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At the Green since 1802

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**A sermon by
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"Stormy Weather"

Mark 4: 35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ But he 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?"³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"⁴¹ 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?"

"Stormy Weather" is the title of an old jazz standard, but the song is not about the weather, it about life. Indeed weather is often a metaphor for our experience of life itself. Do you remember the lyrics?

*Life is bare, gloom and misery everywhere, stormy weather
Just can't get my poor old self together
I'm weary all the time,
So weary all the time, stormy weather.*

There are sunny days that are bright, and then there is the stormy weather. Most of us love the sunny days and wish that we could have them all the time. There is a name for that: it is called a drought. There are storms in life and I believe that these storms enrich our lives and though we may be fearful, we are not alone in the midst of them.

Today I will look at the storms that often blow through our lives: first, in terms of the story of Jesus and storm at sea. Then I will look at the storms that often hit our lives. Finally, I will conclude with a message about discipleship.

I

The story of Jesus and the storm at sea is a primal narrative that expresses human hopes and fears in relation to the unknown: the sea.

My grandfather was a sailor in the Dutch merchant marine. When I knew him, he was quite old. One time I got a glimpse of his bare chest noticed that he had a huge schooner ship tattooed on his chest; a memento of earlier times. My father told me the stories of when they lived on the tiny island in the

North Sea, how grandfather's sailing friends would come over to the house and they would tell tales of the sea late into the night. There were stories of exotic places; stories of humorous events, but also stories of near disaster.

But was another story that seldom was told on those occasions. It was not my grandfather's story, but my grandmother's. She would wait on the tiny island in the North Sea, for months, sometimes years for her husband, Simon, to return: a sea-widow. Tales would come in about storms and other disasters that occurred on the sea, but there would be no word until his ship sailed in. I cannot imagine the anxiety with which she lived. But there is a strange irony in that situation. The sea, the treacherous, life threatening sea, also provided the family with a livelihood. It gave them the means to buy shelter and food. But the same sea also was a raging beast that could bring disaster and death at any time.

Four of Jesus' disciples were fisherman and were dependent upon the sea for their living. The sea also provided the ancients with a means of transportation from one place to another. But the sea could at any time become a ravenous beast. We have no record of the ancient Hebrew people being able to swim and so if the boat was capsized, it would mean certain death. Storms at sea were fearful and consequently the disciples were panicked. Jesus was sleeping! What an amazing gift to be able to sleep during a storm. But the disciples didn't appreciate this and they scream at him: "Don't you care about us? We are all going to die?" (This is really a dumb question.... Of course he cares. He is literally in the same boat!) Then he calms the storm, looks at them quizzically and asks: "Don't you have faith?"

Mark told this story in his gospel because he wanted to establish from the very beginning that Jesus was the son of God. He wanted to show the amazing things that Jesus could do. In the process he also told the story of humanity caught in the midst of the storm. The disciples acted all too humanly and without faith. They were afraid. Mark was telling us that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear! What a contrast this is to Jesus. He wasn't afraid... he could sleep during a storm.

II

Bad weather is not the only storm we experience. There are more significant storms that threaten the little boat that we know as life. There are waves that smack into us, jarring us and raising fear within us. There are events that cause us to realize that we are mortal.

I believe that we, as a nation, are still trying to understand the impact of the 9-11. The events of that day hit our society like a tidal wave and have produced a deep seated anxiety. We don't feel safe. A number of people have asked "where was God?" "Does God care?" How similar we are to the disciples, wondering if the sleeping Jesus cares about us, forgetting that he is with us. Just as Jesus placed his life on the same boat with those disciples, God has cast his lot with humanity. He is with us.

There are also the developmental storms that we experience when the little boats of our lives threaten to capsize. It can be the storm that is rooted in our personal identity. There are different times in our lives when we confront the question, "who am I, and why was I created?" At times this question hits us like a tsunami.

- The job doesn't give us the pleasure that it once did.
- We no longer get the same satisfaction out of our hobbies.
- Something feels missing.
- Our toys, be they the new computer or the red sports car, just don't have what it takes to lift our spirits.

"Who am I?" This, I believe, is a question of faith, and when we battle the elements of this storm, we feel so all alone and abandoned... "Where is God?" "Why is this so painful?" And then we realize that the faith we once knew is there, asleep in our soul, (just as Jesus was asleep in the boat!) It is awakened, and we hear the words: "I was with you always. I am here."

There are also the storms that hit us with tragic personal events. It might be the loss of a loved one. It might be a tragic event or accident. It might be an illness that has afflicted you or someone close to you. It might be a broken relationship. It might be an event that shakes the easy peace that we enjoy so much. Once again we ask, "Where is God?" Fear holds us in its grip and we realize that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith.

These are lonely times. These are times when feel rejected, unloved and uncared for: Our desperate prayer might be, "Don't you care about me God?"

Jesus was there on the boat with the disciples and the spirit of Christ is with us in the midst of our storms. We read that God sheds a tear for the tiny sparrow when it falls from the nest. God's tears mix with ours in our pain. He is with us and will not jump ship.

III

Let me conclude with a word about discipleship. The story of the ship caught in the storm gives us a unique insight into our calling as a community of faith.

Listen carefully: we need to learn to sleep in the midst of the storm. The Christian community needs to be a calming presence amidst the panic and fear that grips the world. Jesus showed phenomenal strength by sleeping in a storm. Can we show that same strength?

One of the major influences on my thinking about church and leadership is the late Edwin Friedman. He was a rabbi who brought a systemic vision to congregations and leadership. One of the terms that he coined was "non-anxious presence." Leadership, he maintained, in this age of anxiety and fear, is manifest in being present to the anxiety, but not controlled by it. Jesus, on the boat, modeled this. We should strive to be that presence. This requires two things.

First it requires us to be present with people when they are afraid. It requires us to be present when the storms of life hit them. Physical presence is healing, and it has the power to calm storms. When I was a teenager and my uncle died, my father was crushed at the loss of his youngest brother. When he got that bad news, my older brother just held my father in his arms. It was an event that impacted me. What could a teenager say to a theologian at the time of death? But holding him... being present was healing. We need to be present with people in the storms of life.

Second, we need to keep our focus, because that is the source of our calm. Our focus is our faith in Christ. Our belief that our lives are in God's hands, and that regardless of what happens, God is with us, and that the resurrection is the final word in all things. If that is our focus, if that is the content of our faith, we will be able to sleep during the storms...and truly represent the Christ in this age.

There will be stormy seas for all of us. There will be waves we ride that will threaten our very being. Know that just as Jesus was on that boat with his disciples, he is also with you in the midst of your storms. With that assurance, let us go forth in Christ's name, into this world, filled as it is with storms, fear and panic. Let us calmly and assuredly proclaim this good news to panicked and anxious world. Amen.