

“Who then is this?”

Jesus Stills the Storm

Mark 4:35-41

January 29, 2012

Rev. Paul Holte

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Neenah, WI

When I started my ministry in the Pacific Northwest, I spent a lot of time walking along the Pacific Ocean shores and the island shorelines of Puget Sound.

I also spent many weekend retreats aboard the *Motor Vessel Christian*, a 56-foot purse-seiner type of craft that was built as a floating Bible Camp.

I regularly rode the Washington State ferries, and would sometimes go out sailing with my friend Russ aboard the boat he lived on.

I learned to like but not love the coast. I'm a Midwest boy at heart. The ocean impresses me with its power. The surf is not calming. Rather, it's a formidable and mysterious force of nature, one to be respected.

I'm a land-lubber. I betray my Norwegian heritage to admit that, for we come from Scandinavian stock whose ancestors were bold Vikings who took to the sea in ships. (Some say Vikings were the first to discover America, crossing the North Atlantic five centuries before Christopher Columbus. Even today, though they no longer pillage, Norwegians are renowned as great, capable sailors and fishermen.)

No, I'm more like Antaeus from Greek mythology, who, because he was a son of the earth goddess Gaia, drew strength from being in contact with the earth. The only way Hercules could defeat him in a wrestling match was to hold him above his head so his feet wouldn't touch the ground.

That's me; if my feet are on solid ground, I'm grounded. Put me on a boat, though, and I'm thinking about making shore.

When I spent a week canoeing the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota, I *lived* for the portages when I could hike instead of paddle.

I get some of this wariness of water from my father, who, like me, was born in a dusty town in North Dakota. Dad enlisted in the Navy and fought in the Pacific in World War II. He later became a Chaplain in the Naval Reserves, retiring as Lieutenant Commander after 20 years. The funny part? Dad never learned to swim. This Navy man could not swim to save his life.

Both of us *like* the water okay; we're just ill at ease *in* it or *on* it.

In this way we're a lot like the ancient Jews. Although they lived on the coast of the Mediterranean, the Jews were not sea-faring people. They were, essentially, desert people. For the Jews, the sea represents terror and chaos, the forces of the Deep, the Unknown, the Untameable.

So when you see a reference to the sea in scripture, there is this sense of uneasiness. The ocean is foreign, ominous, even evil.

Think of Noah, and the Flood.

Think of Jonah, caught in a storm at sea, while trying to run from God.

Think of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee.

The odd thing is that there were at least four fishermen on board the boat that night – men who went out on the Sea of Galilee day after day; men who made their living plying the waters. You'd think being on a boat would be second nature to them. They surely must have experienced bad weather on the lake before. Yet along with the others on board, they were terrified.

It must have been the Perfect Storm.

We are in Chapter 4 today of our Journey through the Gospel of Mark.

This chapter starts out with parables – (Pastor Harms will talk about that next week). Then there follows a series of miracle stories. Jesus not only subdues the raging sea, he casts out a legion of demons, heals a woman who had been ill for 12 years, and raises a dead girl. These show Jesus' power over the evils in nature, demons, sickness, and death.

There were, though, other wonder workers, exorcists, and magicians around – some of whom claimed to accomplish the sorts of cures and miracles Jesus had done.

But Mark wants you to know that only Jesus is able to still the raging storm. Only Jesus has authority over nature itself.

That's why the story ends with amazement: "Who then is this, that even the wind and waves obey him?"

There's a recurring scene in the Paul Newman / Robert Redford film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, where the two are running from the posse, but can't seem to shake them because, unbeknownst to them, the federal marshal has brought in an expert tracker. Sundance keeps looking back and asking Butch, "Who *are* those guys?"

That's what Mark wants you to keep asking, as you read this story: "Who *is* this guy?"

Ironically, among the people who thought they knew him best, the folks in his own hometown, he can do nothing, because of their lack of faith.

You would think that those who had known him all his life (family and neighbors), and those who had decided to follow him (apostles and disciples) would have more faith in him – but they didn't.

This is a continuing theme in Mark's gospel – the lack of faith from those who should have been closest to Jesus.

The *readers* know Jesus' identity. The disciples appear clueless.

It is a cautionary tale to us, not to get too complacent just because we think we know Jesus.

After a full day of ministry, Jesus tells his disciples, "Let's go across to the other side of the lake." As they cross the Sea of Galilee in their boat at night, a fierce wind arises. Waves pound the hull. They take on water. They're swamped, in danger of capsizing. It looks bad, real bad. Even these professional sailors are panicked.

Meanwhile, in the stern, You-Know-Who is sound asleep.

The disciples are probably thinking:

(a) How can anyone possibly *sleep* through this?

(b) “Anyone who doesn’t panic at a time like this simply doesn’t understand the situation!”

So they rouse him and ask, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (There must have been more urgency than that. I think they shook him and screamed, “Wake up! We’re all gonna *die*! Don’t you even *care*?”)

Have you ever felt like this – that the Lord, who is supposed to be watching over you and keeping you safe, seems indifferent to your plight?

Like, “I’m about to go under, Lord. Don’t you even *care* what happens to me?”

Jesus, a calm man in a crazy place, gets up and rebukes the wind and sea. “Peace! Be still!”

He addresses the elements as if they were demons, and this a kind of exorcism.

Immediately the wind stops, and the sea becomes smooth as glass; dead calm; instant quiet.

And they’re stunned.

Maybe they expected him to get up and help them bail water, trim the sails, man the oars, take the rudder – do something nautical.

They didn’t expect him to do something divine.

Remember, to these folks, raging water represented chaos.

Being good Jews, they knew their *Genesis*. When the Spirit of the Lord “moved over the face of the waters” at creation, He brought forth order out of chaos. Now here their Master has done the same thing. That’s why they’re asking, “Who then *is* this?”

Remember the story of King Canute? His people praised him as the greatest king ever. To teach them a lesson about ultimate authority, he had them place his throne on the seashore. He then commanded the ocean to obey him, and the waves to stop rolling. But the tide came in, just as it always did, until the waters began to engulf his chair. He made his point.

For wind and sea obey no one... except God.

So Jesus’ followers ought to think, Wait a minute... if our Master can command the wind and sea... then... obviously... he must be...

But they don’t make the connection. Mark hopes that *you* do.

Once peace is restored, Jesus chides the disciples. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Face it: fear is a lack of faith.

When Jesus is near, why should we fear?

Fear, or faith, my friends – What’s it going to be?

In other words, who or what really has the power in your daily life – Christ, who has authority over all things, or your fears, to which you have surrendered the authority over your soul?

“Who then is this?” Mark repeatedly raises the question of Jesus’ identity. Despite their privileged position, his disciples cannot grasp who Jesus really is. As we read the gospel, we are challenged to examine our own faith. Merely repeating the expression “Jesus is Lord” means nothing if Jesus has no Lordship over our daily lives.

We have probably all at one time cried out to God in prayer, “Don’t you care, Lord? Don’t you care?”

But if Jesus indeed is Lord, then fear, worry, and panic are out of place. Fear is a lack of faith. And it will corrode our spiritual life if we harbor the suspicion that God really doesn’t care about what happens to us.

How can Jesus *not* care? He is in the boat with the disciples. Hey, *we’re all in the same boat!* And not only does he *care*; he has authority to *act*.

Doubts about God tend to emerge in times of crisis – storms in our personal lives. What manner of storms have *you* weathered? Did it get so bad you questioned God? How did God see you through it? (Because if God brings you *to* it, God will surely bring you *through* it.)

We mourn the fatal crash of the cruise liner *Costa Concordia* off the coast of Italy. It’s a reminder that the sea can be a dangerous place, indeed. “*Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee For those in peril on the sea.*”

We remember that 100 years ago, in April 1912, an enormous new luxury liner named the *Titanic* set sail across the North Atlantic Ocean on its maiden voyage. Many thought it to be unsinkable. As you know, it hit an iceberg and sank, with the loss of 1,517 lives.

Yet that same month, April 1912, a group of people decided to form an English-speaking church in the city of Neenah, Wisconsin. It was incorporated in September of that year as *St. Paul’s*. 100 years later, we’re still afloat. Sailing along rather nicely, thank you very much, because the Lord is on board, steering this ship, calming our fears.

“Who then is this?” You need to answer. Remember: Only the Lord God Almighty Creator is able to calm the wind and waves He created. So when your world within is still and at peace, you know you’re in the same boat with Jesus – and all is well.

Have no fear, little flock. Jesus has power to still the storm.