

SERMON: Sleeping Through the Storm  
TEXT: Mark 4:35-41

6-20-21

Way back before I went to seminary or got married, I shared a home with my sister, her husband, and their young son. We all got along pretty well. For a while, my sister and I would do a power walk together, early in the morning, even during the winter when it was still dark outside and the temperature was below zero. Well, one morning - I think it must have been the weekend - I awoke naturally, came upstairs, and was immediately confronted by my sister. "You didn't hear it either, did you?" she questioned. "Hear what?" I asked, still not fully awake. "The smoke detector went off in the middle of the night, and I was the only one to survive because the rest of you slept right through it!"

She was a little bit melodramatic and uppity as she proclaimed her great success, lording it over the rest of us, who had failed miserably. But, what could I say? Looking around the room, I noticed nothing amiss or out of place. No charred cabinets or streaks of black on the walls. Not even a hint of smoke in the air. I just shrugged my shoulders. "Good thing it wasn't a real fire," I said. I'm sure I wasn't nearly as distressed about this as she expected me to be.

Now that I think about it, maybe she was jealous. I have always been a good sleeper. Once when I was in high school, my mom woke me up to ask me why I was washing my hair in the middle of the night! Yes, I was sleep-washing! But beyond that, no matter what was happening in my life, worry or anxiety has rarely kept me awake. In fact, I think sleeping might be a coping mechanism for me. Maybe if I go to sleep, it will all be over when I wake up.

That being said, I don't think I can claim a stronger faith or a closer kinship with Jesus because of my proclivity for sleep.

I'm referring, of course, to today's scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus sleeps through a terrible storm while sailing across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples.

It must have been an incredible storm to upset the four experienced, professional fishermen that were among the disciples. The waves were beating into the boat, so that the boat was being swamped. So the disciples woke up Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" So Jesus "rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, *Peace! Be still!*" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm."

I'm a little embarrassed to admit that this scene where Jesus demonstrates his power over nature, always reminds me of Fonzie from Happy Days. I'm sure you remember that Fonzie was the coolest of the cool. All the girls loved him, all the guys wanted to be him. And he could hit the jukebox in just the right way to play any song he wanted. The episode I'm thinking of has a scene where Fonzie is trying to go to sleep in the forest under the stars. But the sounds of nature - owls hooting, crickets chirping, frogs croaking, raccoons rummaging for food - are just too much noise for Fonzie. Slowly he opens his eyes, sits up, and calmly but firmly says, "Cool it!" And just like that all of nature is silenced. "Aaaayyyy."

Anyway, after calming the sea, Jesus confronted his disciples. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

I think many of us would agree that having a strong faith does calm our fears to some degree. But for me, it certainly doesn't mean that I never feel afraid. Are faith and fear really this mutually exclusive? Instead, I would say that fear sometimes leads us or drives us to find faith. As the saying goes, "there are no atheists in a foxhole."

One Bible scholar commented about this passage and fear versus faith.

“Although we often confuse them, saying, *‘There’s nothing to be afraid of’* is a very different thing from saying, *‘Do not be afraid.’* The hard truth is that fearsome things are very real: isolation, pain, meaninglessness, rejection, losing one’s job, money problems, failure, illness and death. As we grow in faith, we come to understand that even though such fearsome things are very real, they do not have the last word. They do not have ultimate power over us, because reigning over this world of fearsome things is a God who is mightier than they. Time and again in Scripture the word is, *‘Do not be afraid.’* It is, you might say, the first and the last word of the gospel. It is the word the angels speak to the terrified shepherds and the word spoken at the tomb when the women discover it empty: *‘Do not be afraid.’* Not because there are no fearsome things on the sea of our days, not because there are no storms, fierce winds, or waves, but rather, because God is with us.” (Michael L. Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, p. 166*)

And yet, with Jesus SLEEPING THROUGH THE STORM, even though he’s there with them in the boat, it feels like he’s not fully with them.

Look at what the disciples said to Jesus after they woke him. Notice, they didn’t say, “Jesus, help us!” Or, “we’re sinking!” Or “we’re going to drown!” Or

“what should we do?” They are professional fishermen, after all. They’re not seeking expert advice. They’re not really asking Jesus for anything at all. They just want to know that he cares enough to wake up.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Hmm. Maybe my sister just wanted to know that someone else cared enough to wake up at the sound of the smoke detector, even though it was a false alarm. Maybe she needed to know that she wasn’t alone.

While the disciples certainly have their moments of *little faith*, they showed their faith by turning to Jesus and waking him from his slumber. They showed their faith by looking to Jesus when all else failed. Their faith didn’t take away their fear; instead, their faith is what made them turn to Jesus in their time of fear.

In our culture, many of us were raised to be strong and independent. We take care of our problems ourselves, and we never ask for help. Too often, we put a little too much faith in ourselves.

Another commentary I read suggested that the important thing was not the amount of faith the disciples had, but that the object of their faith was Jesus, as it should be. Experienced as they were in dealing with storms on the sea, there came a time when these fishermen knew this storm was beyond what they could handle. There came a time when they knew that Jesus was their only hope.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we read time after time where Jesus reveals his identity and the disciples fail to understand. Even in this story, though they turn to Jesus for help, they still do not fully grasp who he is and the power he has. Note that “they were filled with great awe” as they witnessed the stilling of the storm, and they said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

These fishermen still had some growing and learning to do. While they awoke Jesus looking for help, they still didn’t really know the great power he had to calm the storm and to bring them peace.

I think sometimes we have the same problem – especially in the Presbyterian Church. We understand that simply the presence of Jesus can bring us great comfort and strength, but we often stop short of believing he can solve our problems. We are so logical and sensitive to the idea that God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we want, that we fail to ask for what we really want. We believe in his presence, but we fail to believe in his power. Perhaps we are the ones who are sleeping through all that Jesus can do.

Whether we are in a time of smooth sailing or stormy seas, may we awaken to the presence and power of Jesus.

May we all continue to grow in faith, to the glory of God.

AMEN.