

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Why are you afraid?” That’s Jesus’ question to the disciples, after he had calmed the storm, after they had come to him terrified that their boat was going to sink in the storm that came upon them. “Why are you so timid?” is probably a better translation. And it seems a little unfair. Of all of the four Gospels, Mark is known for being the hardest on the disciples. From the beginning to the end of his story, they don’t quite get what’s going on, even when Jesus explains his parables to them, as we heard last week. Because they don’t understand, they don’t have faith or trust in Jesus either. Even at the very end of the Gospel, when they are given the good news of Jesus resurrection and the promise of meeting him alive again in Galilee, they are seized with terror and run away from the empty tomb “and say nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” Mark uses the disciples as negative examples for his readers. We are meant to identify with the disciples, and to be challenged by their lack of faith and understanding. But we are also meant to be encouraged by Jesus’ persistent faithfulness despite their little faith. Mark uses these stories to move us to faith, to show us who Jesus is so that we might come to trust his promises and be equipped to be his partners in his ongoing creative and redeeming mission in the world.

Already for the earliest church the boat was a symbol of the church. So, Mark’s original audience would have gotten the double meaning here. This isn’t just a simple story about Jesus and his first disciples. It’s a story about Jesus and the church and the church’s mission. Mark wrote it for the church probably at Rome towards the end of the first century, but God is also using it to speak to the church at the beginning of the 21st century. For the church of the first century, the hostility of the religious and civil leaders to the Jesus movement might well have seemed like a storm at sea, threatening the very existence of their little boat. And that was made more ominous by recent events: both the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and periodic persecution by the Romans. Two thousand years later and half a world away, the church faces other storms brought on by our own recent events. For both audiences, I think, but especially for us, there are three things to notice in this text.

First, it was Jesus who put the disciples in the boat in the first place, and he did so for a reason. They’re going somewhere. They’re crossing to the other side of the sea of Galilee. Mark’s community would have known that that was Gentile territory across the sea. So far in Mark, Jesus has been only in the territory of his own people. And so far there has only been a hint that Jesus is concerned with anyone but his own people. His message about the kingdom of God coming near would have been understood by the first disciples as a restoration of the kingdom of Israel, an internal, national matter that didn’t concern other peoples or nations. Now here he is in a boat with them, heading into Gentile territory. See, the church is not castle, a refuge and defense against the attacks of a hostile world. When Martin Luther wrote his famous hymn, he did not write, “a mighty fortress is our church...” *God* is the castle, not the church. The church is a ship at sea. It has a destination. It has a mission. And that will involve some risk. Some danger, even.

Second, the disciples are upset. They are scared out of their wits, I imagine, because the boat was filling with water and close to sinking. Not only are they scared, they’re also mad at Jesus for sleeping through the storm. I’m pretty sure Mark had the story of Jonah in mind here. Both Jesus and Jonah are asleep in a ship in the middle of a storm. Both are woken up by their shipmates to help save the ship. In Jonah, the sailors have done what they can. They’ve thrown cargo overboard and then invoked the help of their various gods. Jonah is woken up to help with

that task. “Get up and call on your god!” they tell him. And how does Jonah end up saving the ship? By sacrificing himself. “Throw me overboard,” he tells them. They do, and the storm is calmed. Of course that doesn’t happen in this story. But in the larger story of the whole gospel, that is exactly what happens. He sacrifices himself to save the disciples, and not only the disciples. If Mark’s audience could recognize the disciples’ boat as the church, they might also have made the connection to Jesus’ crucifixion as his sacrifice for them. But the disciples don’t know that yet. “Don’t you *care*, Jesus, that we are perishing?” At that moment, quite understandably, they can think of nothing but their own lives, their own safety. They don’t care *where* they are going in the boat. They don’t care about the kingdom of God. They don’t care about all those parables that Jesus explained to them or all the people he healed. Right now it’s only about survival, and it seems that Jesus doesn’t even care. But then Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind, and tells the sea to be at peace. That’s so churchy and tame. A more colloquial translation would be, “Hey, knock it off! Settle down!” And now they’re really freaked out. How did that just happen? Who *is* this guy, speaking to the wind and the waves like a parent? And they listen and obey, do the wind and the waves!

Third, Jesus reveals their little freak-out to be about fear versus faith, or as I suggested earlier, timidity. “Why are you such scaredy cats? Have you still no faith, no trust in me or in God?” If we get caught up in the realism of this story, as if this were a piece of journalism rather than a teaching tool for the church, we might conclude that Jesus was being just a little bit unfair to the disciples. We’re only four chapters into the Gospel at this point. Jesus has done some remarkable healings. He has cast out demons. He has sparred with the religious establishment, and told some hard-to-understand parables about the kingdom of God. Is it fair, based on that, to think that he would save them from a deadly storm? It’s not fair, and it’s not the point. Remember, Mark is hard on the disciples for the sake of the church. *We* know who Jesus is. We know that he is the same as the one who says to the sea in our first reading, “this far, and no farther.” And we know the end of the story, that even death will not contain him.

As I said earlier, the disciples’ negative example is meant to evoke faith in us. Like Mark’s community for which he first wrote down his Gospel, we are now in the ship of the church, at sea on the storms of life. It’s a boat, not a castle. It’s not meant to keep us safe and isolated from all harm and danger. It’s meant to carry us on a mission, to spread the good news of God’s coming kingdom, the promise that God will complete God’s creative and redeeming project for the whole world. That mission, by its very nature, will carry us into some uncomfortable places, into some storms even. And in the midst of those storms we will be sorely tempted to think only of our own survival, to see only the water coming over the sides and to believe that we are perishing. But to do that is to forget that Jesus is in the boat with us and that the mission we are on is his mission.

Dear people of God, Jesus *is* in the boat with us. Like Jonah, he has gone overboard for us and our salvation. But unlike Jonah, he comes back to the boat to share the journey with us. He is with us whenever we gather in his name around word and sacrament, reminding each other of God’s promises of faithfulness even in the face of death. And that makes all the difference in the midst of the storms we face. Jesus *does* care, we are *not* perishing, and we are blessed with this joyful mission of sharing the promise with others, even and especially with people who are not our usual crowd.

May we take that promise and that mission to heart. May it give us courage and resolve in the face of whatever may come. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.