

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 133, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41
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Two brothers were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee with a lifelong interest in finding remnants of a boat that their ancestors might have used in Biblical times. In 1986, during a very dry period, when the water level of the lake in northern Israel was particularly low, the brothers uncovered exposed wooden ribs buried beneath the sand along the shore. Further excavation and carbon dating led to the discovery of a boat hull from the time of Jesus. It is now housed in a museum on the grounds of a kibbutz located along the Sea of Galilee in the vicinity of Jesus' adult home in Capernaum. It is called "The Jesus Boat."

This boat, thought to be similar to the one the disciples and Jesus used in today's gospel lesson, would have been 27 feet long, nearly 8 feet wide and 4 feet high. A dozen to 15 men could have easily fit in it. Four men could have rowed it, or they could have used a sail.

While not all the disciples were fishermen, certainly there were enough on board that day to safely cross to the other side under normal conditions. The panic of the crew in this instance suggests that this particular storm, though not entirely uncommon on that body of water, was a very sudden and dangerous one. If the fishermen had heard a severe weather warning from the National Weather Service or NOAA, I am sure they would not have ventured out that day.

It is a wonder that Jesus, the landlubber, could sleep through such turbulence. This suggests two things. Jesus completely trusted his seafaring disciples, and he completely trusted his heavenly Father.

God may have the power to still the storm, but our experience is that more often God does not spare us from life's storms. Former N.C. Senator Sam Ervin said, "Religious faith is not a storm cellar to which men and women can flee for refuge from the storms of life. It is, instead, an inner spiritual strength that enables them to face those storms with hope and serenity."

The disciples wake Jesus and ask him if he cares about them or not. He questions the extent of their trust, then rebukes the wind, and the sea quiets down. He also quiets down the disciples as they go from panic to peace and awe.

During my recent ordeal in the raging seas of Hawaii, Juanita watched helplessly as John and I were carried down the beach and we disappeared from her sight. In her distress, she had the wisdom to pray. Interestingly, the first prayer that sprang to her lips was not that God would save us directly, but that God would calm the waters. The water remained tempestuous, but

John had the presence of mind to think clearly and calmly and, therefore, instruct me and help guide me to shore.

God doesn't spare us from difficult, even dangerous and life-threatening situations, but when we call upon him, and maybe even sometimes when we don't, God helps us get through the difficulty. We can be calmed within the storm.

A bishop in our church lost his wife and child in a terrible accident. We can't imagine how devastating such losses would be. After a period of intense grief and suffering, that bishop was able to say to the people in his diocese, "I have been all the way to the bottom, and it is solid."

Somehow in the midst of his enormous anguish he found a faithful God in the very depths of his heartache. "I have been all the way to the bottom, and it is solid."

I am intrigued in our story today that the disciples had to wake Jesus from his sleep. "Jesus, wake up!" is a form of prayer isn't it? It seems to me it is the prayer of someone who doesn't pray often. After 9-11, for example, you'll remember thousands across the country went to church for a Sunday or two to see if perhaps they could get God to wake up and respond to their sense of fear and confusion. The nonreligious may start to pray when they hear they have cancer and sometimes start blaming God for their mishap all of a sudden if it doesn't turn out positively.

I can think of a few people in our church who recently were diagnosed with cancer and yet have remained remarkably calm trusting in God. Regular prayer and worship is an expression of faith and trust in the God who can and will see us through whatever comes, even and finally death. One person said, "Every evening before I go to bed, I give my worries to God because I know he is going to up all night anyway."

Spiritual disciplines or daily practices of prayer, study and service help us live more fully every day and prepare us for the storms that will undoubtedly come our way. Anything important requires practice, practice, practice if we want to enjoy the activity, excel in it and get over and through the rough patches. This is no less true for our faith lives. A perfect example would be the family members who have already forgiven the young man who shot their loved ones in Charleston.

Years ago I heard the saying that grace has a short shelf life. Let me repeat: Grace has a short shelf life. That means you can't go to church a few times a year or read the Bible occasionally or pray sporadically and expect to have the benefits of knowing God's love, forgiveness, peace and nearness. I need and want to experience the grace of God all the time if possible.

Writing a sermon every week is a great blessing and filling, spiritual nourishment. If I never preached them, the weekly process of studying the passages, having Bible study conversations about them and then composing on my laptop is incredibly enriching soul food. But a week later I can hardly remember a word I wrote, and I need to start again. Grace has a short shelf life. That's why church is every week and not once a month.

We don't want to have to wake Jesus up every once in a while so we can share our panic attack with him. We want to walk with him and talk with him every day so we know he is always with us and for us.

I wish everyone but especially all the men at Christ and Grace were reading Fr. Richard Rohr's book of "Daily Meditations for Men." In one meditation, he writes, "Prayer is difficult for men because every time we go to church, every time we try to pray, we are trying to reestablish a communion that feels lost to us. Prayer seems like pretend, mere duty, wishful thinking, a pious obligation or a useless reaching out."

He continues, "It is a major task for most of us to experience the stream of life that is already flowing through us."

A goal of Christianity, and perhaps other religions as well, is to reach a place where "the stream of life," the presence of God, is never far from us. Our God doesn't have to be woken up because our God never sleeps and is never absent. Our God always wants to be as close to us as our breath. For this reason, may we sleep soundly every night knowing that whatever life may throw at us, Jesus will never leave us in our boats to battle alone. AMEN.