

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

*Arise*

As many of you know, this past May I attended a Festival of Preaching held in Washington DC, intrigued by the theme, so relevant today, of Preaching and Politics. Apparently, others felt the same, because the conference was attended by some 1700 people from all over the country, and Canada. Creative worship, inspiring preachers, it was for me a feast of great proportions. But while I had expected the conference to be thought provoking, I had not expected it to take us to the streets.

On the final night of the conference, there was a worship service followed by a candlelight vigil, a walk in city streets to the White House. It was an event organized by the group that produced the *Reclaiming Jesus* document I referred to earlier, the one I hope we'll read and find time to discuss together. We gathered in two churches, one the originally planned venue, and the other for the spillover crowd, well equipped with a big screen TV to listen to a wide variety of speakers, leaders in churches and in social justice work, among them Bishop Stephen Curry, best known as the preacher for the recent royal wedding.

After the worship we made our way outside for the candlelight walk to the White House. The walk was about a mile to Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House, and we were encouraged to walk in silent prayer. We were bringing religion to government, the speakers had said. We were bringing the values and politics of Jesus to a place of power.

Once there, we gathered while some of the original speakers read the document *Reclaiming Jesus* out loud. I looked over the group, and you know those little battery operated votive candles we have in our window sills at Christmas time? Much of the crowd had those, and much of the crowd had the whimsy to place those candles on their heads.

It was just a week after Pentecost, you know, when the flames of the Spirit appearing to those who gathered, right above their heads. First, we sang “This Little Light of Mine.” Then, after the document had been read, we sang the Lord’s Prayer... with its wonderful build-up and that many voices singing together it was quite a moment. And that was it. The vigil accomplished, we all went home.

Later, when I got home, I was telling someone in this church about the experience. “Too bad,” she said, “that no one in the White House is listening.” But that wasn’t the way I felt. What I felt was *energized*. This had been the gospel going public – getting out of the sanctuary and into the streets, and if it was just a start, it felt like an important start to me. I left that vigil with a sense of peace, the peace of knowing that however confusing and daunting I found the times, there is a good word for these times, and there are people who very much care.

So today with the gospel of Mark’s great story of Jesus in the boat with the disciples before us I want for us to think together about our times, about fear, and faith, and moving forward in faith. I want us to think together about what we do about the matters that concern us.

A visual person, I always enjoy hunting for the image we will put on the cover of the Sunday bulletin. I thought this week’s was a gem. Jesus and the disciples are surrounded by all this swirling water. Water in biblical times, certainly in Jesus time, was understood to be dangerous stuff. People didn’t have local YMCA’s for swimming lessons and often, in the psalms in particular, water – particularly the seas are lifted up as a symbol of all that is chaotic, seemingly out of control.

So here is Jesus, standing up in the midst of all this chaos. Just moments earlier he had been sleeping, but now this terrible storm comes up...and look at the disciples, they are leaning out of the boat, one is rowing like mad, another has hands up in the air, looking desperate in a desperate situation...and what does Jesus do? He certainly doesn’t stay asleep, curled up at the bow of the boat. He stands up, commands the wind and the waves to stop “And the winds ceased, and there was a dead calm”.

And then he turns to the disciples and asks *Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*

Mark is the question raising gospel, and the question is: Will God’s people have faith? It’s a gospel that ends not with numerous resurrection appearances but with women at the empty tomb, afraid *and deciding to tell no one what they’ve found precisely because they are afraid*. Mark understands fear and how it can have a grip on us. How it can paralyze and isolate us.

In every situation we face, we have a choice. We can choose to live in fear, or we can choose to live in faith. Now I want to name it: ever since the election, we have felt fear in the church. Fear that if we talk about anything going on in our nation we may not agree, and we might as a faith community break apart. There’s fear that our preacher will preach politics and not the gospel.

Among many, there's fear that our country is going in directions that harm people and the environment, and our very democracy. And of course, since long before the election the church has held fear about its own future. Why don't more people of a certain generation seek a faith community? What does our future hold if that continues to be the case?

This past week, yesterday in fact, I took part in rally for immigrant families and children. The idea for the rally was to have community action folks, clergy, and child advocacy people speak to the separation of families and children., that we might find ways to do more than wring our hands. Simple enough, but as I thought about what I might say it all seemed so daunting, and the topic so very distressing. Where to begin?

My eye fell upon my bible, sitting on my desk. I thought about how that bible, the good book, is being used and misused. I thought about how Christianity has become almost unrecognizable so that these days claiming to be a person of faith can make you feel like you have a lot of explaining to do.

So I focused my remarks on scripture – on how the bible I know and love has a central story in the Exodus, the story of the people being liberated from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Our Jewish and Christian traditions, you see, honor the text from Leviticus: “When an immigrant resides with you in your land, You shall not oppress the immigrant. The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you As the citizen among you, You shall love the immigrant as yourself, For you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.” (Lev 19:33-34)

It seemed important also to lift-up Matthew 25, where Jesus speaks of those who will receive the kingdom: When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink, When I was a stranger you welcomed me....

And I shared with the people yesterday, as I am sharing with you today, my belief that Jesus very much included the most vulnerable of people when he said (Mark 12:31) “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Meanwhile, a government leader lifts up one line in Romans that says people should obey their governments, though Jesus regularly taught that there were higher allegiances than Caesar. And when the early Christians went about making their claim that “Jesus is Lord” they meant Caesar could not be Lord, just as in the Exodus Pharaoh wasn't Lord.

Truly, our biblical history is full of border crossing people. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph Moses, Hagar, Esther. Joseph, Mary and Jesus were border crossers in the midst of a genocide the Holy Spirit crossed borders to start the church and is still crossing borders today. Churches are called to be border crossing places

because we are heirs of border crossing people. (*adapted from a prayer on Re: Worship website*) Hospitality and welcome of the stranger is a central biblical ethic.

I am struck by how we have in scripture a powerful tool for action. For the lifting up of true Christian values. Yet currently in this country we are letting others define these values in ways that dishonor Jesus. When we do that, we are in danger of becoming people who have abdicated their power and lost our way.

This scripture today reassures us we are not alone. Jesus is in the boat with us, yes, that is true. And he stills the storm. Can we also see the church in that boat, we who are also anxious and afraid and Jesus there asking us to stand up too – to arise and claim the power we do have for him and for all the many vulnerable ones?

Remember Mark's question: will God's people have faith? Faith is trust ...but it is also seeking to further God's purposes of justice and peace.

And what as a church might we *do*? We could invite a speaker to come speak to us about immigration and invite members of the wider community to attend. We could financially support an organization that is working on behalf of detained families, or for the wellbeing of these separated children. As people of faith, we could also meet amongst ourselves to discuss the document "Reclaiming Jesus." Like the gospel of Mark, it asks some pretty good questions. Who is this Jesus we seek to follow? What does he ask of us in times like these? And right here in Plymouth, we can go out of our way to welcome the stranger among us, whoever he or she might be.

May God bless our church with courage as we wrestle the stormy seas of our times. May we know Jesus to be with us in the boat. And may we find ways to stand up, to arise so as to honor him.

Amen.