

Let's Go to the Other Side

I don't know about you, but I find it totally amazing that Mark, the first gospel written, was so short and fast paced. It can be difficult to keep up with this Jesus who is on the loose! Think about it. Chapter 1, we have about two paragraphs telling us of Jesus' birth and then fast forward, he is being baptized by John. He spends about forty seconds of his forty days in the wilderness and poof, he is already in Galilee, John has been arrested and Jesus has begun his ministry. Before we reach the end of Chapter 1, Jesus has already encouraged four fishermen, who will become his disciples, to follow him; he exorcises an evil spirit from a man in the synagogue; and he performs many healings, including the healing of a man with leprosy. Whew! I am out of breath as I try to keep up with him. I feel as though I am in a race that I am losing! Of course, we all know this isn't a race, but still. Yes, Jesus is truly on the loose! And I for one, have a lot of empathy for his disciples, who throughout the book of Mark, are continually portrayed as being too slow to catch on.

Fast forward, to today's lesson. For several days, now, Jesus has been followed by large crowds from all over Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, from east of the Jordan River and even from as far away as Tyre and Sidon. News about his healings and miracles were spreading like wildfire. From the hundreds of people following him around, Jesus chose 12, from varied backgrounds and life experiences to be his apostles. **The one characteristic they all had in common was a willingness to obey.** And, after choosing them, he took them to a private space to explain his mission, purposes, and why he taught in parables. Then, so characteristic of Mark's Jesus, he **immediately** sent them out to preach, and cast out demons. Can you even imagine being sent out to preach with such a short tutelage? It could put all the seminaries out of business! Immediately! No time for deep reflection, for research, or to wait for the writer's block to lift! **Immediately** is a word used 58 times in the New Testament, and 41 of those times it was used in Mark. No surprise here! Jesus didn't just ponder things in his mind and worship God in his thoughts. A servant would never do that. A servant needs to act, and this is what he models for his disciples.

Today, the crowd is so large that Jesus gets into a boat on the lakeshore and speaks from there, telling stories and parables. And at the end of the teaching, he said, "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand." His poor disciples, befuddled and confused by all those parables ask for extra help. Things are just not clear. Jesus, showing a great deal of compassion at this point in Mark, once again, pulls his 12 obedient disciples aside to give them an insider teaching on parables, miracles, healings, and other mysteries. But do they really comprehend the deeper message? Do they know just who this Jesus is? Which begs the question, **do we recognize who Jesus is?**

Let's cross to the other side. Yes, it is evening, we are tired, it's been a long day, but it is time to move on. What will we find on the other side? Will the people be different? Will they welcome us, or will we be met with hostility? There is no time for deliberation. Let's go immediately; we will sail through the night. The disciples, many of whom were experienced fishermen, obediently set sail for the other side of the Sea of Galilee, even when not particularly clear on their mission or purpose.

Obedience and Faith. Two key themes from today's message. Obedience: A willingness to take a step to the other side, even when we don't know what's there, trusting Jesus to guide the way. What **is** the other side for each of us? Is this a call to change our prayer life? To step out of our comfort zones and connect in meaningful ways with the homeless in our midst, to engage with our elected officials in the fight against unjust laws, to serve at our local food pantries, maybe attend a town board meeting, to vote in the primaries, or even join our Vestry! Perhaps Jesus is guiding us beyond our known, comfortable, local community into a new ministry which we have begun with St. Francis in the Valley in Arizona where together, we are exploring the humanitarian work of caring for our neighbors at our southern border. God has already nudged us at St. Johns, to step out of our boats in Brooklyn, where we have been forming relationships with a church whose culture is different than ours. In the sharing of food, music, worship styles and values, which are unique to our different cultures, we grow together. We are responding to Jesus' call to become beloved community. As in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is also on the loose at St. Johns. **Do we recognize him?** Do we obey his call?

Crossing to the other side comes with risks. While most of us know on some level, that Jesus is present, sometimes, like the disciples, we doubt. And even if we are deep believers and fervently pray, we may wonder if Jesus really cares enough when we are in the midst of our own personal storm. Do we **recognize** that he is indeed intervening for us during our times of crisis? Mark's stormy gospel forces us to reflect on our own faith.

The disciples, newly "ordained" as it were and doing the will of their master, were more than capable of navigating the Sea of Galilee, but tonight's storm was like a tsunami. Terrified, they believe they are all going to die. Why is Jesus sleeping? On the other hand, why don't they immediately wake him? Is it even in their radar that Jesus is their savior? Doesn't he care? Finally, they wake him. Out of their terror, the disciples actually accuse Jesus of being indifferent to their plight, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" **Immediately** Jesus arose and calmed the storm, a prequel to his ultimate rising that Mark is rapidly moving toward in his Gospel, and that will soon occur. The storm is now calm, yet the disciples' fear is not yet quelled. Who **is** this man that even the wind and sea obey him?

Storms sometimes roll in when we least expect them. A sudden onset of an illness or death of a loved one, which happens in a flash, blurring our vision, and overwhelming us so we, like the disciples, forget to wake up Jesus. Those may be the moments when we are most grateful for our loving faith community who, through steadfast prayer, and perhaps a warm meal, bring Jesus to us.

Sometimes the storm is slow moving, unrelenting, and stubborn, like watching all the children being literally dropped into our country on our southern border. Or learning that people are actually dying as they cross hot deserts because they yearn for a better life. God, where are you? Nobody should have **to die!**

All of us together with the rest of the world have now shared in the storm of the Covid -19 pandemic. With the painful loss of millions of lives, we wonder where Jesus is. He didn't rebuke this storm, but in fact he was and continues to be present – guiding the researchers to provide multiple vaccine options in record time, spurring us all to reach out to help our neighbors – sharing our resources so needs were being met. Jesus even guided us in doing church differently – jarring us out of our complacency. Storms happen even when we are obediently doing the will of God. Perhaps church has needed a new look for a long time, now. What **is** being church in our world today? Lots of ideas to ponder, but maybe the bigger thought to consider is that stopping the tempest is not God's biggest problem. God has been taming the waves of the sea since creation. What God yearns for is that we put our trust and faith in our risen and life giving lord, Jesus! Maybe it is only when we are in the midst of the deluge that we truly understand who Jesus is, who we are, and what faith in him can do.

Together, let's obey Jesus' call to step into the boat and go to the other side trusting that God is with us always! Amen