



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Sea-Going Disciples

Mark 4.35–41

By Rose Baer

Message from July 22, 2018

777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

I prepared this sermon (from the text of Jesus calming the sea) prior to this week's tragic event of the duck boat that sank in Missouri. Then, I went back and re-worked it. On Thursday evening, seventeen people lost their lives in a sudden storm on a lake in Branson, Missouri. Nine people from a family of 11 are among those deceased. Many are left with profound grief and suffering.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric today instills and enflames violence directed toward those who are seeking refuge in America. Families are torn apart, placed in shelters or detention centers, and returned to dangerous situations. Many are left with profound grief and suffering.

Our text today speaks of boats, winds, waves, and being swamped. It speaks of following Jesus to the sea, fear, and faith. As I read the text from Mark 4:35–41, can we view it as a cry for God's peace to be with all who are afraid and grieving untold loss...and as a call for us, as disciples, to follow Jesus to the sea, to bring life and hope to all people?

I invite you to listen as I read...(NRSV)

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But 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?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Prayer: God of life and love, bring peace to all who suffer and grieve the loss of life. Spirit, move in our midst today,

2 fill us with the power of your love, which makes all things new. We ask this, in the way of Jesus, Amen.

This past May I visited Chiapas—the southernmost state of Mexico which borders Guatemala—and, as well, I spent time in the borderlands of Mexico and Arizona. While there I heard many stories about suffering and loss, not only from the perspective of those suffering, but also from those standing in solidarity with suffering individuals. One was about the lesson of the snail, told by Julio, our van driver in Chiapas. It is an old Mayan lore and it goes like this:

Snails have a heart at the center of the spiral pattern that they carry on their shells. If we dare to have the courage of the snail, we will traverse the spiral that leads to our hearts. As we walk the spiral, we will think—slowly and deeply—and go around and around the word of truth. What we hear and see goes into our hearts, and that which is love, we keep. It transforms us. Then, it is ours to share.¹

Now, the book of Mark, where we'll be spending some time, does not have a snail's slow pace. The early church gave it the symbol of a lion, and like a lion, it is swift and purposeful. At the beginning of Mark, Jesus rises from his baptismal waters in the Jordan River to see the heavens torn and the Spirit descending like a dove. This theme of tearing open, to reveal new things, continues at a quick clip throughout Mark. Jesus—with urgency—traverses Galilee, crosses back and forth over the sea several times, and makes his way to Jerusalem, all the while tearing away at the old way of configuring the world and introducing a new world. The small book of Mark has a great message: Jesus comes to a hurting world and breaks boundaries that defeat life and love.

¹Julio, the van driver for MS400 Chiapas, Mexico and Border Trip for Lancaster Theological Seminary, Chiapas, Mexico, May 10, 2018.

With all of this urgency, why the snail, you might wonder? Well. We'll come back to the snail later.

Jesus is on the move in today's text. It was evening when Jesus and the disciples push off from the shore in Galilee. It had already been a full day. Jesus had been teaching the crowds and his disciples—with parables—about the Reign of God realities. Realities such as: seed is sown everywhere, the harvest is almost unbelievably abundant despite opposition, small things (like mustard seeds) become great, and the yield depends upon the hidden work of the seed dying and being transformed. With his teaching done, Jesus shifts tactics; he seems to want to put his teachings into practice, immediately. So, he says to his disciples, as dusk settles, "Let us go across to the other side."

In Mark's gospel, Jesus not only likes to keep things moving, but Jesus also likes to situate himself and his disciples in places of transition and risk. Immediately following this story we find Jesus in a graveyard—on the Gentile side of the sea—calling out demons from a man who made his home among the tombs. Later, back on the Jewish side of the sea, he's at the deathbed of a synagogue leader's daughter. He takes her by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up!" She gets up. He's touched by a woman that no one else wants to touch. She has three strikes against her. She is a woman, she is bleeding, and she is poor. Jesus recognizes her furtive touch. She speaks her truth, publicly. She is made whole. Later, Jesus feeds a multitude of people—twice—first in Jewish territory and then in Gentile territory. Is there enough food for both the Jews and the Gentiles? Yes! With leftovers! Jesus re-vision's the world with the power of love.

In today's text, God's power—through Jesus—is revealed on the in-between place of the sea. The Sea of Galilee during the time of Jesus was important. It provided an industry that not only sustained families, but also, through the

4 Roman system of heavy taxation, sustained an imperial appetite of domination. And, as well, geographically, it served as a boundary of sorts, keeping the Jewish territory separated from the Gentile territory. Jesus, in crossing the sea, shows his disciples—then and now—that the Reign of God does not stay small; it challenges an empire and connects different ethnic and religious groups.

Of course, as readers of the story, we know that in going to the sea, the disciples get caught up in a whorl.

This whorl is felt in the telling of the story. The writer of Mark uses the same Greek word, *megali* (which means great), three times in quick succession: great windstorm, great calm (NRSV says dead calm), and great awe. Furthermore, the waters and wind in the story seem to compete with the strong questions of both the disciples and Jesus. The disciples ask Jesus, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” And, Jesus, after rebuking the winds and waves—“Peace! Be Still!”—asks the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

I admit...as I prepared this sermon I felt a whorl within me. I became unsettled. I had to sit with my feelings of dismay. As I slowed down and just sat still—I realized the heart of my whorl is that I am like the disciples. When I am in places of transition and risk—places where I am praying and acting against the status quo of domination and for a new world of life-love—I can be fearful too.

When I was in the borderlands of Mexico and Arizona I had the privilege of meeting Lois, a petite, white-haired woman. She transforms fear into faithful action by showing up.

Lois’ sea is the courtroom. She stands in solidarity with migrants who are seeking asylum in the US, but have been caught by the border patrol. Five days each week, 75 migrants per day are brought to court. Lois shows up and

watches, chart in hand, while women and men, shackles taken off for a brief moment in front of the judge, are put on trial. She is there to ensure that the migrants are treated with dignity and that their requests for asylum are heard. “God is in the courtroom,” she says. Lois’ activities extend beyond the courtroom. One morning each week, she hikes into the Arivaca Desert carrying water to a drop-off site for migrants who are thirsty. When not in the courtroom or desert, she can be found educating others about the “End Streamline Coalition” movement and the “No More Deaths” organization. Lois, though small, is great with the power of God’s love, simply by not ignoring the pain around her.

Here at Etown CoB, as we strive to practice peace, service, and openness to all (which is ‘re-configuring the borders’ type of work!) we will be brought face-to-face with the suffering and oppression in our world. It might cause some questions and inner turmoil. It’s hard to completely let go of fear-driven stances. Maybe sometimes in our fear, we might plead, “Jesus, where are you? Don’t you care?” The cry of the disciples in this story can give us hope and healing as we follow Jesus. You see, despite the disciples fear and accusation, Jesus does not abandon them. They—throughout Mark—are invited back into the boat, again and again. And, the disciples, despite their fear and doubt, keep getting into the boat.

The disciples’ accusation becomes a way for us to enter the storms and sufferings of our lives and our world—to lament, to pray, to act. We are invited to feel the whirlwind of the storm, feel the power of Jesus, feel the peace that comes from being with Jesus, and stand with the questions before us: Fear? Or faith?

Now...let’s move back to the snail...

6 What do we do with the mix of fear and faith that is within us as we follow Jesus to the borderlands? How do we navigate the complexity of the seas present within us and in our world, some of which are... working toward a world without violence and rape, racial profiling and hate, and hostility toward migrants (to name only a few)?

If we spiral back to Jesus' parables—which in Mark sit right next to this passage—we find reference to small seeds growing large, step-by-step. Enlargement of God's Reign comes when we, like mustard seeds, dare—by God's grace—to push through the tough shell that keeps us small. This reaching upward and outward is scary because it's new. When we hold the beautiful complexity of fear and faith—and own our part in it—we can by Christ's power be transformed into Reign of God living. This, as Jesus says in the parable, is *megale* or great. This type of work is snail work. As we traverse—again and again and again—the spiral of God's love, our lives and actions will continually be transformed.

Then...we'll be called to get back into the boat. Again. Because that's how God's love works. It transforms us—so we can continually follow Jesus to the sea and, with Jesus, break the boundaries that defy life.

May we have the courage of the snail to traverse the spiral of God's love. And, may we turn and move with purpose, while exhibiting mercy and peace, while being life-love.

