

## **"Where Is Your Faith?"**

**Mark 4:35-41**

**May 20, 2018**

**Pentecost**

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Some of you have wondered about the poster that's been adorning the Liturgist's pulpit over there for a number of weeks now. I have had some guesses about its meaning, everything from "these are the hymns we will be singing this week" to "this is a new ministry within the UCC," to "this must be this year's Stewardship theme!" I am not surprised that Dick Sherer researched it. The very first week.

While all the guesses are good ones, Randy Mann capped off the curiosity bowl with a simple exasperated question last week when he asked, "Are you ever going to tell us what that means?" Well, Randy

and the rest of you who have wondered, today I am going to answer your question. That is, in a little while, I am going to answer your question—mostly.

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Jesus asks his terrified companions, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" If I am one of the disciples, I can easily take Jesus' questions as a snide comment on my very real human emotion, my fear. The boat is caterwauling all over the place, taking on water, barely holding together. The wind and the waves are so strong that they threaten to throw us all overboard and swallow us up beneath the angry surface of the sea.

We are powerless against the storm. We have no time to pray; all we can do is panic. The noise is fierce, the cold is penetrating. We are holding on for dear life, and our Master is sleeping away, oblivious to the danger and our growing terror.

As the story goes, Jesus is asleep up in the stern of the boat as all this is going on. There he is up there, curled up in a blanket, sleeping away on a cushion like a baby! The disciples have to wake him up, rebuking him for not caring that they are all about to drown.

I think sometimes our lives feel just like that, like we are about to perish, and that God doesn't care a wit about us. Just being truthful about it, I think we all have had times when our lives just seem to be lost at sea.

We have lost someone from our lives and we just don't see how we can go on.

We have experienced financial ruin, and we don't have a boat nor an oar with which we can navigate the stormy seas of piling up bills and no money coming into our bank account.

We have battled without divine intervention an addiction to drugs or alcohol or gaming or internet or pornography—there are so many things that can trap us and squeeze the very life out of us, aren't there?

We have battled our very own sea monsters of every kind, felt the fire of their breath scorch our souls, felt their claws dig into our flimsy cloaks, and looked around with wild eyes, hoping and praying for a deliverance from evil, for salvation.

And it often feels like God just is sleeping away up in the stern of the boat.

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We want answers when we face life's hardest questions! Jesus asks us, instead, "Have you still no faith?" We reply in exasperation, "What kind of answer is that, Lord? We're *drowning* here!"

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Jesus teaches us with questions, rarely with answers. In our Bible, Jesus is asked 307 questions. He asks 183 questions. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Jesus leads us to an experience of God with his questions. He invites us to ask the deepest questions we have of ourselves and then to sit with the questions as they work on us, bringing us closer to the Divine Oneness that is God.

I love the simple honesty of Ann Lamott. She writes in her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, this musing:

...the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.

"Where is your faith? Why are you afraid?" Jesus asks us to examine our relationship to the Holy, to question our fears, our wants, and our judgments of self and of others. Jesus invites us to sit with the questions and notice what is happening around us.

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This past week, Chris and I took two of our grandchildren to the movies. We saw the cartoon feature, "Sgt. Stubby." In this story, a homeless bull terrier adopts a private in the US Army who is about to go to basic training during WWI. The recruit, Robert Conroy, while on parade in New Haven, Connecticut, spots the hungry pooch on the

sidewalk as he passes by. Feeling compassion for the dog, Conroy throws him a cookie. The dog eats the treat hungrily, and proceeds to join the marching soldiers right into their compound. He has adopted Private Conroy. He has faith that he will at last find a home and a human to share it with.

It is against regulations, of course, for a soldier to have a dog in camp, but this little mutt burrows his way into the hearts of the many doughboys and their superiors. He is nicknamed, "Stubby," for his little legs. Conroy teaches him basic manners, including how to salute with one paw. His presence lifts the morale of everyone in the 26th Yankee Division.

When it is time for Conroy to ship out to the battlefields of France, he places Stubby with the camp cook, who promises to look after him. But Stubby has his own orders and sneaks his way on board the ship, finding a surprised private in the bunk room. He is allowed to stay. And stay he does. He stays right with Private Conroy onto the battlefields of France. He learns about mustard gas and gas masks. One of the other infantrymen makes him a little mask of his own. He learns about the enemy and how to sniff them out. He already knows how to give care and love to the wounded, but he learns how to give compassion to them while staying out of the way of the field doctors.

My grandchildren were enjoying the cartoon about the dog and his antics; Chris and I were fascinated with the story of how this dog matured into an asset of the US Army. General John Pershing met the dog in 1917 and instantly took a liking to him, stating that he was the perfect fighting man's mascot—"unpedigreed, untrained, an underdog." Col. John Henry Parker mused that Stubby was the only member of his regiment that could talk back to him and get away with it.

Stubby was a real dog, we learned at the end of the film! The cartoon was accurate to the facts of his military life. He saved the regiment and the town of Chemin des Dames from a mustard gas attack by running up and down the town's streets, into the barracks, and into the trenches barking and pulling on the gas masks of the townspeople and the allied soldiers. He captured an enemy soldier and he uncovered and stayed with many a fallen allied soldier, barking until they could be found and rescued.

He was wounded at Siecherray when he caught a German bomb fragment in his leg, but he survived. He was the only animal given an Army rank—he was promoted to Private First Class in an official ceremony on April 5, 1918, but everyone knew him as Sgt. Stubby. Later he was inducted into the Red Cross, the American Legion, and the YMCA, where it was decreed that "he would receive 3 bones a day and a place to sleep for life."

He met three Presidents—Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge, and he became the predecessor mascot for the Georgetown Hoyas when he accompanied his master, Robert Conroy, to law school there. Amazing. A faithful little guy he was.

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“Where is your faith? Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks the disciples to live and breathe outside of the self-imposed confines of their lived experience. The story of the disciples in the boat with the sleeping Jesus is not the traditional scripture utilized on Pentecost Sunday. You might have come to church today expecting to hear about how the disciples were all gathered together in one place after Jesus briefly reappeared to them after his execution. If you remember that story from Acts 2, the disciples are all sitting around together and suddenly “from heaven,” the text tells us, “there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” The wind brought tongues of fire which rested on the heads of the disciples, bringing them the ability to speak in other languages and “filling them with the Holy Spirit.”

That’s the selected lectionary passage for the day, but I chose for our consideration today this other story about the disciples in the boat with Jesus. I daresay none of us have had an experience of the Holy Spirit dancing as fire atop our heads. All of us, however, have had the

experience of the disciples in the boat, afraid, unsure, in a panic, crying out to God for help. This is every bit a Pentecost story, isn't it?

"Help me, Jesus!" we cry out in our deepest angst. "Where are you, God?" we implore when we cannot see our way through the storm. "Come, Holy Spirit!" we whisper when we are at a loss as to what to do, when we are afraid, when we feel lost, when we see and feel the storm clouds approaching. The story in Acts is the story of Pentecost for the chosen disciples of the 1st Century Christian way, to be sure; of being in a sinking boat and feeling afraid and needing God is perhaps the story of Pentecost for our time.

"Where is your faith?" The soldiers and locals in war-torn France learned to put their faith in God in the form of a scruffy short-legged hero of a dog. They saw God's perseverance in him. They saw God's compassion and caring in him. They felt brave through him; they felt connected to something they could surely experience but could not see, the will of an animal to make a difference for the humans he loved.

In her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert reminds me of the parable of Sgt. Stubby as she writes this of the discipline of faith:

To find the balance you want, this is what you must become:  
You must keep your feet grounded so firmly on the earth that it's like you have four legs instead of two. That way, you can stay in the world. But you must stop looking at the world through your head. You must look through your heart instead. That way, you'll know God.

I am not an expert on faith. That may sound strange coming from me, your pastor, but it's true. I'm a student of faith and a disciple who is afraid much of the time. When Jesus asks, "where is your faith?" the pat answer is, of course, to say, "My faith is in you! My faith is in God!"

But what does that mean in today's world? What does that mean for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church? Ok, so I say my faith is in God, but really, if I'm *really honest* with you, when I am saying my well-rehearsed answer, my eyes are wild with fear and I am trying to wake Jesus up from his sleep so that he can calm the winds swirling around in my head and my heart and get me to reclaim my faith!

If I am down-to-my-bones *authentic* this morning, I am scared of Hawaii's angry, erupting volcano and what it might be signaling to us, the greedy, careless human guests of this Planet Earth. I am sickened again this week by another school shooting and the way we are becoming desensitized to these senseless acts of violence.

If I am true to my angst, I am worried for the inclusive and loving Christian story, disheartened that it is not being taught to many of our children, that so many things seem to take precedence over worship and Bible literacy and a sense of belonging to the whole community of humankind. "Have you still no faith? Why are you afraid?"

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The morning we were to leave California to come home, my sweet little grandson Roen, age 5, wandered into the room where I was reading, and he crawled up and sprawled out onto me, just wanting his Grams to hold him and scratch his back and coo to him. I was more than happy to comply. I held him, and after a minute or two, I felt him relax into sleep. I thought about faith and I thought about the Holy Spirit, for we had had a talk the night before about the voice in his head that loves him no matter what. We had been talking about some boys wanting him to do something bad and how he heard his "head voice" tell him not to do it.

"That's God living in you," I told him. "That's your best friend. You have to have faith that God will always talk to you and tell you what you should do, the right thing to do." Roen gets this theological conversation on a level that I can only hope to. You know, "and the little child shall lead them."

I lay there listening to his breathing, and then he woke up. He thanked me for taking him to the movie the day before. I asked him what he learned from Sgt. Stubby's story. He thought a moment, for he is that way, and then he answered me, "I think God told his head voice what he should do to help those men."

Amen. Faith. He gets it. I am still learning.

*May It Be So.*