

“He Could Sleep Through Anything”
Mark 4:35-41
4th Sunday after Pentecost

June 20, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

A number of years ago, I heard a colleague tell of the time that the basement to his home flooded.

They had just bought the house,
the flooding was obviously unexpected,
it had to do with some deficiency in the house that was not caught during the inspection of the house...

Well, they called the experts who take care of such things.
And many days and many more dollars later, the problem was solved.

But before it was over, the contractor pulled my colleague’s wife aside and told her, “Ma’am, even though we can get this fixed, you need to remember something:

WATER ALWAYS WINS!!”

Now that’s a good question.
Does water always win?

I’m thinking about the house we owned in Indiana—and how, right after we put it on the market before we moved to Dallas, there was a leak in the ceiling in the kitchen. And the plumbers came out, and they couldn’t figure out the source of the leak. They cut a hole in the ceiling, still couldn’t find the leak. They looked all over the house for 2 hours, and finally went home, defeated.

Later, I figured out that the leak was caused by the fact that I had scrubbed the caulking around our bathtub in the master bathroom too hard, thereby creating a small hole, and when someone turned on the shower, water went through the hole and matriculated to the lowest point, which was the ceiling above the kitchen and then it dripped through the kitchen ceiling...

Does water always win?
I didn't want to believe it.
But I'm beginning to believe it's true.

Because then we moved to Dallas.
Lived there 9 years.

And shortly before we were about to move to Greenville, I noticed that one section of our hardwood floors in our living room was warping—not a good sign.

Called the foundation repair people, they determined there was too much moisture in the crawl space underneath the hardwoods, not enough ventilation...and thousands of dollars later, we had it fixed.

Sigh.
Does water always win?

I ask not because I think you're interested in all my repair bills from previous years.

I ask because water is a very important symbol and subject in scripture.

On the one hand, it represents that which is very good.
Remember the prophet Amos?
“...let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Or the waters of baptism, representing forgiveness, membership in the church, symbolizing new life in Christ.

But on the other hand, water in the Bible isn't just goodness and renewal and life.

It's also danger, death, destruction.

Do you remember the prophet Jonah?

Who had to be thrown into the tempestuous water in order to calm it down?

The sea is where people believed that demons dwelled in Jesus's day.

Water in scripture also represents that which is out of our control in this world...that which is *chaotic* in this world.

And that's what we've got in our scripture passage for today.

When Mark writes:

"A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped..."

- a. On the one hand, there's the literal reading of this text—that the waves and the water were the problem, the waves and the water might win!
- b. But on the other hand, there's the THEOLOGICAL reading of this text, which is that **chaos** is the problem, and is the chaos of the world going to win??

The water that beats into the boat is, in this text, a manifestation of the cosmic forces of chaos, that which has no purpose, no meaning, the void, the emptiness...

ANYTHING that opposes God's will and way and love
in this world—all THAT is beating into the boat as well!

Now you may think that's an overly-dramatic way to read this story. But Mark, I believe, would want us to hear it that way.

Why? Because I think Mark knows that chaos is one of our *deepest fears*.

We were in Washington, DC last weekend for a brief vacation. Had a great time seeing the sights as the city itself reopens to tourists.

Lots of walking required in DC, so on a few occasions, we took an Uber. And one of our Uber drivers was very friendly, very talkative—originally from Ethiopia.

We asked him about living in the United States. He said he likes it here because there's so much more opportunity. He said he was selected to come here in a lottery, which sounded like he was a refugee.

He said that back in Ethiopia, he had previously been put in jail, for no good reason.

He spoke of problems with the government, a history of nepotism in the Ethiopia's government, and while I don't know anything about Ethiopia's history and governance, if you read about what's going on right now in Ethiopia, it doesn't sound good—there's civil war, there's famine...

It sounds like—for many people in that country—utter chaos.

Who wants to live in chaos?

Let me go out on a limb here and assume that every person in this sanctuary would choose calm over chaos 100% of the time...

Which is why the most disturbing image in this story is not the water and wind that's beating into the boat.

It's Jesus.

Jesus, who is sleeping through the chaos of the storm!

Mark tells us that the disciples have to wake Jesus up,
and they beg him to do something about the storm,
and then—after Jesus tells the wind and the waves to stop—
he chastises the disciples for their response:

*Why are you afraid?
Have you still no faith?*

I thought Jesus would say:
Thanks for making me aware of the problem!

Now...I'm not going to try to explain the reaction of Jesus in this text.

There are plenty of times when scripture describes our Savior not just in comforting ways, but also in utterly CONFOUNDING ways...

What I do know is that the disciples did not get caught in a storm because they did something wrong or because they disobeyed Jesus. The disciples found their lives in danger because they did EXACTLY what Jesus told them to do.

Did you notice that part?

It was Jesus who said to his disciples:
 “Let us go across to the other side.”

It was Jesus who asked his disciples to get into the boat which took them into a storm.

This doesn't come through in our English translation of the text, but the Greek verb that is used in this passage for “go across” is a RARE verb in Mark's Gospel.

As Dr. Brian Blount—President of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia—as Dr. Blount points out, this particular Greek verb that gets translated “go across” has the connotation not just of crossing over, but of doing something EXTREMELY DIFFICULT.

In fact, this verb is used only one other time in the Gospel of Mark. Do you want to guess when that is?

When Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through—ie, cross over—the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.¹

Do you see what's going on?

Jesus invites his disciples to cross over in the boat.
 To do something very difficult in the boat.
 And THAT'S when they run into the storm!

I wonder if this is what Mark wants us to see in this story. Because when the storms of life approach, our instinct is to stay on dry land.

To avoid the storm. To take shelter from the storm.
 And it's not a bad instinct.

¹ I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw, “Dead Calm,” for this exegetical detail about the Greek verb that's used for “cross over,” found at <https://austinseminarydigital.org/items/show/1258>.

But what if, as followers of Jesus,
we aren't supposed to avoid every storm.

What if sometimes, Jesus asks us to get into the boat,
to cross over with Jesus,
even when crossing over—
may lead us directly INTO the chaos...

Mary Ellen Geist is a former award-winning journalist who, years ago, gave up her lucrative career to return to her parents' home in Michigan.

She made a commitment to help her mother care for her father, who was slowly succumbing to Alzheimer's.

"I was used to winning awards and getting the big stories," Geist recalls.

"What I didn't know at the time is that you can't win at caregiving... You can only help a little bit along the way."

But she goes on to point out: "that doesn't... mean you have failed."

Geist describes how one day she went to her closet to find her favorite pair of black pants. After a search, she discovered them:

"hanging inside out, waistband snarled around the hanger,
the crease of the pants in the center of the legs...
the pant legs twisted and hanging upside down."

How did this happen?

Well, she was letting her dad “help” her hang her clothes.

In the midst of the storm that Alzheimer’s can be for a family, Geist wrote:

“The truth is I kind of like looking in my closet and seeing my father’s handiwork there. It’s amusing. It’s creative.

“It’s a worthwhile exchange—a messy closet and some wrinkled clothes for a father who feels useful and loved and a part of our lives.”

“It also announces to me and to others that things are not normal in this house. We are not going to pretend, anymore, that everything’s okay...”²

Do you think, perhaps, that’s why Jesus invites us into the boat? So that, as we emerge from the pandemic, God’s churches can cross over to places and to people where things are not ok?

I trust that many of you are familiar with the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and how Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in 1945 for participating in a plot to try to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

What isn’t as well known about Bonhoeffer is that he didn’t have to be in Germany during WWII.

The year was 1939, and Bonhoeffer was overseas, visiting the United States for the second time in his life. Storm clouds were on the horizon in Europe—everyone could see them—and while Bonhoeffer

² Mary Ellen Geist, *Measure of the Heart: A Father’s Alzheimer’s, A Daughter’s Return*, New York: Springboard Press, 2008.

was supposed to be in the U.S. for a brief visit, he actually had the opportunity to stay much longer.

He was invited to remain in America as a pastor to German refugees.

Bonhoeffer agonized about this decision.

His friends in the U.S. wanted him to stay, to be out of harm's way.

In a letter to the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer ended up writing:

“I have made a mistake in coming to America [this second time]. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany...Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our...civilization.

I know which of these alternatives I must choose;
but I cannot make that choice in security.”³

Why did he do it?

Why did Bonhoeffer return to the chaos that was unfolding in his homeland?

Why did he decide NOT to avoid the storm?

The only answer I can come up with is that it wasn't his idea.

It was Jesus.

It was Jesus who asked him to get into the boat.

³ From *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Has Jesus ever asked you to get into the boat?
To cross over to a place that maybe you were reluctant to go?

Getting into the boat with Jesus could mean a conversation with someone whom you've been avoiding. You don't want to have this conversation, but you know you need to have this conversation, and it's probably going to be a messy conversation...it might mean you offering grace to this person, it might mean you accepting grace FROM this person. And you don't want anything to do with this person.

If Jesus asks you to do it, will you get into the boat?

Maybe getting into the boat with Jesus means rethinking your career. You've got good security with what you do, you make good money with what you do...but there's a nagging sense that what you do right now...it's not really using the gifts that God has given you.

And starting a new career that uses those gifts—well, that's a scary proposition. It could lead to some pretty rough seas. But you keep getting the sense that this is where Jesus wants to take you.

If Jesus wants you to go there, will you get into the boat?
I understand our resistance to getting into the boat...

Barbara Brown Taylor once told about a 3-year-old girl named Ellen who was going to be baptized.

Ellen was due to be baptized at an Easter Vigil service—
a service that occurs in the middle of the night,
when the day of Easter actually begins.

The only problem was that the parents wanted Ellen baptized by immersion, and the church they belonged to had what we've got—
a baptismal font for sprinkling, not dunking.

So the minister got creative.

And without asking Ellen, he decided that the best thing to do would be to take a 36 gallon garbage can,
decorate it with ivy to make it look pretty,
and fill it with water so Ellen could be immersed.

The night of the service arrived, and unbelievably,
the garbage can looked...not too bad.

But 3-year-olds are savvy enough to know a garbage can when they see one, and when Ellen saw the destination that the minister had in mind, she stiffened.

What to do?

But Ellen was also a brave little girl, and her parents had rehearsed her well for this moment, so she moved forward to the make-shift baptismal font, doing everything she was supposed to do, right up to the point where the minister leaned down to pick her up.

And you know what Ellen did then?

She planted her feet FLAT against the garbage can so that water went splashing everywhere, and she screamed at the top of her lungs:

“Don't do it! Don't do it!”⁴

⁴ As told by Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “Buried by Baptism,” in her book *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, edited by Ronald J. Allen, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

THAT baptism was a little chaotic!
 Little Ellen didn't want to end up in a garbage can.
 Who can blame her?

It was going to be messy.
 It didn't feel safe.
 She was going to get all wet.

I get that instinct.
 It's so much easier to stay dry.

After all, there are all sorts of possible storms out there.

Storms that have to do with poverty, and income inequality, and racism, and difficult conversations about racism...and storms that have to do with loneliness, and mental health...and storms that have to do with drug addiction in our country, and storms that have to do with how we can prevent all this gun violence in our country...and storms that have to do about all the little tribes that our society likes to divide us into...

It's so much easier to avoid the storms.
 But what if Jesus is inviting us into his boat?
 What if Jesus is inviting you and me...to get a little wet?

While you're thinking about that, let me remind you that Jesus got you wet once before in your life.

How many of you have been baptized?
 I don't mean in a garbage can.
 How many of you have been baptized?

May I suggest that water
 is NOT done getting you wet...
 (Amen.)