

Sermon 25 June 2018  
Season After Pentecost Proper 7, Year B  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church  
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The Gospel reading we just heard is one of the most popular stories in the New Testament.

It's a common feature of Sunday School lessons, of devotional material, and even of artwork.

And, this seems to be true across Christian history. In fact, my favorite illustration of this story comes from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, where it was painted on the wall of a baptistery.<sup>1</sup> It's one of the oldest remaining pieces of Christian art. In it, the disciples, looking disheveled and tired, cower in the boat, and Jesus stands with his arms out, calming the sea.

It's a powerful image, I think, because it speaks to experiences that are so fundamental to being human.

After all, every one of us has been afraid. We have all felt overwhelmed and overcome by things that threaten to sink us.

And, I'm willing to bet that many, if not all, of us have been in situations where we've asked God "do you not care that we are perishing?"

This text is so popular, I think, because it's so universal.

The Gospel of Mark was written around the time of the first Jewish war with Rome, which means it dates from somewhere close to the year 70 of the common era.<sup>2</sup> And this fact is important, because it lets us know that Mark is writing to a community that's witnessing and experiencing a lot of change.

They were in the middle of political tumult.

The Jewish rebellions over their mistreatment by the Roman Empire resulted in many deaths, the division of communities, and the destruction of the Temple. Jerusalem had been under siege for seven months.

Neighbors who had lived side-by-side for years were suddenly fiercely divided and found themselves on opposite sides of a conflict, wondering if they could ever live together peacefully again.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is my favorite mainly because it is one of the oldest pieces of extant Christian art. It's on view at the Yale University art gallery as part of their Dura Europos exhibit, and everyone should go see it

<sup>2</sup> C. Clifton Black's introduction to Mark in the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Revised edition, 1723.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War)

They were also in the middle of religious tumult.

The temple had been destroyed, and there were many folks claiming to be the Messiah, the one to save the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

It wasn't clear what to believe, or who to follow. The answers weren't immediately apparent. Religion, too, was becoming a source of conflict.

As all of this was going on in the background, the Markan community was faced some high-stakes questions of its own.

At the beginning, the Markan community was predominantly Jewish but as it grew, more and more Gentiles were added to their number. This was good news, and it meant that the community had to grow and figure out how to live with people who were different than they were.

They were asking questions like:

Do the Gentiles who are coming into our mostly Jewish community have to get circumcised?

What dietary laws do we have to follow?

How do we accept someone who looks different? Who doesn't speak our language? Who doesn't read and understand the Scriptures in the same way we do?

What if these new people wish us harm?<sup>5</sup>

Mark's community, which is not our own, also sounds a lot like our own. We too, are living in politically tumultuous and religiously confusing times. Our church community here is asking a lot of questions about who we are, and how we're going to be in the world.

And so, this story has a lot to tell us about how it is that we might respond to these moments of fear.

In our reading for today, when Jesus tells the disciples to go to the other side, he's telling them to leave their predominantly Jewish community, let go of people who are like them, to go over to Gentile territory.<sup>6</sup>

He's asking them to be in the middle of people who are different than they are.

He's asking them to take a risk and do something frightening.

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<sup>4</sup> C. Clifton Black's introduction to Mark in the *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Revised edition, 1723.

<sup>5</sup> <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2018/05/26/the-other-side-pentecost-5-b-june-24-2018/>

<sup>6</sup> This is what's referred to as the "country of the Gerasense" in 5:1

And this is a call that comes for all of us, many times in our lives:

We find God calling us to move to a new place, change schools, to start a new job or vocation, or take a risk.

Other times, when we have to face something scary, it isn't a call at all:

Like when you have to face frightening medical news, surgery, or grief,

When poverty or a place on the margins means that you're mistreated or forgotten,

When someone you love dies.

And oftentimes, these situations seem to come at the worst possible moments. Like when the disciples – a group that includes some experienced fishermen – have to cross the sea during a terrible windstorm.

They're already doing the hard thing. They already trusted Jesus enough to get into the boat with him.

But the weather makes it worse, and they get overwhelmed quickly. It's dark, and I have to believe at least some of the disciples are angry and asking,

“Why couldn't this wait until the morning?”

“You couldn't have cut us a break?”

“Why, this, now?”

To make it worse, Jesus is sleeping. He doesn't seem to notice their struggle.

Now, in the Hebrew Scriptures, sleeping is often a posture of trust in God. In the Psalms, sleeping amidst enemies or in situations of trouble is a sign of deep faith.

So, by laying down in the back of the boat, Jesus isn't being a jerk. He's not sitting back and letting everyone else do the hard work. He's being the model of faith.

However, the disciples don't share this same faith, and in Mark's Gospel, the disciples never really get it.

So they wake Jesus up. And they ask him “don't you care that we're going to die in this storm?”

Because to the disciples, it seems SO OBVIOUS that they're about to die.

It seems clear that Jesus has asked too much of them, and that things aren't going their way.

They thought Jesus cared about them, and they trusted him. That's why they got on the boat with him.

They had faith in him. But then a storm happened, and it seemed like Jesus didn't care about them.

Maybe this is a moment of faith that's familiar to you. Where you trust God, and take a step out, only to find yourself overwhelmed. When you pray, it doesn't seem like God is answering your prayers.

Or when you're living in the midst of change and you're not sure what to do, but you have to do something.

It's those moments of fear and change that we all find ourselves in at some point or another.

When Jesus wakes, he rebukes the storm as he rebuked a demon earlier in Mark. He calms the storm. Waters that had raged seconds prior were suddenly eerily still.

This action was part of Jesus's demonstration of divine power. The disciples recognize this when they whisper among themselves that even the wind and waves obey this man.

But they are still afraid. When the text says that they were "filled with great awe" at the sign of Jesus's power, the Greek just says they were afraid.

In our story today, the disciples never really get to escape their fear. They're still scared at the end of the reading.

But the object of their fear has shifted. The disciples aren't scared of the storm anymore. They're scared of divine power.

To be clear, they are not scared because God is using God's power in the way that a tyrant does, to lord it over them. Mark's gospel makes this clear.

But I think they are scared because they recognize that God uses God's power on their behalf.

As my friend Lauren Larkin says, "Divine power is the power of love for the beloved."

God's power is always used for the benefit of those whom God loves. Never for their harm, but for their benefit.

To enable them to do the hard work that is in front of them. God's love and power enable people to be brave and face the things that frighten them.

I have to imagine that the disciples are afraid at this moment because they realize for a second the nature of God's power. They realize that God is on their side, and that God is powerful.

And they recognize that this means they have to do those hard things that God has called them to.

This is faith.

Not the ignorance of the storms. Not pretending that there are not real things to be frightened of.

But trusting in God's power and love to get us through those storms. It is trusting God to show up, in some way, in those moments where disaster seems certain and we are overwhelmed.

It is refusing to give up hope.

And it is committing to facing the hard things that God has called us to.

My friends, we are all people that God loves.

And God's power is love on our behalf.

This means that in those moments of fear, those moments when we are forced to face a crisis, or when God has called us to do something frightening, we trust the one whom wind and seas obey.

It means we recognize that we are not alone, but Jesus is with us.

It means we can rest in the knowledge and love of God.

One of my favorite prayers in the *BCP* sums up this well, when it begins with

“Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts.”<sup>7</sup>

And, for the next week, I'd encourage you to pray this, both for yourself and this community:

“Grant me, O Lord, trust in you with all my heart”

That you may give us courage in the face of things which are overwhelming and difficult,

And that we may know your power, which is love on our behalf.”

Pray in hopes that God will give us this transforming trust, and that we may be able to stand strong in the face of fear. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Collect for Proper 7, *BCP* page 233.