

“Asleep at the Wheel”

A Sermon on Mark 4:35-41

June 21, 2015

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Jesus is still early on in his ministry at this point in the Gospel, yet in spite of his being the new kid on the block, he is already drawing enormous crowds. When Jesus began teaching earlier that morning, he stood on the shore. Yet the crowd swelled so much, that he found it necessary to climb into a boat and continue preaching *on the water* to avoid being crushed by the mob. Now Jesus, tired after a long day of teaching and preaching under the hot sun, commands his disciples to set sail for the other side of the lake, while he curls up and takes a nap. While he sleeps, while the disciples row, a great windstorm overtakes the calm and peaceful waters of the Galilee. The disciples, several of whom are experienced fishermen, go crazy and begin to think they will all drown. This helps us understand the severity of the storm. Jesus snoozes on until the disciples, not the raging storm, wake him up. “Teacher, don’t you care that we are about to die?” Now awake, Jesus scolds the wind and cries, “Peace,” to the waves, and in an instant calm returns. The sea is like crystal and the air is still. “Who is this,” the disciples wonder, and Mark tells us that, at that moment, they are filled with fear.

Several things stand out to me from this passage, especially in light of the tragedy this week in Charleston. The murder of nine men and women as they met for Bible study and prayer has had a tremendous impact on our community and our nation. A calm and serene gathering of people of faith was suddenly overtaken by a violent and raging storm. Many people may be looking to Jesus, asking, “Don’t you care that we are perishing?”

I believe Jesus does care. I believe he cares, and I believe he mourns with those who have lost loved ones, family and friends, and leaders of their church and community. Yet Jesus is not here for us to rouse to wakefulness. He is not here to rebuke the storm. He has empowered us to do that.

Racism is an ugly word, and we do not like to hear it. Many people begin to feel defensive when issues of racial inequality are raised. Certainly, as we look back over the last half century, we can argue that much has been done to address issues of racism, and that progress towards equality has been made. However, as clearly evidenced by the shootings in Charleston this week, racism is still a major issue. Whether the shootings were racially motivated or not, I cannot say, however the dialogue of recent days, accompanied by the dialogue of the last several months in the wake of other shootings and acts of violence can only lead us to the sure realization that there is a storm of racism brewing around us.

The progress we have made as a culture and society is good, to be sure. I wonder, though, if sometimes the devil uses a little progress towards a goal to lull us into the restful haze of thinking that we have achieved that goal. Charles Baudelaire once wrote that, “The finest trick of the devil is to convince you he doesn’t exist.” He also tries to convince us that racism doesn’t exist. And it is working.

The church is called to follow Jesus, and in this instance, I think we are imitating Jesus a little too well. Mark has Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat, the back of the boat, where the steering happens. While many of Jesus’ disciples are independently trying to save the ship from sinking, the church has been lulled into taking a nap at the wheel. Those disciples can only do so much without being able to steer the boat in the midst of the storm, but it seems to me the larger church has remained mostly silent on issues of race and racial justice. The voices of those desperate disciples need to wake up a church that has fallen asleep with the false comfort that everything is calm, peaceful, and okay. Racism has not gone away, and the church needs to wake up and rebuke the storm.

When the disciples finally get Jesus to wake up and pay attention to what’s happening around him, his actual response might be a little bit different than what you presume based on

what we've read and heard this morning. The Bible, in English, has a tendency to lose its punch, and this is one of those instances. Many of us have an image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," (C. Wesley), yet that is not the Jesus in Mark's account. This Jesus wakes up groggy from the rude awakening, disgruntled at his disciples' lack of faith. He looks out at the stormy sea, and literally tells the waves to "Shut up!" His words are much more vulgar and much less decorous than the, "Peace! Be still!" we read in our Bibles this morning. Yet look what happens. Calm and peace are restored. Things go from being very wrong to being right, to being the way they are supposed to be. Jesus is able to affect change.

Racism is not the only evil force in the world that the church needs to tell to shut up. Pope Francis this week stood up in the boat and yelled, "Shut up!" to forces that do not care about how they mistreat the environment. He yelled, "Shut up!" to the pernicious forces that drive consumerism based on easily disposable goods. He believes these forces have the potential to drown us, and that human lives and relationships are at stake. There are a multitude of forces – prejudices, systems, and ideologies – that the church can, should, and does stand up and tell to "Shut up!" The light of God's kingdom breaks into darkness when we stand up and shout, "Shut up!" That is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church, the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus sent us and calls us to exercise in his name. We have the power of Jesus. Jesus tells his followers in John that the one who believes in him "will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (14:12). If Jesus has the power to calm the raging storms, than so do we.

After Jesus calms the storm, Mark tells us that the disciples are literally "fearful with a great fear." I find it interesting that their fear increases *after* Jesus calms the storm. It does not abate in the calm. It grows. When the church is calming the storms that rage around her, people become afraid. Should the church become too powerful, she could potentially disrupt the forces

of evil that crush people to elevate others. She could reverse forces that ensure that some have less so that others have more. She could bring about a world where full and abundant life – the life Jesus promises – is available to everyone.

The tragedy in Charleston can shake awake the church and drive her to shout, “Peace! Be still!” to the racism and hatred deeply and firmly rooted in our communities. It can motivate her to recognize that when people put their own selfish interests before the interests of others, those people have missed the boat. It can motivate us to say, “Shut up!” to the words, actions, and symbols that are used to reinforce hatred and oppression, even if we feel our motives in using those things are innocent. It can motivate us to stand in solidarity with sisters and brothers who are mistreated, maligned, and kept at the edges of society; to not shut our mouths until we are sure the forces of racism and evil are fully exposed in the light of Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we can shake awake the church, and steer her towards the loudest microphone to proclaim to the world that we will not listen to the voices of hatred and we will not be silent until the storms cease. You and I can proclaim the love of Christ so loudly that all will hear. You and I can shine the light of Christ so brightly that darkness will have nowhere to fester and multiply. You and I can teach and model for the children in our communities that hatred and racism is wrong. This is the power of Christ in us. May it guide us in all the storms we face.