

“Grounding Hope”

Psalm 107 v. 1–3 and 23–32 and Mark 4.35–41

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Don't you love this particular portrait of Jesus the storm-stiller, who is kind of an unflappable tough guy? But he's also like a Zen master, and the disciples are a bunch of undisciplined students who don't quite understand the teachings he's been giving them. I guess he's kind of like Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*: he has no fear about anything, even facing death. (Well, actually, Obi Wan is more like Jesus than vice versa.) The author of Mark's gospel often paints a picture of Jesus as a somewhat enigmatic figure; he's the purveyor of an alternative wisdom that often flies in the face of the conventional wisdom of his day, whether it's stilling a storm or healing an untouchable person.

This story, which relates back to Psalm 107 and it's nautical theme of being saved, shows us the mighty works of Jesus, which is meant to inspire **confidence** in us. Pay attention to that word, confidence. It is rooted in two Latin words, “cum” and “fides,” meaning “with faith.” Just keep that in mind.

If you were to read ahead in Mark's gospel, you'd encounter Jesus healing a man possessed by an unclean spirit, a woman who touches Jesus' robe and is cured of hemorrhaging, and Jesus restoring the life of Jairus' daughter. So, this section of the gospel is in some ways a testimony to the power of Jesus, designed to make us feel a sense of confidence in Jesus.

In every case, faith enters into the picture. In the stilling of the storm, there is a lack of faith on the part of the disciples in not trusting that things would be okay, but presumably they "get it" by the end of the rough voyage, though their thick-headedness is almost laughable. When Jesus exorcizes the unclean spirit from the Gerasene man, the outcome is not only a cured, but a faithful, man. So, in each case, there is an act of great power and then resultant faith.

In the instance of the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' garment, which cures her chronic hemorrhage, Jesus says to her, "Your faith has made you well." And when he responds to the plea of Jairus to heal the man's daughter, Jesus is responding to Jairus's faith. So, in these cases, there is an act of faith that results in power.

I just wanted to clarify that there is not a cause-and-effect, chicken-and-egg scenario, in which bad things don't happen to good people who have faith. Life just isn't that simple.

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So, let's dig deeper into this story of Jesus stilling the storm. Where is faith in the story? Jesus asks the not-so-cool-headed disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Where do you see yourself in this story? Would you be one of the disciples running around shouting or one of the crew members who is using all your expertise trying to find a way out of the situation? Maybe a few of you would have been in a Zen-like state of trusting that everything would be okay, but I know that's not where I would have been, though I probably would have been offering some pretty fast and furious prayers.

There are times when we each of us is afraid or confused or even panicked: a parent dies, we go through divorce, lose a job, change careers, have children. Even when the big changes are joyful, they have stressful elements that can be tempest-like.

The key question is how we handle or approach it: do we madly jump into the roiling waters, try to fight the storm with our expertise and logic, or do we trust God's powerful presence enough not to get plunged into chaos?

We live in turbulent times. We live in a turbulent world. If you aren't willing to admit that, you're swimming in a river called "de Nile."

So, what happens when Jesus stills the storm? The King James Version of the Bible says that "there was a great calm." The presence of Christ in our lives can still the storms of life, if not into a "*dead* calm," as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, then into a *great* inner calm. How do we get that great inner calm?

When I was in my late 20s, I attended Al-Anon meetings to help make sense out of the way my mom's alcoholism was having an impact on me, and one of the things that really turned me off on Al-Anon (which really is a wonderful program, some of which bugged me when I was in my 20s) was the idea of *serenity*, which to me seemed as lifeless as **dead** calm. Most 12-step programs use a wonderful prayer by the late UCC

theologian Reinhold Niebuhr that you can actually find as number 852 in our New Century Hymnal, that they call the serenity prayer. When you say serenity to me, it feels too passive and flat, too pious, kind of like being partially anesthetized: it's **dead** calm. Who wants that? But I do like Niebuhr's idea: that we should accept the things we cannot change, have courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. There are times when we need to let God be God, and there are times when we need to get off our rear ends and act to make a difference.

Perhaps serenity is actually "great inner calm," rather than "dead calm." And as someone who is now in his early 40s, the idea of "great inner calm" sounds really kind of delicious, especially on weekday evenings at about 6:00 when my kids' blood sugar is heading south. And it sounds pretty good when I try to have hope about the plight of the poor in this nation: the people Jesus called "the least of these who are members of my family." And when I go through things like my mom's death.

For me, serenity (or a "great inner calm") is not the

aim, per se. It's one by-product of a life of faith. Another by-product of faith is hope, not a Pollyanna kind of hope, but a hope that is deeply grounded in our relationship of trust in God.

I think that for some Christians, pious, pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die serenity is the object; it's what we consumerists think we can purchase by believing certain things or saying certain things. If you ever listen to those televangelists with the Brylcreem blow-drys, you know what I mean. When I think of an engaged faith, that certainly is **not** what I mean.

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So, what do we mean by "faith?" Some fundamentalists think that faith is **believing** certain things (like that the creation stories in Genesis are an empirical account of what really happened). That's **not** faith; that's **blind belief**. God gave us gray matter not just so that we could be productive at work and at home, but also so that our intellect could help us explore the realm of faith.

So, if faith isn't **believing** certain things then what is it? Returning again to Mark's gospel, Jesus asks, Why

are you ***afraid***? Have you still no faith?” So, Jesus puts *fear* and *faith* in opposition. And if fear is the antithesis of faith, what then is analogous to it? ***Trust, confidence, and hope.***

We are not meant to have faith *in the Bible* per se or *in the doctrine of the church*; we are meant to faith in God as creator and in Jesus as messiah. Faith is a willingness to embrace God with every fiber of your being and to trust. That’s what Jesus expected of the disciples.

When we, as individuals, as a congregation, a nation, a world encounter the turbulence that is part of life, we have the tools of faith to keep us in the boat while the storm abates. We need faith to grow beyond September 11th and the tragedy of the recent war in Iraq with a sense of hope. We need faith to make it past being laid off at HP or Agilent or any other company with a sense of hope. We need faith to make it through the challenges of chemotherapy or heart surgery or knee replacement with a sense of hope. We need faith when our families change, if we are to have hope. *Where is it that you need to have hope in your own*

life? Think about that for a minute. *Where is it that you need to have hope in your own life?*

Sometimes, it isn't easy to be hopeful. And it's at such times that we need to remind ourselves and each other that our faith gives us the capacity for hope.

As I said, hope is not a Pollyanna or head-in-the-sand attitude that cuts us off from reality. It an engaged aspect of faith that lets each of us know that in the long run, we're not going to be abandoned by God and pitched out of the boat into the surf to sink or swim.

One of the readings I often use when I perform a funeral or memorial service is "A New Creed" from the United Church of Canada, which ends with these beautiful, powerful, hope-filled words: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God." Our faith and our hope lie in our connection with God and with each other in a community of faith.

Yet, there is a strange phenomenon that I notice among many people in the UCC and other progressive Protestants: when the going gets tough, our faith is

often the very last resource we attempt to use. We can be so stubbornly self-reliant that it becomes a fault. (This is sometimes true for me, too.)

The storm is raging, and we grab for the mainsheet of logic, the rudder of reason, the anchor of conventional wisdom. And we too often forget that we have the power of the risen Christ on board, which can still the storm and help us through a rough passage.

I'd like to close this morning with a prayer that, as a sea kayaker, I appreciate; it's an islander's prayer from Melanesia:

“O Jesus,
Be the canoe that holds me up in the sea of life;
Be the rudder that keeps me in the straight road;
Be the outrigger that supports me in times of
temptation.

Let your Spirit be my sail that carries me through each day.

Keep my body strong, so that I can paddle steadfastly on, in the voyage of life. Amen.”