in that storm if we've ever gotten a scary diagnosis or suddenly lost a job or failed a friend we really care about so badly that we don't think they'll ever speak to us again.

We can bring fears about the murder rate in Memphis or new COVID variants or a young person's ongoing risky choices to this story, don't you think?

This is not to say that gospel stories are little fables into which we can insert our personal problems and get a Christian solution to them all. I think you'll find the stories pretty resistant to that method. Or, at the very least, they don't tend to spit out the solutions we come to them looking for.

Take the one we just read. The presenting problem is that storm, right? That's the scary, uncontrollable event that sends the disciples to Jesus. And Jesus takes care of it. He gets up, rubs the sleep from his eyes, and tells the weather to calm down. And it does.

But what happens next? Do the disciples say, "Cool! Our new friend has superpowers! If he can calm the sea, our problems are over! Just imagine what other binds he'll get us out of! He'll keep us from getting sick and from losing our jobs. He can mend the relationships we've messed up and ensure that our children grow up to be healthy, wealthy, and wise."

That's not what they say. What they say is "Who is this?" In the wake of all their very recognizable fears, the disciples experience something more like confusion than relief. Jesus doesn't seem like someone who's there to save them by solving their problems. He's actually less comprehensible to them than ever.

And when he says, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" what in this world does he mean? Does he mean if we have enough faith we can stop storms and other frightening, uncontrollable things from happening to us? Or, that if we have enough faith, we can ask him to and he will? Mind you, I don't want to sap these stories of their power by removing the possibility of miracle. In fact, let's just agree to accept that Jesus really did speak to the winds and the seas that evening in Galilee and that they literally calmed right down. What then? What does the story offer to our lives if he did?

Well, the first thing I'd say is that if we're coming to Jesus as a reliable calmer of storms, we're going to be disappointed. The rest of Mark's gospel, and the other ones as well, is not a story of Jesus rushing ahead of his disciples and running interference, lest anything horrible happen to them. In fact, his death will be the most incomprehensible horror of them all to them.

But at the same time, there is something in this story and in this Jesus that draws those disciples and also draws us to him with the specific worries and anxieties and knee buckling fears that can beset us in a world like this one. A world in which ships really do sink in storms and pandemics really do still rage, especially in poor countries, and in which ordinary, but mostly comfortable people can still experience loss and fear and doubt and grief. And I believe we can still take these things to Jesus. I really do.

There may well be times when what you've taken to Jesus really does get healed or resolved or mended in ways you cannot explain except as a miracle. But if we only go to Jesus for what he can do for us, it may seem like he's asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. My experience is not that he usually wakes right up and solves my problem with a word. And, read the story again, the disciples were still unsettled and confused at the end of it. But they did begin to realize that the God who made this familiar world that includes, not only uncontrollable storms, but also unconditional love and unmerited grace, was with them through it all. And something in the miraculous calming of the storm didn't guarantee Jesus would calm the next one so much as it drew them closer to him in their wonder.

That may be the takeaway this particular Christian most needs from this story right now. That Jesus isn't running ahead of the faithful, speaking all headwinds into submission. But that he is present to us in these storms. That faith in him is still a trusting connection with the God who never promised to solve all our problems. But a God who loves. A God who is love. A God

who can't not be love. And a God whom we don't access best through our fears of the worst thing that might happen, but as we bring those fears, in all their frightening details, to the one we might still turn to in confusion and wonder when we've survived, if only barely, the storm in our lives that didn't actually get so neatly solved as the winds did in Galilee that day.

When we baptize little Sam in a few moments, we are doing so as a community of the Jesus who may have calmed a storm once in Galilee. But also the one who left most storms in this world and in our lives to rage on. We'll baptize Sam as one of us, in the world as we know it. But we will baptize him into a community that's still trying to trust more deeply by the day that lives like ours still matter to God. That fears and failures like ours, large and small, will not drive this Jesus away from us. In fact, that in bringing the particulars of our lives to Jesus together in prayer, we can still be drawn into his life and his love even more strongly. Not as a fixer of everything that's broken, but as the constant lover of ordinary broken ones like us.