



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Not Alone in the Boat

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 20, 2021
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7
Job 38:1-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

We are, all of us, afraid. We are all afraid of something. Some of us experience a constant low-level dread—something akin to a quiet panic. Others of us suffer from a persistent anxiety that robs us of any sense of peace or well-being. Still others of us are literally scared-out-of-our-flipping minds every single day. It's a wonder we're able to assemble ourselves in some fashion, put clothing on, and venture out into the world. During the pandemic, more and more people discovered they didn't have to put on this act every day, and that turned out to be just fine, because constantly acting as if you're *not* afraid is absolutely exhausting. Still, you can't hide in your apartment in sweat pants and an old t-shirt forever. Eventually we have to come out to face our fears.

I believe the unfiltered response of the disciples in the story of that storm-tossed boat that we just heard speaks to our deepest selves. You know that phrase, "I can feel you"? We can literally "feel" them. This story connects to our personal lives, and it resonates with our life in this community of faith and in the wider culture and context in which we live.

The fishermen took him in the boat, "just as he was." I love that phrase, *just as he was*. Without additional equipment. Without anything overtly divine, "just as he was." The boat was their territory, their domain. They were the professionals. They were fishermen and sailors, and he was aboard *their* boat. Yet it's clear who's in charge.

The Reverend Michael Lindvall, former minister of the Brick Presbyterian Church (just up the street here) in New York City, wrote, "We are afraid of the wind and the waves that assail our fragile vessels... our lives, our churches, our cities, and our nations. We fear disapproval, rejection, failure, meaning/less/ness, illness, and of course we fear death—our own death, the death of those we love, and the potential demise of the communities we cherish."¹ Yep, Michael. I'd say that just about sums it up.

¹ *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, c. 2009, Westminster/Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 164

On this Father's Day, I find myself thinking about my own father, whom I loved so much and who fought constantly with his fear of not having enough money to provide for his family. It was a constant, nerve-racking fear, fed by his having grown up in the Great Depression. And now I, being my father's son, am fortunately not as worried about my own personal finances, but find myself fearful about the church's finances: the needs this beautiful, historic building continues to present to us. Will we be able to fix the HVAC? How will continue to pay our employees properly? And so on and so forth.

And just as the disciples experienced the "presence of an absence," we, too, experience what we interpret as the indifference and apathy of God, the absence of God's love and care. 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?'" In other words, God, don't you care about our fears? Don't you care about our suffering, our anxiety, our debilitating dis-ease?

We don't hear enough from the Book of Job, but earlier we heard one of the most familiar passages in that entire book. Job cries out to God and finally gets God's attention, but it doesn't go particularly well, at least a first. At first it looks as though God is saying, "Who are you to question me?" Overwhelmed by God's recitation of the wonders and mysteries of the Almighty (which Job's best attempts at theology can't begin to answer), it seems that we hearers of this story are being told we shouldn't dare question God about our sufferings or fears.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Who could—who *would*—argue with the One who laid the foundations of the universe, "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy"? God's words are sublime poetry in Job. Who would want to argue with *that* deity? And yet, a good argument with God suggests a deep relationship with God. You don't argue with an entity you don't believe in. The Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Psalms, are full of genuine arguments with God, the kind of arguments you only have with those whom you truly love.

Now Christians sometimes like to share with others what they've been told in times of difficulty, regardless of how hurtful or unhelpful these words may be. "Church talk" can be its own unconstructive thing in the face of fear. You know what I mean. You've heard all of these at one time or another. "God is good all the time. All the time, God is good." "God will never give you more than you can handle." "God's will is difficult to understand." These "truths" may, indeed, contain a truth, but they're not very helpful as empathetic responses to fearful or suffering people. Like Job's friends, we don't actually enjoy pondering mysteries we don't understand.

We do better when we maintain a compassionate silence: a non-anxious presence, a caring curiosity that offers more thoughtful questions than easy answers. Questions like, "How are you doing,

really?" "Are you finding anything that's helpful?" "Do you mind if I just sit here with you for a while?" Job's friends, it seems, were the most helpful when they were quiet.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee six different times. Three of these crossings are uneventful, but in the other three crossings, Jesus stills a storm, he walks on the water, and he and his disciples discuss the multiplication of the loaves of bread.

Scholars note that when Jesus says, "Let us go across to the other side," he's not just proposing a change in scenery. The Sea of Galilee separated Jewish and Gentile territories, but it serves as much more than just a topographical feature. The Sea of Galilee symbolically represents the social, ethnic, and cultural battles that defined and distinguished Jews and Gentiles. The "other side" Jesus wants to travel to is Gentile country. This is his first foray into dangerous territory in The Gospel According to Mark. Here Jesus is suggesting an inappropriate destination for a Jewish teacher. He wants to go where the spiritually unclean, the impure, and the lost live. He wants to teach "those people." He's heading to the dangerous part of town, and he's going there at night.

This storm is reminiscent of the watery chaos from which creation was brought forth by God. Yes, we actually came out of chaos! The stormy sea represents the powerful demonic opposition to this Gentile mission. Jesus wants to cross to the other side to fulfill his mission; and the storm, the power of evil, is trying to keep him from his goal. But for all of its chaotic force and power, this "stormy sea" presents no real obstacle for Jesus. It's as if Jesus has exorcised the demon of the wind and the waves, and his triumph over the storm offers all the justification Jesus could ever need for including the Gentiles in his proclamation of the good news of God's kingdom.

But the fear the disciples express in the midst of this storm also suggests something else. Their fear represents their own resistance to the Gentile mission. Finally, they don't have faith in Jesus' abilities to share the Kingdom with people who are not like them. Their God is just not that big. This becomes a major issue that lasts well into the formation of the early church. "Will outsiders be included?" "What kind of relationship will they have with us and we with them?" Believe it or not, we're still asking those questions.

Who *is* Jesus and who is he *for*? Is he for one special group, or is he for everyone? The Jewish disciples would have preferred to keep him for the people with whom they were most familiar, and there's been a more than two-thousand-year-old history of trying to keep Jesus to ourselves, regardless of who you are. Yet Jesus is the one who overcomes all the barriers: the barriers that separate Jews from Gentiles, slaves from free, men from women, binary from non-binary persons. Jesus consistently refuses to be possessed by any one entity—even Christianity, even the Christian church.

You will note that in this entire story, Jesus never tells the disciples who awaken him, "There is nothing to be afraid of." He never lies to them. No, the dangers were real, and the wind and the waves were genuinely threatening. Instead, Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" The disciples have seen him teaching and performing signs and miracles. They've traveled with him for a while now. They've seen the exorcisms, and they've seen the other wonders he's performed. And still, still, they're afraid.

The truth of the matter is, the things that make us fearful are very real. The fear of losing one's job, the fear of experiencing a public humiliation, a private rejection, a growing sense of aloneness, a disabling illness—even our eventual death: these are all real fears. These aren't things we just imagine. There are real reasons to be afraid. There are bad actors and real dangers.

But the central point of this gospel story and the point of The Book of Job is that in spite of what we do not know and cannot understand, in spite of our clinging tribalism and our self-centered theologies, in spite of all the real things that create terror in our hearts and minds, none of these things, *not one of these things*, holds final power over us. None of the things which terrify us, none of the things which cause us fear and anxiety, hold final authority over us.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to those impossibly cantankerous Corinthians, who, in spite of their faithlessness and their misbehavior, Paul just could not keep from loving. “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

And all of us, who appear to have nothing *even as small as a flashlight* to push back the darkness of our fears, have the promise of the final possession of everything—every single thing we need—to give peace to our terrors and a blessed rest to our fears. Because, in the end, we are not alone in the boat. And that is good news. Good, good news.

Amen.

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