

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 23, 2024 (Proper 7, Year B)
Mark 4:35-41

Maybe you heard about this: A week and a half ago, the weather in these parts got a little dicey. Okay, that's a MAJOR UNDERSTATEMENT. It was scary, and dangerous, and destructive.

We'd heard about it coming for a couple days beforehand, but just that morning at the Men's breakfast bible study, we were saying amongst ourselves that tornadoes almost NEVER come this far north. Well, ALMOST never.

According to the paper, 2 supercell storm-systems spawned 4 different tornadoes in our area. The 1st supercell, which is the one that hit us directly, covered a staggering 230 miles. It produced 3 tornadoes, the 2nd of which was an EF-2 that hit Cedar and Hammal Lakes. It packed winds of 115 miles per hour, and was on the ground for over 13 miles.

If you weren't one of the storm VICTIMS, you've heard the STORIES from people you know. Docks and boat lifts and boats and pontoons picked right up out of the water and flipped over. Roofs torn completely from their houses. Trees snapped right off. Small buildings tossed around like toys.

Thankfully, there were no fatalities, but that evening was a reminder to us ALL that THINGS HAPPEN in our lives that are UNEXPECTED, and FRIGHTENING in their FEROCITY.

In the Gardiner Museum in Boston, there is a painting by Rembrandt entitled "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." It's Rembrandt's interpretation of this scene. It shows panic etched on the faces of the disciples, as their small vessel is being raised up on a high wave, about to be crashed down. Two of the disciples are trying to rouse Jesus who is asleep in the stern of the boat. But if you look more closely, you'll discover that there's something that's not quite right. There are TOO MANY PEOPLE in the picture. When you count, there are fourteen. There should only be thirteen (twelve disciples and Jesus). But instead there are fourteen. It's then that you'll notice that one of the men in the boat is Rembrandt himself. He had painted HIMSELF into the picture. He placed himself in the SAME boat.

Which is exactly the way that we're SUPPOSED to understand this passage. We are in the boat WITH the DISCIPLES, faithful but frightened. There's no immunity for ANY of us. We're caught up in the SAME storm.

I'll bet EVERY ONE of us here this morning could tell a STORY about SOME MOMENT in your lives when you FELT LIKE those disciples in that boat – afraid, vulnerable, a sinking feeling! We know what it's LIKE to feel as though you are in the middle of a STORM, TOSSED this way and that, and you wonder how you're EVER going to get OUT of this, and get to calmer seas.

The DISCIPLES' QUESTION is OUR question TOO: "Don't you care that we're perishing?"

On this beautiful June day, it's easy to think ONLY GOOD thoughts about the world. In June, boating around a placid lake, enjoying the outdoors, being in nature, the world seems benevolent and benign. We moderns, because we have devised so many means of protecting ourselves from nature, tend to be nature ROMANTICS.

Most of us would LIKE to be the EXCEPTIONS. We'd LIKE to believe that either STORMS will never STRIKE us or that FAITH will never FAIL us.

But you know HOW LIFE IS. There are DARKER, more DIFFICULT days than THIS. Storms WILL strike us – because THAT'S JUST LIFE.

If I were giving this sermon 2 Wednesdays ago, we would all be sheltering in our basements. "Jesus, don't you care that we're perishing?"

When I preached on this text in 2018, my wife, Wendy, and I were preparing for her 2nd brain surgery after a nightmarish day of doctor appointments with wave after wave of more and more and more bad news. And I remember my cry, OUR cry: "Jesus, don't you care that we're perishing?"

When I preached on this text in 2012, it was the week of the generational flood in Moose Lake, when the lake that was 5 blocks away from my house was lapping in my neighbor's yard, and my basement, which had kept the flood water out, filled completely with raw sewage from the city's failed system. "Jesus, don't you care?"

You know, honestly, if these 2 weeks in June were to somehow DISAPPEAR from the calendar, I'd be OKAY with that.

But this story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat tells about the REAL world – a world where storms rise up out of nowhere. Everything can be going beautifully; things can be going your way; everything's great. Then all of a sudden, the telephone rings and everything in your life is turned upside down. The medical test results come back, a loved one's in the hospital, your marriage comes to a startling end, your fulfilling job is pulled right out from underneath you, or, as we were reminded recently, a natural disaster can overwhelm your home, and, suddenly, you find yourself in the midst of a storm. The placid lake, which has BEEN our LIVES on MOST days, becomes an ANGRY, RAGING sea.

And this story is ABOUT that.

God never promised that there WOULDN'T be STORMS in life. The Christian life isn't always smooth sailing. EVEN when Jesus is WITH us, there are times when the going is EXTREMELY ROUGH.

The disciples experienced it, and so do we. That's when they go to the stern of the boat to FIND Jesus. And what they FIND ISN'T what they EXPECT. Jesus was ASLEEP! On a PILLOW! What was that pillow even DOING there? Did he EXPECT this? The little boat was already beginning to sink, and he's SLEEPING? Did their lives matter so LITTLE to him that he couldn't be BOTHERED to WAKE up? They cry out, "Jesus, don't you CARE?"

When God is SILENT in OUR storms, we ask the SAME QUESTION. Threatened by troubles and tragedies, we have no CHOICE but to try and WAKE GOD UP. We pray, we beg, we shout: "Lord, don't you CARE? I'm DYING here! COME ON GOD! DO something!"

Sometimes it FEELS that way, doesn't it? Like God is ASLEEP, like the one, who's SUPPOSED to be in CONTROL, is letting us down, letting us DROWN, letting our whole world drift into chaos.

But here's the thing. It wasn't that Jesus didn't CARE; he just wasn't AFRAID of the storm.

They wake Jesus and he REBUKES the storm: "PEACE! Be STILL! Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." A raging storm...BECOMES a dead calm. JUST like that. The disciples were RIGHT to be in awe. Only the one who CREATED the sea with a WORD in the BEGINNING, bringing ORDER to the CHAOTIC face of the deep, only the almighty God, the Lord of all, could CALM a storm with a WORD. "Peace! Be still!" were the words of GOD. Our life's struggles and challenges are REAL and they're THREATENING, but God's power to SAVE us is GREATER.

The Christian LIFE isn't always what we EXPECT. It isn't always smooth sailing. Most of the time, we think that, with JESUS in the boat, there will BE NO storms, no waves, no fear. But NO. Almost every page of Mark's gospel proclaims that Jesus is in the CENTER of the storm, OUR storm, BATTLING it WITH us. God NEVER promised that there WOULDN'T BE STORMS in life. But when the wind picks up, the waves BANG against the side of the boat, and there's trouble, Jesus is NEAR.

Robert Louis Stevenson told a story of a ship tossed in a storm. The sea was rough and the rocky coast was perilous. Danger was real and dread spread among the seamen. One frantic sailor who was working below the water line couldn't contain himself any longer. He rushed to the control room, closed the door behind him, and stood frozen in fear, watching the captain wrestle with the controls of the huge ship. Skill of mind and strength of hand enabled the captain to guide the vessel through the threatening rocks into open water. The Captain turned slightly, looked at the frightened sailor...and smiled. The young man returned below deck and assured the resto of the crew that all danger was over. When they asked him how he KNEW that, he answered, "I have seen the face of the Captain, and he smiled at me."

There's a saying: "Don't tell God how big the storm is; tell the storm how big your God is." We know that's true, and SO DID the DISCIPLES. So why are we still anxious? Jesus has the power to quiet the waves. So why are we nervous? Why are we afraid?"

Jesus showed us that, even when we're right in the middle of a storm, we have nothing to fear, not even death. God's love FOR us is far greater than anything that could happen TO us. The storm may rage, and life may be full of chaos, but Jesus is your captain, and HE says, "Peace! Be still!" And in here (gesture to heart), and here in the place (gesture to the sanctuary/lake), he CALMS the STORM. "Peace. Be still." Amen.