

Peace, Be Still

Mark 4: 35-41

“It’s a miracle!” There is a moment in the musical play *Charlotte’s Web* when the farm hand finds that words have been written on a spider’s web praising Wilbur the pig. Of course, the barnyard animals all know it was Charlotte’s doing, trying to save her friend from ending up as bacon and ham. The human residents of the farm, however, are convinced it is miraculous.

We often use the term miracle to describe something unlikely or unexpected. In that sense, miracles are often simply a matter of perspective and attitude.

Miracle stories in the Bible are different. They are intended to convey a sense that God is present and active in the world. This activity takes place in ways that are generally contrary to what is understood as the natural order – what is expected.

The story found in Mark 4: 35-41 is a miracle story. Its closest parallel is in Luke’s gospel (8: 22-25). This miracle story is similar in character to miraculous stories found in other ancient literature such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

For those of us with modern minds, the question pushing us, as we hear these miracle stories is “what actually happened?” In this particular story, some of the details sound a lot like

eyewitness accounts. We can almost see the boats taking off from shore, smell the weather and the crowds, and hear the storm approaching.

As we imagine the scene unfolding, I encourage you to suspend your disbelief and be open to the events as described. Jesus seeks to escape the crowds that seem to follow him everywhere. The long day draws toward evening, so he gets in a boat and takes it across the Sea of Galilee. This body of water is so large, it’s almost a Great Lake. A caravan of small boats is crossing.

Suddenly, a storm is on them. From this point, we don’t hear any more about the other boats. Jesus is sound asleep at the rear of the boat, head resting on a cushion. He is comfortable enough that the storm does not awaken him. The disciples, however, are growing decidedly uncomfortable. As the waves toss the boat more violently, their anxiety goes up. They wake Jesus up, not with cries of “Help us, Jesus”. Rather, they shout, “Don’t you care if we die?” “Don’t you care?” The phrase, “Don’t you care?” is almost guaranteed to raise anyone’s blood pressure. Can one ever care enough?

Jesus responds to their cries and *rebukes* the sea. The Greek word translated *rebuke* is a very important word. It’s used earlier in Mark’s gospel (1:25) to silence an evil spirit and drive him out of a man. Jesus *rebukes* the storm and, immediately, it stops. The storm literally shuts up and the wind is still. The sea listens to Jesus.

Then, Jesus rebukes the disciples, attempting to quiet their inner storms. Do the disciples listen to Jesus? Do others listen? Do we listen to Jesus’ command that we let go our runaway anxiety without letting go our passion? The disciples respond to Jesus’ words with a question: “who is this?” “Who is this that the elements themselves obey him?” Perhaps this is our question, too? “Who is this?”

Some people need to defend the miraculous works of Jesus to justify his super human identity. They become quite anxious when that identity is questioned. They can even rage against those who question. Maybe you are one of these people. In response to you, Jesus is saying: “Be still; be quiet; peace”.

Other people, maybe many of us who trust in our minds and the power of reason,

need to find a rational explanation for the miracle stories. We search for an understanding that fits world view and tend to dismiss the miraculous in order to calm our anxiety in relation to the unknown or inexplicable. We tend to dismiss the possibility that it this story *actually happened*. In response to us, Jesus is saying: “Be still; be quiet; peace”. There are several possible answers to the “what happened”. Each of us will be wise to consider answers that lie outside our comfort zones.

The question that matters most is: “what does this story mean?” What does it tell us about Jesus? What does it tell us about ourselves?

A boat trip is a journey – in this case, an image for our own spiritual journeys. This crossing takes place at the symbolic time of evening, the drawing of night toward the time of fear. The journey is toward a Gentile shore, a foreign land, the “other side of humanity,” through waters of chaos, fear, and uncertainty. The passage proves challenging, difficult. There are several of these passages in the gospels.

In their fear, the disciples cry out, “Don’t you care?” Theirs is the fear of abandonment or that God is not there at all. It is a fear shared by most of us some of the time. Maybe that’s why we hug our theologies so closely, just in case God does not care or is not there. The meaningful journeys of our lives are often fraught with fear and involve moving through considerable chaos. They are difficult journeys.

Jesus is present with the disciples as they experience their fears, represented by the chaos of the storm at sea. His presence is able to ease their fear and lower their anxiety. We might call Jesus a *non-anxious presence*. That does not mean he kept everything sanguine and placid. Jesus had a knack for helping put discomfort and anxiety where it belonged. He did it for the purposes of healing and growth. Healing means coming to grips with reality. Growth is what you do with your healing and what it does with you.

This story tells us that Jesus, from the perception of his early followers, had sovereign power over the forces of chaos, destruction, death, and evil symbolized by the churning sea. This is not a story about a wrenching distortion of the natural order, but about the in breaking of a new order. It proclaims that God’s reign, God’s new creation, has come in Jesus.

This story promotes the belief that, in Jesus, God is revealed in a unique and compelling way. This divine presence calls us to have faith, not in Jesus, but in the God whose reality is perceived clearly in Jesus -- an important distinction. Genuine faith cannot be placed in Jesus

the miracle worker, but only in the God revealed by Jesus. This story calls us to be like Jesus.

The challenge we have, as followers of Jesus, is to be the presence of Christ in other people’s lives. What does that mean? What did Jesus do? First of all, he was present in the boat. He was asleep, but he was there. Most of the time, you have to be present to be helpful.

He waited and, when called upon, he acted. He rebuked the storm -- not to prove himself, but in response to the need of his followers. He spoke truth clearly and forcefully in the face of chaos, to silence the chaos and lower the level of fear. He then challenged the fearful ones for their lack of faith. Jesus brought healing by helping the guys in the boat come to grips with the reality that God is sovereign in life and death, that only faith in God makes sense even in the midst of life’s storms. Jesus challenged them to grow: to take the healing they had experienced and let it stretch their capacity to trust and to live large.

So, we face the challenge today, to be the Christ presence in our world. What storms are churning in our world today that we as church are called to rebuke, to exorcise, to silence? (responses) The storms probably include: helping people who are suffering from the ravages of poverty and injustice, putting a stop to the causes of that poverty and injustice, and working to save the health of our planet before it's too late. The Spirit calls us to be that non-anxious presence in the world around these issues. This will be a change of pattern for the Church. We need to be engaged in the world not to raise anxiety needlessly, but to help bring healing and growth.

What storms are churning in you that need to be stilled? Where does the rain of peace need to fall in your life or in mine? Our ability to help the world face its storms, to be the Christ presence – a non-anxious presence -- will depend on our ability to face our own storms. We can be that Christ presence for each other. That's why we are community together.

The reality of God lives in each person, even though we so often fail to make the space in our lives to be aware of that reality. That divine presence, the Spirit, lives in all of us to help each of us face the storms and challenge the chaos in our lives. That Christ presence lives in our communities of faith so that we can be Christ for the world that so desperately needs to face its storms and challenge its chaos. The Christ in you calls to me, and the Christ in me calls to you, saying, "Peace, be still. Face the storm and know that God is. God, take flesh again in our flesh and in this community so that this world will know healing and growth whose presence lives in us and through us. Amen.