

Peace! Be still.

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—23 June 2024 (Year B)

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Job 38.1-11; Psalm 107.1-3, 23-32; Mark 4.35-41.

The Sea of Galilee is a fresh-water inland lake about 21 km long, 13 km wide. In the first century, the lake supported valuable fishing, as still does today. Several of Jesus' disciples were Galilee fishermen. They knew the lake well. They knew that its unpredictable storms are dangerous. There can be sudden and violent squalls, with powerful gusty winds and a cauldron of waves pitching in all directions.

Despite this, boat travel on the lake was commonplace for the people who lived near it. Mark tells us that, at Jesus' command, the disciples set out across the lake, at night, with Jesus asleep on a pillow in the boat. It had been a long and tiring day.

As "a great gale arose and waves beat into the boat so that the boat was already being swamped" (v.37), Jesus slept on. The disciples were frantic. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (v. 38). As we read in Psalm 107, speaking of sailors in danger: "Their courage melts away in the face of disaster. They reel and stagger like drunken men and are at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their distress (vv. 27b-28a)."

"Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm," Mark writes (v. 39). With a dead calm, I wonder whether the men had to row the rest of the journey. Mark does say that they reached the other side!

Let's look at two things about Mark's story.

First: We see that Jesus has the authority to pronounce God's peace.

Jesus brought peace to a great storm which the ancient scriptures said could be sent only by God and could be controlled only by God. Psalm 107: "[God] spoke, and raised the storm-wind: and it lifted high the waves of the sea." But when sailors cried for help, the psalm continues, "He calmed the storm to a silence: and the waves of the sea were stilled."

The text from Job says, similarly, that the sea is God's to command: "[W]ho shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? When I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?" (Job 8-11)." Controlling the sea was God's business and the ancient Jews were somewhat afraid of it.

When Jesus criticises the disciples' lack of faith, perhaps he is lamenting lack of understanding that, with him in the boat, they were travelling with the Son of God. In and through Jesus, it was God's authority that had silenced the storm and calmed the sea.

That's the first observation.

Secondly, there's the way in which Jesus stilled the storm and hushed the waves.

In one of Jesus' earliest acts of public ministry, described in the first chapter of Mark (vv. 23-28), Jesus healed a man tormented by an unclean spirit. Jesus *rebuked* the spirit, Mark says. 'Be silent, and come out of him!'

Faced with the storm tormenting the Sea of Galilee, Jesus similarly *rebuked* the wind. Mark uses the same word in both stories, ἐπιτίμησεν (*epitimhesen*), "rebukes".

Having rebuked the storm, Jesus then commanded the sea itself to be peaceful and still. Here, Mark uses the same Greek word as in chapter 1 when Jesus silenced the “unclean spirit”: *πεφίμωσο* (*pephimōso*) meaning “be muzzled,” “be silent”, or “be still”.

Mark has the onlookers emphasise the parallel when they react almost identically in the two stories. In Mark 1, the crowds whisper, “What is this? . . . He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him (v. 27). In Mark 4, the disciples whisper, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? (v. 41).”

In the man set free from the unclean spirit, we can see that Jesus’ ministry healing and peace of applies to simple individuals like us. In the Galilean storm, we can see Jesus bringing peace and healing on a vast scale. To each of us, and to the whole world, Jesus proclaims healing, and above all peace and stillness.

Throughout the world, God’s kingdom encounters fierce and powerful opposition. Like a night storm at sea, it’s big, confusing, and terrifying. Our world is torn with polarization and division, conspiracy theories, despair, and appalling violence. Mark’s world was also full of fear, disorientation, and lament. About the time his gospel was written, the Romans brutally crushed a Jewish rebellion and desecrated and destroyed the Temple. There would have been fear, grief, lamentation, and dread.

Yet Mark’s story tells us that God’s peace will prevail. “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,” as it’s described in Philippians (4.7).

All very well, one might say. But when we see pictures and read about the horrific pain in our world, we surely wonder, “Where is God?” We see pictures of parents in Gaza holding their dead children in their arms. I will never forget a picture I saw from Aleppo, in Syria, of a man on his knees cradling his dead, blood-soaked, young son. Where is God?

It’s a classic theological problem, the problem of evil. How can there be so much suffering in the presence of a supposedly all powerful and supremely loving God? An ocean of ink and a forest’s worth of paper have been spent on this. Many of the great Christian thinkers have wrestled with it. I once did a 26-hour course at St Mark’s that tackled this problem of evil. And at the end of the course, the teacher offered this conclusion: “We. Just. Don’t. Know.”

Many of us here have faced this; please forgive a personal example. It was certainly not God’s will that my husband, James, should die of a horrible illness. Yet, even as James became increasingly unwell, and sometimes disoriented and afraid, he and I knew, and shared with each other, an experience of the peace-giving presence of God. But, when James did die, I was confused, of course, and very angry. Angry with God, and angry with myself. I have needed healing. That is what Jesus gives, healing and peace—even in the most appalling situation.

Where is God? God is at the place where the pain is. The pain and forsakenness that Jesus bore on the cross tell us that he knows what we are experiencing. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God grieves with the grief stricken, comforts the wounded, calms the anxious, and gives light where there is in darkness and confusion. And slowly, sometimes very slowly, healing begins, if we will let it. Jesus didn’t permanently abolish storms from Lake Galilee. They still happen today. But when the disciples cried out in despair, Jesus stilled the cause of their fear, so that they could finish their journey, in peace, with him.

Amen.