

SLD02.20.05 2nd Lent
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 8:18, 23-27
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Why Are You Afraid?”

It's been a long day for Jesus. Since dawn he's been preaching to the crowds by the sea of Galilee - none of this '15 minute sermon' routine. Now the sun is setting, the crowd and his voice are thinning, and he's ready to call it a day. "Let's go across to the other side," he suggests to his disciples. So they climb into the boat, the one Jesus has been preaching from, and head on over to the far side of the sea.

Why Jesus would suggest such a journey at this late hour, we are not told. It's no quick trip across the sea of Galilee, especially in the dark and in uncertain weather. Maybe Jesus has an idea about where he wants to stay the night, that inn over in Hippos where they serve the great tabouli. Or maybe, he just wants some peace and quiet out there on the water with nobody making demands on him. Every preacher needs a break.

Anyway, whatever his reasoning, Jesus' disciples cooperate with his plan without complaint. Maybe they're accustomed by now to following Jesus even without necessarily understanding the whole plan. So off they sail.

Suddenly a great storm arises and the glassy surface of the sea begins to froth and roil. Unfriendly swells lift the tiny boat, and drop it with a smack, as the waves lose their rhythmic rise, and slap the vessel to and fro. The wind shifts, the boom swings, and over-stressed sails begin to tear. Lines rip from the sailors' hands, and even the experienced fishermen aboard begin to panic. They're doing what they can but the boat is filling with water and threatening to capsize.

Now, I have to tell a joke here. I never tell jokes in my sermons 'cause I'm so bad at 'em. But this one came to me from the PNC of another church and tickled me so I want to share it. And who knows, maybe it'll have something to say to our own PNC.

So, here goes:

It was 1955 and an all male Pastor Nominating Committee had been elected to find a new minister. But they were faced with a singular problem: their candidate was a woman! What to do? None of the five was prepared for this dilemma. Finally one had a suggestion: "I know, let's take her fishing. Obviously, if you can't fish, you can't be a fisher of men."

So the whole committee and the candidate go out together in a boat but after short time, the line of one of the committee members gets tangled up with a log. Whereupon the candidate calmly rises, steps out of the boat, and walks across the surface of the water to disentangle the line.

At the time, none of the men say anything. But later, when they're unpacking their experience with one another, one of them remarks, "Well, it's obvious she can't swim."

Well, it's obvious from today's text that the disciples can't swim, either.

When the storm threatens to capsize their little boat, they never think to jump in the water and swim to shore. Instead they panic, and, looking wildly about for help, are astonished to see their savior, curled up cozy on a cushion back in the stern, cuttin' the zzz's.

"What is Jesus doing? Is he asleep? No way. Are you kidding me?! Well, wake him up!!

"Yo, Jesus! Wake up! We're dying here! Don't you even care if we perish? Wake up and save us!!

And, according to Matthew, Jesus does wake up and rebukes, or fusses at, the wind and sea for making such a commotion. "Peace! Be still!" he cries, and the elements calm themselves.

Though I can't help but wonder if it's really the wind and the sea Jesus is rebuking or if maybe some of his grumpy hollering maybe aimed at his disciples, and the elements just overhear. Or maybe a weary and rudely awakened Jesus shouts "Peace! Be still!" (better translated - "muzzle it!") to who- or what-ever has ears to hear?

And the wind and the sea certainly have ears to hear, no question about that. The elements of nature have a long history of conversation, and competition, with the divine. In Hebrew Scriptures, raging waters are a symbol of the chaos and ominous power that challenge God at the very beginning of creation. God has to tell those raging waters to 'muzzle it,' too, not to destroy or eliminate them, mind you, but to redirect their power and life force toward God's purposes. In fact, God is forever working with raging waters and raging spirits and raging nations and raging consciences to contain and limit and redirect their power and energy. Interesting that an omnipotent God doesn't just get rid of challenging, chaotic forces within and around creation, just sort of reworks them. Perhaps it's because, since the very beginning of time, chaos has been the raw material of new life, the very source of God's new creation.

Listen how God describes this mystery to Job (38:8). God says (about the raging waters) "(I) shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb...I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, 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.'" Not eliminated or destroyed, mind you, just contained, boundaried, reshaped and redirected to God's purposes.

In any case, just be aware that, having been duly introduced at the beginning of time, the wind and sea that night in Galilee are well aware of who Jesus is. So when they hear, or *overhear*, as the case may be, Jesus say “muzzle it!,” they muzzle it. And when he says “back off!,” they right readily contain themselves. Oh yes, the forces of chaos know all about the power of the Word of God.

But the disciples, now, that’s another story. The disciples, even when Jesus gives them what they want, even when Jesus does what they ask, even when they get “saved” by Jesus’ intervention, they remain confused and frightened by who he is. Awed but unenlightened. “Who **is** this guy,” they ask one another, “that even the wind and sea obey him?”

So I ask you, whom do you think Jesus is really rebuking in this story?

“Why are you afraid?” he asks his disciples. “Have you no faith?”

Exhausted, weak, almost too worn out to care, the disciples can hardly believe their ears. “No faith.” “Did he say ‘no faith?’ You gotta be kidding, Jesus! Who you talking to? Us? Uh uh. No way. Aren’t we the ones who left everything to follow you? No faith. Didn’t we stick with you even when we have no idea what you’re up to? Hey, didn’t we just launch out in the middle of this very bleedin’ night, and against our better judgment, we might add, just because you said to? No faith! Brother.

And anyway, didn’t we just wake you up so you could save us? I mean, at least we believed you *could*, once you got with our program.

James and John, sons of thunder, interrupt: “and what you talkin’ about, ‘why were we afraid’? Because we were about to die, Jesus, **that’s** why! Hellooo. And you not even awake. Anybody but you, Jesus, and we’d deck you.”

Learned Luke tries a more reasoned approach: “After all, Jesus, you’re human, aren’t you, and familiar with the concept of fear? You know, ‘that unpleasant emotional state characterized by the anticipation of pain or great distress? Like when you’re about to feel discomfort, or pain, or lose something, like, say, your *life*? Now we humans find fear to be an appropriate, even a helpful response to danger, Jesus, because it prompts our autonomic nervous system to a heightened state that helps us run away or scream loudly or fight for our lives, which is what we were doing just a minute ago, don’t you see. I’m sure you understand that fear is an legitimate and helpful human impulse, Jesus, and certainly no reflection on our faith.”

The sons of thunder roll their eyes. Maybe Jesus does, too, if for different reasons. For it’s clear that despite all Jesus’ efforts, his disciples *still* do not get it. However responsive the forces of nature may be to Jesus’ commands, obviously he *still* hasn’t managed to have any impact on the forces of fear in his own disciples.

“Has nothing I’ve told you, taught you, shown you made any impression whatsoever? Are you still afraid for your safety? Your comfort? Your future? Do you still imagine your life is yours? That suffering will kill you? That death is the end? What I want to know,” asks Jesus impatiently, “is when your faith in an all-powerful God will become stronger than your faith in an all-destroying death?! “

Jesus’ impatience is understandable; it’s not as though he and his disciples have only just met. They’ve been hanging out for a while now, had front row seats to Jesus’ teachings, debates, and miracles, not to mention all the endless private tutoring on the deeper meaning of his parables. But still the disciples stare at Jesus non-plussed. Still

Jesus' closest friends, his private pals, his inner circle, can't quite figure out who he is and what he wants from them.

But, of course, we in the post-resurrection church know better who Jesus is and what he wants from us. Having had the advantage of 2000 more years to interpret Jesus' words and actions and the meaning of his death and resurrection, we're far more clear about Jesus' identity and our relationship with him, and structure our lives accordingly, right? Not.

But that's probably because...in a world in which safety is measured by the number of nuclear arms per nation, and hand guns per home..., a nation in which neither streets nor offices nor schools nor churches are free of violence and sexual misconduct..., a country in which drug abuse, child abuse, spousal abuse and earth abuse have become so commonplace as to not make the newspapers anymore..., a metropolitan area ranked among the top in the nation for violent crime..., a church that's had a difficult parting with a pastor and isn't clear about its future.... no way Jesus would ask us in this day and age why *we* are afraid. Or would he?

In Matthew's story, Jesus seems fully aware of his disciples' life-threatening situation. He can see the storm as well as they can, and more than that, read the terror in their eyes, and hear it in their panicked voices. Yet *still* he questions their fear. Still wonders why they are afraid. As though chaos and destruction shouldn't be all that frightening. As though death weren't all that final. As though there were no circumstances, not even the ones most feared by his disciples, that should cause them to lose their trust in God's presence and purpose in their lives.

Anxiety drives so much of what we do, how we think, the kinds of choices we make. And since a community of faith is just a collection of human seekers, anxiety drives a lot of what goes on in a church, as well. In the case of EPC, some our anxiety is rooted in our history, some in recent events, some in sadness or disappointment or weariness, some in fear of the future. We're all doing the best we can, but basically, when you and I are confronted with difficult times, never mind with death itself, anxiety rules and pain-avoidance becomes a high priority.

I mean, what if the church is dying?!! After all, we've lost a lot of members, and N. Decatur's just up the road, and we may have this rep at Presbytery, and our budget is in deficit, and we're short-staffed, and members are struggling with burnout and...

“Jesus, Wake Up! Do you not care if we perish?!!”

And there's ole Jesus, curled up in the back of the boat, sleeping the sleep of the saved. And once again, upon hearing his disciples hollering, he gets up blearily, rubs the sleep out of his eyes, and, to the ever-reaching destruction of the raging sea in all the forms it takes in our lives, commands, 'Muzzle it! Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped!'"

And then, turning to his puzzled disciples, Jesus asks the same questions he's been posing since he got baptized by the Spirit: "Friends, why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

You know, in Matthew's story, the disciples never answer Jesus. They're difficult questions to answer, especially in the aftermath of a storm. Maybe it's only later, when the disciples witness for themselves the power of God's redemptive love, that they're able to understand things differently. Maybe it's only after they've had a chance to

experience the resurrected Jesus for themselves that they're able fully to understand God's sovereignty over not just order, but also chaos, not just good but also evil, not just life but also death. Maybe it's only through communion with the risen Christ that the disciples are finally able to glimpse what Jesus has been trying to show them all along - the sovereignty of God over everything that frightens them.

Perhaps that's what it took. Perhaps that's what it takes.

To the glory of God. Amen.