

Storms in the Forecast

“In the eye of a hurricane there is quiet, for just moment, a yellow sky...” I wonder if these words from the musical Hamilton might describe how the disciples, looking back, felt about the moments after Jesus calmed the storm. Though I’ve experienced some pretty significant storms, I’ve never been in a hurricane, but I’ve heard people describe being in the eye as an eerie silence, surreal, and you know it’s only a pause, not an end, to the storm. The Scripture tells us that “the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.” And in one sense, this seems true, the physical storm creating tumultuous seas was stilled, and the disciples were able to safely continue on their journey. In this moment, the disciples witness a new side of Jesus though, one that may be actually more disconcerting than comforting, and find themselves asking “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” And the physical storm is not the only storm in their lives - it may very well represent the internal storm that each of them are experiencing as they partake in the early stage of Jesus’ ministry. And if that’s the storm that is being stilled, if crossing the sea gives them a brief rest, well they are very much in the eye of the hurricane, and this passage is far more complicated than Jesus calming down our lives.

Where the disciples are headed as they cross the lake is straight back into the hurricane – they come to shore in an area that isn’t Jewish, where they are met by a man who has been chained in a cave because he is possessed by demons, but who has the strength to continually break the chains the people try to use to subdue him. Jesus drives the demons out the man and into a herd of pigs, who the demons cause to run off the cliff into the sea. Then Jesus and the disciples get run out of town for causing the death of so much of the town’s livestock. So much for calming the storm. It’s a wild story, and if you’re not familiar with it, read the beginning of Mark 5 which is what comes immediately after today’s passage. I imagine they are still asking who this guy is, and the part that may have the most implications for the storm in the lives of the disciples in that it is now clear Jesus isn’t just here for the Jewish people, but that his ministry goes beyond that scope, even to the Gentiles, as well.

In the commentary she wrote for the Presbyterian Outlook, our own Rev Barbara Chaapel calls what the disciples experience a “cosmic storm — a storm actual or metaphoric that upends our sense of security and meaning.” She continues, “We know about cosmic storms. Who would not compare the world as we know it today, with its racism, violence, pandemic illness and death, economic injustice and environmental destruction, to a cosmic upheaval that challenges our very lives, the human race and the world as we know it?”

I could talk more about the storms in the disciples’ lives, because of course there was more, and it’s also hard to know where to begin in talking about the storms in our own lives because there is a multitude of options. Having been in a meeting this week that captured much of what

I have been feeling recently, I do think it worth naming that we are still in the storm of this pandemic, even if in a new way. It's been a powerful storm from the start - in spring 2020 suddenly everyday places like the grocery store became a place of fear and anxiety, because it meant exposure to many people. Someone coughing, even a block away on the street, was often deemed worthy of suspicion, with the counter being we felt nervous coughing when we got pollen in our throat or swallowed the wrong way. Every day we were trying to make the safest decisions we could with the information that we had at the time, information that given the evolving nature of the medical and scientific understanding of the virus was frequently being updated and changed. It was, in many ways, exhausting. And now, the transition back out can also feel quite stormy at times, as our excitement and anxieties go back and forth within us, as we try to continue to adapt to what is safe after having changed our behaviors. A couple weeks ago I saw a headline about people feeling a sense of whiplash, and that felt pretty on point. It's okay to name that transitioning back has elements that are hard.

And as Barbara noted in her commentary, the pandemic is only one of many storms we are experiencing right now. While Juneteenth was celebrated yesterday, we remember we still have far to go in breaking down racism, and as we prepare for hurricanes and wildfires this summer, we worry for our planet. While many storms in our lives seem outside our control, there are also some of our making. The Hamilton lyric I referred to is talking both about a literal hurricane experienced in his youth, and the hurricane he has created for himself by having an extramarital affair, which, spoiler alert, he doesn't handle well because of his pride. Other storms may be of our creation but are storms that need to happen, even if it creates challenging situations. Change, even positive change, can often feel stormy. As we can see in the Scriptures, Jesus also leads the disciples straight into some storms, like the one that waited for them on shore.

So how does Jesus enter into this, and why was Jesus sleeping through the storm? I think there are several answers to why he may have been sleeping, including sheer exhaustion. Mark moves at such a rapid pace, and Jesus had been traveling and teaching, and figuring out his own relationship with his biological family, calling disciples and getting on the radar of the powers that be; he's been busy and needs rest. Jesus needing rest is a reminder that we need rest, that in the midst of life's storms we have to recharge to face them. And Jesus trusts in God enough to claim that rest even while on a boat. Maybe Jesus' actions, as well as his command of, "Peace! Be Still!" tells us that sometimes in the midst of the raging winds and waters, we need to pause, to be still.

I also wonder if Jesus was sleeping because he hoped that the disciples might be beginning to understand the power Jesus had, and that they had and we have through Jesus. We often want Jesus, or God, to make just it all better, when we have often been equipped by God to do the work ourselves, either with the tools and skills, or with the people to reach out to who can help provide us with the tools, skills, and help that we need. I think that Jesus probably

believed that between the disciples' faith in him and their sailing skills, that had what they needed to weather the storm, plus Jesus was present with them the entire time, through that physical and also the larger, metaphorical storms that they encounter.

Then there is the power Jesus revealed in calming the storm. After calming the storm, Jesus questions the disciples' faith. We, like the disciples, may forget the power that Christ has. Mary Oliver touches on this in her poem *Maybe*, where she writes of how when Jesus calmed the storm he was:

tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was —
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer sea.

Those lines really struck me. I tend to find myself thinking of Jesus calming the storm as a kind of pastoral scene, but that's not really that accurate I imagine. Jesus calms the storm, but he doesn't calm the disciples, he leaves them in awe and with questions about who they had got into a boat with.

The pattern of this story reveals that Mark is telling not just a miracle story, but a story of healing and exorcism. It parallels the story in Mark 1 where Jesus drives an unclean spirit out of a man, using the same words to rebuke and speak to the wind that he did with the spirit, questioning the disciples' faith, and then those present react in the same way. What this means, according to the author of the Salt blog, is that "First, the story suggests that the world's death-dealing forces aren't limited to afflicted individuals; they are also much larger, interpersonal, communal phenomena, more like enveloping storms than personal maladies. And second, the story suggests that the essence of Jesus' mission is to confront such forces — not with military might, but with a calm, courageous campaign of healing and liberation." They go on to say that "the world's death-dealing forces are no match for the God of life." These forces are what God is driving out and healing us from.

One detail unique to Mark's telling of this story is that there were other boats with them. This reminds us Jesus was here for more than just the disciples, but it also reminds us that the disciples, and we, have companions on our journey, companions we are beginning to get to see in the flesh and not on Zoom once again. These companions can help us weather the storms.

Life is going to hit us with storms, and sometimes, we may have created them. But Jesus is present with us in the boat, offering us strength, and also inviting us to trust and find the rest we need. And through it all, Jesus reminds us that God is more powerful than whatever life can throw at us, that God has the final word. That's the promise of the resurrection. Amen.