

Sermon for 6-23-24
Text: Mark 4:35-41

Let us pray: In the midst of our fear and chaos, Lord, walk with us. Help us to know we are not alone. Amen.

I heard about a terrible traveling story last week (thankfully it wasn't my own story from my family vacation!). A woman and her husband were going to fly out of Duluth in order to attend a wedding. Once they arrived at the Duluth airport, they found out their plane was delayed. It was then delayed again. And again. When they realized they would inevitably miss their connecting flight, they decided to book with another airline and fly out of Minneapolis. So they drove 150 miles south to catch another plane.

When they arrived in Minneapolis, they found out their new plane was delayed. Finally, they were able to board. As she was boarding, the woman overheard a flight attendant talking about a dent in a door on the plane, saying, "I don't think it's going to be a big deal." After everyone boarded and got settled in the plane, you guessed it, they had to get off the plane in order for the door to be repaired. As they were waiting for the door to be repaired, a catering truck on the tarmac *ran into* their plane. Finally, finally, after hours of waiting and driving and accidents, they were able to take off and arrived at their destination in time to attend the wedding.

When people say they like to travel, I wonder if what they really mean is they like being in a new place. The traveling part, the in-between, is full of

uncertainty and stress. Will my plane take off on time? Will I lose my luggage? Will there be road construction? Will I get lost? The in-between of traveling is tough. It's difficult to be in the space between home and where you will land.

Jesus likes to be in the in-between places in the Gospel of Mark. He seeks out the places on the borders—deathbeds, cemeteries, water, wilderness, mountaintops. He meets people in their in-between spaces: between life and death, sickness and health, fear and trust. He's not afraid to be in the messy middle.

Today's story of Jesus stopping the storm happens in the messy middle. Jesus decides to take a boat across the Sea of Galilee in the evening, a risky time to be on the water. He takes no supplies with him. He asks the disciples to come with him, and they agree. But it's not an easy trip.

Jesus, exhausted from the work of healing and teaching, immediately falls asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. A furious storm rises up out of nowhere. Water is quickly filling up the boat and the winds are howling. The disciples, practiced fishermen, are right to be terrified. They know when the sea is too dangerous. Their fear overtakes them.

Fear is our most powerful motivator, but it's not necessarily a good one. Nothing makes us more uncomfortable than being scared. Yet fear takes away our ability to think, to weigh pros and cons, to pause and seek

understanding. When we experience terror, we scramble for comfort and familiarity, and we'll often follow anyone who promises us that they can alleviate our fear.

The disciples, seeing Jesus peacefully sleeping on his cushion in the middle of the storm, jump to blame and anger. They wake Jesus up and accuse him of not caring about their lives. "Teacher," they yell at him, "Don't you care that we're about to be destroyed?"

I don't know about all of you, but in my experience with relationships, starting a sentence with, "Don't you care?" doesn't usually elicit a warm response or foster a feeling of connection. Starting a conversation with a blaming statement never ends well—as the disciples are about to find out.

Jesus controls creation in a show of his divine power, telling the sea, if we translate the Greek literally, to "shut up." It's the same word he uses when he speaks to demons. And there is a dead calm.

Notice that Jesus doesn't ask the disciples, "Why were you afraid?" It wasn't their fear that bothered him. Jesus immediately stops the cause of their fear without trying to rationalize with them or correct their theology. After the storm calms down, he decides to do a little instruction.

Jesus turns to the disciples. "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have faith yet?" It was their jump to blaming him and their lack of trust that bothered him, not their fear.

Following Jesus means facing fears. The disciples will follow him into in-between places. But it's often in these places that we learn to move toward faith instead of fear.

That's why patience is difficult, especially in the in-between times. We often want to rush into a solution in order to stop the discomfort, and the messy middle is often when we're most vulnerable to people who offer us easy solutions. The interim time in a congregation is when people are likely to be swayed by "snake oil"--answers that seem like a simple fix to all our problems. But in life and in faith, there's no easy answer. The messy middle is where we spend a lot of time. We follow a savior to the cross.

Look at how the story ends. The disciples don't suddenly become filled with extraordinary courage. They don't pull themselves together or talk themselves out of their anxiety. They are a mess, and they let the panic completely overtake them. Instead, it is Jesus who calms the storm and their fears.

Chaos is a part of life. We don't know why it is that way. We hear God's response to Job's questions in our first reading for today. Job is suffering and questioning God, and God responds by showing Job God's sovereignty—God's vastness. There are limits to what we can know. As Dan Simonson writes, "Job is advised to recognize human limits and trust that God will take care of what Job and others cannot know or do."

Jesus never tells his disciples, “There is nothing to be afraid of.” Fear is real in this life, but it does not have the last word. Faith relieves fear. Even when we come running to God in full panic, God will be there. God is bigger than the storms. Time and again in the Scriptures we hear, “Do not be afraid.” This is a life-giving word. Yes, there is much to fear. Yes, sometimes this fear will overtake us. But God is with us, and God is bigger than our fears.

Amen!