

“Boat People”

Salado UMC—24 June 2018: Fifth after Pentecost

Preaching Text: Mark 4:35-41—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“Fear not those who argue but those who dodge”

—(Marie Ebner von Eschenbach, *Aphorisms*, 1905).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him” (Mark 4:35-41 NRSV)?

This text, *Jesus Stills a Storm*, represents a shift in the action of Mark’s Gospel. In previous verses, Mark emphasizes Jesus’ parables. Mark’s text takes a decided turn at 4:35 and continues through Mark 5:43. Here Jesus demonstrates divine power in four successive authoritative deeds. These deeds are: the stilling of a storm, healing the Gerasene Demoniac, and healing of both Jairus’ daughter and a woman suffering with hemorrhages. This eventful series of Jesus’ four dynamic acts reveal Jesus’ power over nature, the spirit world, apparent death, and disease. Together, they support Mark’s introductory gospel claim: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

We can see how Mark shapes this story, the stilling of the storm, by exploring three controlling metaphors. The first metaphor is Jesus as teacher. The phrase “just as he was” indicates that Jesus remains unchanged as he got into the boat. That is, he was identical to the Jesus who had previously been teaching. This makes sense from the context. Jesus has just taught in parables. These teaching parables include the sower, the lamp, the growing seed, and the mustard seed. Perhaps, Mark’s point is to introduce the mighty acts as demonstrations of what Jesus has earlier been teaching. Also, the disciples, as they woke Jesus up from his sleep, say, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” This, too, indicates Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ teaching.

A second functioning metaphor in this text is the sea. From Genesis’ beginning, the sea symbolized danger. The sea created an overwhelming fear in human beings who contemplate its vastness. In Job we read: “Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb . . . and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your

proud waves be stopped' " (Job 38:8-11)? Sea citations are strewn throughout scripture. Finally, in Revelation, there is a sign that humans need no longer fear sea metaphors: "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Revelation 21:1). Mark suggests by Jesus stilling the storm that Jesus controls even natural phenomena—those insurance companies politely call "Acts of God." Thus, in Mark's section of the four mighty acts, Jesus rules over even circumstances that make people fearful: untamed nature, the spirit world, death, and disease.

The third metaphor prominently appearing in this text concerns the boat. In the Christian tradition, a boat is often used as a symbol of the church. It certainly may be taken in this text as a symbol of the church. The church is often depicted in art and literature as the gathered people of God or disciples—in a boat. Jesus is at the helm, and the boat is buffeted about by the great sea storms of chaos and life. Like Jesus' teaching in the synagogue, Jesus also teaches the disciples in the boat. He also models what he teaches by remaining calm in the midst of the storm. Mark reinforces our reading of both Jesus' teaching and the boat as a platform from which Jesus teaches. We recall that Jesus often teaches from a boat (Matthew 13:2; Mark 4:1; Luke 5:3).

Mark's story indicates life's storms battering all human beings eventually occur metaphorically/symbolically on our human journeys. The disciples also ask natural questions. Experiences as of a chaotic sea or watching Jesus' control over the raging elements tends to raise questions: What manner of human being is Jesus? This question controls our grasp of the text. We could ask: Who is Jesus and why has he come? Mark suggests that Jesus comes to teach/model faith and guide the boat (church) amidst life's stormy seas. Perhaps, in a profound theological sense, Jesus reorders creation, just as at creation, God orders it. All this is accomplished by God in Jesus through the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as the Christ.

In Boston's Gardiner Museum hangs a painting by Rembrandt entitled "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." It is Rembrandt's interpretation of this Marcan story. It shows panic etched on the disciples' faces as their small vessel is being lifted on a high wave, about to be crushed. Two disciples attempt to rouse Jesus, asleep in the boat's stern. If we look closely, we discover that there is something not quite right. There are too many people in the painting. So, we count them—fourteen. There should only be thirteen (twelve disciples and Jesus). But instead there are fourteen. Then we notice that one of the boat's individuals is Rembrandt. As he sometimes did, Rembrandt painted himself into the picture. He has put himself in the same boat.

I'm going out on a limb and suggesting that the entire purpose of this Marcan story is not to show Jesus as some heroic figure who gives us an example of how to be courageous when waves start to swamp out boats. For example, I cannot imagine anyone saying, "Now remember children, if you are ever caught in a storm, try to be a little more like Jesus." Rather, the purpose of this story is altogether different. The purpose is to identify Jesus as the one who can master the demonic and unruly forces of life and hold them at bay. Mark writes that Jesus will be there for us. Jesus will be right in the boat with us. But . . . we may not know it until the storm comes. We may not know it until it looks, for all the

world, as if our boat is going under. And if we don't know Jesus . . . I mean if we really don't know Jesus . . . maybe it is because we have never really been caught in a storm.

Ultimately, this is a story that tells us at least three things:

Who Jesus is . . . the one who even the wind and sea obey.

Where we meet Jesus . . . when the storms of life are raging.

How much ought we trust him . . . probably a whole lot more than we do.

The Desperate Hours is a 1955 play by Joseph Hayes, based on his 1954 thriller novel of the same title. It concerns two escaped convicts who take over a middle-class home in Columbus, Ohio.

There, a mother, father, and two children are held hostage for several hours. In the final scene, a 12-year-old boy is being used as a body shield by one of the convicts what has stuck a gun in the little boy's back.

But there is a vital truth about his situation that the boy does not know. At some time earlier in this ordeal, the father has managed to gain temporary possession of the two guns of the convicts. He has unloaded one and kept the other. Now, in the final scene, the father is on one side of the room in secret possession of the loaded gun. But neither the convict nor the boy has any knowledge of that.

"Ralph," cries the father to his son. "Ralph, listen to me. Come over to me. The man is not going to hurt you." To which the convict says, "You try it kid, and you'll find out."

"Ralph," the father says, "Have I ever lied to you? I tell you, do exactly as I say, because his gun is not loaded." In response, the convict simply sticks the gun more forcefully into the boy's back.

"It has no bullets, Ralph. You understand? Now do as I say." Then, after a long pause, the father shouts, "Run." And in a rush of faith, the boy tears across the room in the direction of his father, as the convict's gun clicks repeatedly and uselessly.

Sooner or later, everyone has to trust somebody!

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