

KGL+
Sermon
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Is there anything more disquieting than the image we have in scripture today?

Not the storm.

Not the disciples' panic.

Not David facing the impossibly huge and deadly Goliath.

For me, there is almost nothing more psychologically undoing than the image of Jesus asleep in a boat in the middle of a storm.

I am particularly incensed at the detail that we find Jesus asleep on a cushion—I mean, if the Son of God is going to be napping on the job, then at least have the courtesy to humankind to have him be somewhat uncomfortable instead of curled up on a what I imagine is a waterproof duvet, enjoying the soporific, yet healthful, effects of sea air.

Up to this moment, Jesus has been in Galilee with a successful ministry—at least as we know it from the Gospel of Mark, he had had to get into a boat several times to not be crushed by the crowds listening to and following him. His teachings during that time were largely through parables, as Brandon spoke about last week—those teaching stories of Jesus which aren't meant to be metaphor or simile, but rather a breaking open of the ways we understand God through commonly held experiences, just seen through a different, and often surprising or unsettling, lens.

And yet, even though it's going well for him in Galilee, Jesus decides to move on.

Possibly still in the boat from which he was teaching, that evening he tells the disciples that it is time to go across 'to the other side' of presumably the Sea of Galilee. The disciples prepare the boat (being fulltime fishermen, at least some of them, in their recent past), and set off in the night, taking Jesus, 'just as he was', as scripture is clear to specify.

In what can only be a profound incarnation of Murphy's Law: everything that can go wrong will go wrong.

They lose the other boats which had set off with them, leaving them alone. It was night, a dangerous time to be on the water. They encounter a storm strong enough to scare even the seasoned fishermen who are contemplating their own demise then and there. And Jesus napped.

One cannot help but sympathize with the disciples—who in a stunning moment of fear address Jesus simply as ‘Teacher’, rather than any honorific reflecting their understanding of Jesus’ divine personhood. “Teacher”, they say—“do you not care that we are perishing”? Jesus wakes in that moment and doesn’t address his friends first, but rather the wind and sea, in a curious approach—Peace, he says to the wind. Be still. To the disciples, he chides them for their apparent lack of faith, and for their fear in calling out to him. For waking him up.

Which isn’t quite our image of how God works, right?

God should be acting, we think. God should be saving. God should be working overtime, feeling our fears, salving our hurts, there-there-ing our dejections and bucking us up. God should be asking us if we want advice, or just be a place to vent our feelings, offering us curated self-help options, as a good therapist might. God should be sending us funny memes, or stopping the pain, or magically ensuring that others know of our distress even when we ourselves don’t actually share it with them.

The Holy One asleep in the boat is not a top-ten comforting image for those who sense that they are drowning.

One might also want the satisfying conclusion that the challenge of the crossing and storm made it all worth it once they got to the other side—it’s a plot genre we Americans adore, that somehow, “it was all worth it in the end”. But fast forward with me to Jesus’ landing the boat in the region of the Gerasenes, in the scripture following today’s gospel. Just off the waterlogged boat, Jesus and the disciples are immediately greeted by a man plagued with a demon, and end up healing him by casting the demons into a herd of pigs, which then are sent into that same sea the disciples just arrived on and drown—all of which earns them nothing but ire and distrust from the community, and a not-so-polite invitation for all of them to leave, preferably immediately.

So, less successful than Jesus’ previous ministries on the other side of the sea.

But let’s remember: our God is the god of the parable.

The parables Jesus tells, and which confound his followers and disciples, are not stories alone—they upend our comfortable frameworks, even while they use imagery which is familiar. Consider this one: the kingdom of God is like a man who left guaranteed success and traveled through a storm at his and his friends’ peril to heal only one man, and to be evicted from that region without recognition.

Parables are meant to open wide our sense of God’s breadth and depth and scope, all of which, by its very intrinsic nature is far beyond our human sensibilities. God works in ways which confound and astound us, because our own horizons are regularly too narrow, too limited, to see beyond the storm, or beyond how we imagine a God *should* behave. Faith grounded in parables doesn’t provide the ease of a morality vignette or bumper sticker theology which posits that faith itself is easily come by, and full of shame when foiled.

Jesus napping in the boat is unnerving because we tend to associate grand and concrete action with God's involvement. If Jesus is not in the fixing business, or in the averting crisis business, what does that tell us about our God?

It tells us, as disciples, to widen our scope.

The God who can control the wind and sea with three words also loves the demoniac isolated from his community for being too unruly, unwieldy and uncomfortable to be around. The God whose teaching attracted interested multitudes is also a God who chooses to seek out those who will be threatened by it. The God who sleeps through his disciples' terror will also be the God who recognizes the humanity in a stranger on a far-off shore.

Consider our first lesson of David and Goliath—Saul, the inaugural King, allows David to fight Goliath, on his behalf. In readying David, whose only professional experience was in protecting a herd of sheep, Saul puts his royal armor on him, as is natural for battle. But that armor doesn't fit, or work for David and in fact strangles him with its weight. So David uses what he knows even if it appears unassuming and foolish. He chooses five flat stones to put in his pocket instead of wearing the trappings—literally—of a king. Goliath mocks him, Saul doubts him, and yet we know the end of the story. By eschewing the traditional image of kingship, by his surprising demeanor, David is victorious.

We will always be confused by a God we expect too little of; a God who fits into a mold; a God who behaves how we imagine God should behave. That kind of faith is one which limits the power of God to that which we can understand and appreciate, one conforming to human standards and not that of a Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer, who defied death and rose and lives now in and through us.

The one we call out to when we feel that we are drowning, when we are perishing, when the once well-known waterways are changed, is the one who breaks down neat and tidy savior motifs, and predictable endings. The power of God's presence is found in us not always knowing the end of the story, but in knowing that God's participation in it will be so much more than we can ask or imagine, and will surprise us, parable-laden people of a parable-giving God, again and again.

May we look for more.

Amen.