

**READING FROM THE GOSPEL:** Mark 4:35-41

**SERMON:** *A Dead Calm*

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Sunday, June 21, 2009

You've probably heard the expression, "a loose canon." I've always thought it meant someone who went about causing all kinds of trouble and turmoil. But in our Gospel reading this morning, I'd like us to think about a "loose canon" in another way.

In Victor Hugo's story, "Ninety-Three," a ship is caught in the grip of a terrible storm that is threatening to sink it. And then, to make matters even worse ... the frightened crew suddenly hears a terrible crashing sound below deck. Immediately the men know what it is: a canon has broken loose and is crashing into the ship's side with every smashing blow of the sea!

Every time the ship lists to one side, the canon goes rolling ... its full weight striking the hull's timbers. Finally, two men, at the risk of their lives, go down below deck and manage to fasten the canon down again, for they know that the unfastened cannon is more dangerous than even the raging storm. As someone once said, "Many people are like that ship—their greatest danger areas lie within their own lives." (*From NetBible, Source unknown*)

The disciples found themselves in a similar situation ... upon the stormy seas ... their lives in imminent danger. Listen with your heart to the word of our Lord from the fifth chapter of Mark, verses 35-41.

**4:35** On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."

**4:36** And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

**4:37** A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

**4:38** But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

**4:39** He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

**4:40** He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

**4:41** And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The weather on the Sea of Galilee can be quite quirky. The sea itself lies 680 feet below sea level where the air is semi-tropical ... warm and moist. But surrounding the sea are hills that reach some 2000 feet high ... here you can have cool, dry air. When these two contrasting air masses collide near the surface of the water ... the result can be a terrible storm ... a storm that suddenly appears out of nowhere.

Jesus has been teaching from a fishing boat for a long time to a crowd of people who have gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He's told them about the parable of the sower ... he's told them to not hide your light under a bushel ... and then he reveals to them the mystery of a tiny mustard seed. But it is evening now ... and I'm sure he is exhausted. It's time to go ... to go to the other side of the lake.

Now I would feel pretty safe in the hands of the disciples who climb aboard to man the sturdy little boat. After all, four of them are fishermen by trade ... they know these waters ... they've sailed in all kinds of weather. Jesus must have felt pretty safe, too, because no sooner than they cast off and raise the sail ... he's found a soft and cozy little spot back in the stern and falls right to sleep.

Now I wonder who felt it first ... which of the veteran sailors on board that ship first felt a sudden blast of warm air blowing down from the mountain meeting the cool waters of the sea ... who first noticed the sail rustling just a bit louder ... who first spotted the sudden billowing of storm clouds ... and the first drops of rain begin to fall. There is no time to prepare for what is about to happen ... there is no warning. The storm smashes into the little craft with an angry fury. One moment they are peacefully sailing to the other side of the sea ... and the next they find themselves locked in a life and death battle with a horrible storm.

Now one thing is in their favor. They don't have any loose canons rolling around that little boat. But if you think about it ... maybe they do. Not necessarily a real canon ... but a loose canon deep within their guts as they feel they are losing fast control of a terrible situation.

There are all kinds of storms in life that each of us face ... and just like the one on the Sea of Galilee ... sometimes those storms can hit us ... and hit us hard ... without any time to prepare for them ... and without any warning. One day you're feeling great ... the next day the doctor gives you some bad news about those recent medical tests. One day you're feeling great ... and the next day the love of your life tells you, "I'm leaving."

One day you're feeling great ... and the next day the phone rings and your best friend ... or a close relative ... has suddenly died. One day you're feeling great ... and the next day your boss walks through your office door and tells you that the company is downsizing and your position has been eliminated. The storms of life bring waves of distress across the bow of our lives ... sickness, grief, uncertainty, depression, loneliness, despair and sorrow. And you can feel that emotional turmoil ... like a canon rolling around below deck ... threatening to sink your very life in a sea of chaos.

You can just imagine how our disciples are feeling out their in that storm ... but their teacher ... Jesus ... doesn't seem to have a clue about what is happening. As a matter of fact, he is still asleep in the bow ... and not until one of the disciples grabs him and yells at him ... "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ... does Jesus wake up and look around at the scene before him. And with three words ... "Peace! Be still!" ... the wind stops blowing ... and the sea becomes a dead calm.

Wouldn't that be great if Jesus would do that every time we find ourselves in a crisis? The cancer is suddenly cured ... the friend or loved one comes back to life ... a new job is suddenly offered ... your partner returns, seeking forgiveness. Wouldn't it be great if life was always like that ... you know ... like a one-hour TV drama in which everything is fixed at the end of the show and tied up with a big bow.

But that's not how life really happens ... does it? But the disciples are now safe. The wind has stopped blowing ... the seas are as smooth as a sheet of glass ... they're just there ... in the dead calm of the Sea of Galilee. And at that moment ... Jesus knows something else that they don't seem to understand.

There's only one problem with being safe in the dead calm of the Sea of Galilee. You will never be able to sail anywhere ... because there is no wind to push into the sails to bring you to the other side. And Jesus knows that. They will have to experience the wind again ... sometimes blowing gently and leading them to where they want to go ... and sometimes coming as a tempest threatening to drown them.

So out of that storm ... out of the dead calm ... Jesus returns the winds to the sail ... because in the next verse of the next chapter ... the little boat finishes its trip across the Sea of Galilee. The simple reality that Jesus is trying to teach the disciples that even though he is with them ... they will still have to face the storms of life ... and we will, too. But we will never have to face them alone ... because Christ has experienced the storms and the chaos of the same storms that we, too, have faced, are facing ... or will face in the future.

Henri Nouwen reminds us in his book *Spiritual Direction*, "Remember Jesus' own words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We are never alone. God's silence is not God's absence. Perhaps the presence of God is so much beyond the human experience of being near to another that it is quite easily misperceived as absence. When Jesus echoed those words from the cross, total aloneness and full acceptance touched each other. Where God's absence was most loudly expressed, God's presence was most profoundly revealed. (Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*)

Jesus faced the storms of this world ... he endured the violence of being rejected by those who once loved him ... he felt the pain of loneliness and despair in the Garden of Gethsemane, he endured the horrors of that fateful walk to the cross and then he took on the one storm each of us will face one day ... the storm of death ... and through that final storm ... he comes into our lives and offers us salvation ... peace ... hope ... compassion ... love ... and the grace that only our Savior can bring into our lives ... both in the mountaintop experiences when joy overwhelms us ... and in those valleys we must all endure at times.

If you think about it ... Jesus never leads anyone away from the storms of this world ... but he never abandons you to go there alone. I recently read this on an Internet blog from a seminarian ... he said, "I was reminded tonight in my class by our professor. "Don't pray to avoid the storms of life but pray for the grace to dance in the rain". Think of that image," the student writes. "Too often we pray to avoid the items in life that cause conflict or pain. Whether that is the problems that arise in life (finances, relationships, etc) or issues (ordination standards, inclusively, etc). Rather pray to dance in the rain." (seanchow.com a journal of my journey)

"Pray to dance in the rain." It's a beautiful image. It's one we can hold on to when those dark clouds suddenly form on the horizon ... or when we hear the crashing of canons running loose below the decks of our lives. When there is no time to prepare ... when there is no warning ... Pray to dance in the rain ... with your Savior ... Jesus Christ ... knowing you are cared for ... you are loved ... you are never forgotten ... even in those times when life just seems to come as a storm.

As Bruce Reyes-Chow, the moderator of the Presbyterian Church, shares with us ... "It is Jesus who draws his people into the storms of life, not simply to overcome them, but to exhibit the calm that Christ offers the world.

At some times we do this better than at others, but this posture of ministry is still an imperative of our faith: to respond in peace-filled ways to a world filled with emotional struggle, social anxiety and physical conflict." (Aug. 22, 2008 *Road Notes*)

I would like to close with a poem written by a Presbyterian elder struggling to understand the suffering in this world. It is titled ... *In Your Suffering find Joy*.

I offer gift of suffering.  
Gift of unending trials.  
Wilderness journeys.  
Pain, loss and sorrow.

Cup offered James & John.  
Martyrdom's blessing.  
Sending you to valley  
shadowed by death.

You think suffering evil.  
You don't understand.  
You demand release.  
Escape from torment.

You don't trust Me  
in your wilderness.  
Like Peter you must  
step into your storm.

See Me in your suffering.  
Feel Me in your suffering.  
Know Me in your suffering.  
Understand My plan.

Know I came  
to suffer for you.  
Know I came  
to die for you.

In your suffering  
be transformed.  
A grain of wheat must die.  
Must die to produce life.

Learn to trust Me  
in your suffering.  
In your suffering  
find My joyful life.

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Let us pray:  
Be still, my soul: your God will undertake  
to guide the future, as in ages past.  
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;  
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.  
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know  
the Christ who ruled them while he dwelt below.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.