

Calming Words
Sunday, June 20, 2021
Mark 4:35-41
Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Jesus calms the storm, reminding the disciples that as fear and faith compete for our attention, God's presence remains and is sufficient for the crises we face.

Last night's storm brought down trees and power lines across the area. Some of the issues were more manageable than others: around 7:00 pm I received a phone call that there was a large limb blocking the church's driveway. That proved to be an easily managed problem: after a few phone calls, four of us got the limbs cut up and cleared away.

Other problems were harder, and I'm afraid I am the bearer of bad news today. There is no easy way to say this, except to ask everyone to please take a deep breath and to remain calm: the power went out at Donut Palace this morning. There will be no donuts this morning.

I've already made an inquiry to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to see how they might be able to help us.

In the face of our greatest fears, we yearn for calming words. This is, perhaps, the one thing we had most longed throughout the pandemic.

Pandemics, perhaps like parenting, elicit fear responses because they are filled with unexpected emergencies and unplanned contingencies. There are moments more frightening than riding a roller coaster in thunder and lightning. You can budget the best you can, only to realize that both are more expensive than you planned. You will be exhausted, worn out, and anxious one day, only to go to bed and do it all over again the next.

You do it, and do it, and do it, even though the storm is raging, and your little boat is beginning to take on more water than Sponge Bob SquarePants.

This is what the pandemic has taught us: God is our companion, even when all we see is Jesus asleep in the boat. The evidence will try to convince you otherwise, but God has not given up. Have courage, and journey on as you listen for Jesus to say, "Peace, be still."

It is these words which the disciples longed to hear that fateful night on the boat. They are panicked. In the words of that old fisherman's prayer: the sea is so wide, and their boat is so small. Lord, be good to us, they pray. The water is filling up the boat, the wind is pushing at it from stem to stern.

The sea is so wide, the boat is so small, the waves and the storm are so great.

Fear and anxiety become intertwined in our lives, just as they do for the disciples that day in the boat. There are generally considered five specific categories of phobias – fears related to animals, fears related to natural environment, fears related to medical injuries, fears related to specific situations, and a broad category doctors call “other.” Other includes choking, loud noises, and being the recreation leader at Vacation Bible School.

These categories are broad as fears, phobias and anxieties are deeply personal. If you check on the Internet – and you don’t have to, because I did – you’ll find a complete A-to-Z listing of fears, ranging from Arachnophobia (spiders) to Zoophobia, and everything in between including tryphobia (fear of holes) to homilecticaphobia (fear of sermons).

I actually made that one up.

Fear and anxiety are contagious. All systems – congregations, families, organizations, groups – are anxious in differing levels. Anxiety is part of our life – it acts like a smoke detector, says Kathleen Smith, to alert us to possible trouble.

Edwin Friedman was a Jewish rabbi and family therapist who wrote books about leadership theory in congregations and organizations. He was famous for saying most synagogues are paralyzed by their inability to confront poor behaviors in their organization because it wouldn’t be the “Christian thing to do.” Friedman wrote that any system can be threatened by the powers of chaos and crisis. It is bound to happen, he wrote, unless there is someone in the system willing to be what he called a “non-anxious” presence.

Amid the pressures of the moment, that one remains calm and cool, and will turn things around.

That night on the boat,, the disciples were a mess. It had been a long day for them. It begins all the way back in chapter three of Mark with Jesus healing on the sabbath. It continued along the shore line of Galilee as crowds pressed against him, “hearing all that he was doing.” They came in great multitudes and were so numerous that Jesus instructs the disciples to have a boat ready in case he needs a place to preach. Next he goes up the mountain, and appoints the disciples. He has given them authority, Mark tells us, to proclaim the gospel and to cast out demons.

That would have been a full day, but Jesus’ schedule continues as he returns home. Once more he is surrounded by the crowds, which have become so numerous that he cannot even eat.

Finally, at the end of that long day, evening comes. All of them are worn out, exhausted, and probably hungry. Pardon the pun, but it was the perfect storm. Jesus instructs them to go to the other side—crossing from the familiar Jewish villages to the unfamiliar, and perhaps less friendly Gentile territories across the sea.

And then Jesus falls asleep.

Storms come up quickly, and this was no exception. Clouds thicken, and the wind gathers strength. The waves crash against the little boat. The disciples, most of whom were fishermen, were no strangers to wind and rain, but this storm was different. But the sea is so wide, the waves are so great, the winds are so wild, and their boat is so small.

The chaos rolled over and around them.

They yearned for some sign, some sort of intervention. The chaotic anxiety stirs them into a frenzy. Maybe they were passing around life jackets when suddenly they noticed that Jesus was asleep, his head on a pillow, taking a nap while the storms range.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

If they had taken a deep breath, they might have remembered the sea stories in the Hebrew Bible. In the scriptures, God remains in control of the raging chaos of the seas. They might have recalled the anxiety of the crew aboard the boat Jonah was sailing. They might have recalled the words of the Psalmist: “The Lord commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths...then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he brought them out from their distress.”

They might have recalled that and become the non-anxious presence they needed.

Instead, as the waves beat harder and harder, they cry out to Jesus, “Don’t even care?”

We are familiar with those cries. We understand their predicament, and have likewise sought out the assistance of what one writer calls “counterfeit fear-fixing” techniques. We trade faith in the assurance that the storm will pass, the clouds will part, the donuts will return, for anxiety that rages within us like a storm. It would have been safer to remain on the shore. What good is “God with us” if God seems to be asleep?

Jesus awakens and rebukes the wind. He silences the storm that rages around them, but his words do little to calm the storms within them. “Why were you afraid?” he quizzes them. “Have you still no faith?”

Early Christian communities often portrayed the church as a boat sailing across the chaos of the world. Jesus’ question, then, becomes a question that calms not only our deepest personal fears and anxieties, but also the heart-ache and struggle of every Christian community since the birth of the church. We are not the first ones who have navigated through obstacles. And in those moments we are called to remember the calming presence of God that renews our faith.

And while the storms may rage, the promise of faith is that God will triumph, secure in the hope that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In her powerful novel, “The Hate U Give,”¹ Angie Thomas recounts the story of a young Black girl whose best friend is shot by police because they mistook his hairbrush for a gun. Later that night, Starr is back at home, inside her house as protestors take to the streets. She watches as her little brother and their dog fall asleep. “That’s not an option for me with the helicopters, the gunshots, the sirens. Momma and (my older brother) stay up too. Around four in the morning, when it’s quieted down, Daddy comes in bleary-eyed and yawning.” Her parents discuss whether or not they should move, with her mother pleading, “This won’t get better. It’ll get worse.” Starr watches as her dad takes her mom’s hand. “She lets him take it, and he pulls her onto his lap. Daddy wraps his arms around her, and kisses the back of her head. ‘We’ll be a’ight.’ He sends me and my brother to bed. Somehow I fall to sleep.”

The storm is passing over, take courage O my soul. Hallelujah!² Amen.

¹ Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

² Charles Albert Tindley, “Courage my soul,” (“The Storm is Passing Over,”) hymn published 1905. Public domain.