

“Who Then Is This?” GPPC 6-24-18
Psalm 133, Mark 4:35-41

It had been a good day. Church was so full Jesus had to get into a boat and push off from the shore to preach to the crowd listening up on the land. He'd talked about soil and seeds, some seeds that grew and some that didn't. He'd said something about lamps giving light and how all secrets would be uncovered and that truth would finally be revealed. And he spoke about God's coming kingdom being like seeds and their mysterious growth and like tiny mustard seeds growing up to become gigantic bushes providing a place of nurture and life. God's kingdom is like that, he said—mysterious, unstoppable, life-giving. And Jesus had explained everything in private to his disciples, a deeper understanding for people who were actually trying to follow him. It had been a good day.

But then it was evening. And Jesus said to his disciples, “Let's go across the lake to the other side.” So they left the crowd behind, and took Jesus in the boat. There were some other boats with them.

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And a terrible storm arose. Maybe there was thunder and lightning. We don't know. But the wind was howling and blowing. Waves sloshed over into the boat. And it was so awful that the boat was starting to fill up in danger of sinking. Can we imagine how terrifying that must have been?

It had been a good day, but the night was another story.

Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner had an Old Testament professor in seminary whose knowledge and passion about the Old Testament, embodied the Old Testament. He mesmerized his students who brought their friends, who brought their friends. And the lecture hall would be filled to overflowing when he taught. "Every morning when you wake up,' he used to say, 'before you reaffirm your faith in the majesty of a loving God, before you say *I believe* for another day, read the *Daily News* with its record of the latest crimes and tragedies of [human]kind and then see if you can honestly say it again.'" (Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*, 16.)

Here's what I saw in the online *Greensboro News & Record* on Wednesday. Three local family members killed in a head-on collision in

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Utah. One in critical condition. Three young people died in a swimming pool in Durham. Parents and fans brawl at a girls' softball tournament. A local bank is robbed at gunpoint. A local district attorney is going to prison. On *Fox News* there was video of a female reporter sexually assaulted while she was in the middle of a live broadcast about the World Cup. On *The New York Times* site was the report of a political leader mocking a child with Down syndrome who had been separated from his mother.

And we could go on with our own stories of suffering, loss, fear, couldn't we?

Every morning when you wake up, scan the news, scan your own life and the lives of the people you know and love, and those whom nobody seems to know and love, and ask yourself, "Do I still believe?" "Do I still believe?"

It had been a good day, but night was a different story.

It was dark, the wind shrieking, and the waves sloshing over the sides of the boat, threatening to sink. And where was Jesus? Asleep on a cushion in the back.

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The disciples' entire existence had become swirling wind, sloshing water, and impending death. And where was Jesus? Asleep in the back of the boat.

Have you ever felt that way? You were being swallowed by your troubles, by a future as dark and chaotic as a boat in an evening storm, yet Jesus seemed asleep. God seemed asleep.

The Psalmist certainly felt that way. He prayed, "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!" (Psalm 44:23)

So the disciples went and woke Jesus up. Maybe they were expecting him to pray. We don't know. But they said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're dying?"

"Don't you care?" Maybe we've said that to God before too. "Don't you care? Don't you care that we're being destroyed by this storm?"

An English professor says, "Our greatest fear, my greatest fear, is that we are of no significance. Whether we call it fear or anxiety or

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dread, we fear our own annihilation. We fear that our coming and going will matter not a jot.” (Anne Marie Drew in *Weavings*, XXVII:3, 30.)

The disciples feared death and annihilation, and they were probably hoping that Jesus would pray for their rescue. But Jesus did not pray. He simply gave a scolding to the wind and a word of command to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The Greek translates more literally, “Be silent! Be muzzled!” This is the language of exorcism for a people who saw such storms as evidence of the demonic. Jesus, God’s love in the flesh, spoke a word and the evil around them was cast out. And the wind ceased and there was a dead calm, a great calm. And Jesus said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid?” Literally, “Why are you cowardly? And still you have no faith?”

A pastor says, “It is important to note that Jesus never says, ‘There is nothing to be afraid of...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, illness, 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

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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...[so] they need not paralyze us; they need not have dominion over us; they need not own us, because we are not alone in the boat.” (Michael L. Lindvall in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, 166 and 168.)

The story ends with the disciples “filled with great awe...” [More literally, “They feared a great fear...”] and asked each other, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

“Who then is this?”

That’s our question too, isn’t it? And sometimes when the storms are raging around us or even in us, it’s hard to remember the answer. We may be scared, even terrified by the storms that hit us. We may join the disciples and the Psalmist and yell at God, “Wake up! Don’t you care that I’m dying?”

And I wish I could promise that when we yell for help Jesus will instantly appear, speak a decisive word, and the storms be silenced and muzzled. But we know it often doesn’t happen that quickly or easily.

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And it's hard to remember who is with us in the boat. "Who then is this?"

But even when we forget, even when the storm winds drown out our alleluias, we still know down deep. We know who is in the boat with us. And we gather with the church to be reminded and to lean on each other for support. And when we are having trouble believing, we have the church to have deeper faith for us for a while.

Who then is this?

Whatever you are facing, whatever I am facing, whatever the world is facing, the God we know in Jesus Christ is stronger. Nothing will finally defeat God. When all is said and done God's love will be victorious for us and for the world. Suffering, injustice, evil, and death will not merely be silenced and muzzled. They will simply cease to be. But *we* will be. We will be. Not obliterated. *We* will be and our lives will matter because of who is in the boat with us.

Who then is this?

We know the answer. And so we sing. And so we sing. Amen. ©

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