

Mark 4: 35-41
Creekside COB
June 21, 2009

“Asleep At the Helm”

In September 1991, three strong weather systems merged off the eastern seaboard to form a storm the likes of which is only seen perhaps once a century. Meteorologists call them, “perfect storms.”

I have never gotten sick until I read Sebastian Junger’s book, *The Perfect Storm*, which relates the events that took place during two fateful days in September. Several ships disappeared in that storm, and Junger describes a scenario of what likely happened to the sword fishing boat, the *Andrea Gail* and its crew.

Readings from the storm were off the charts. The barometer dropped 996 millibars in one hour. Winds exceeded 120 miles per hour. The waves were 70-foot high with some over 100 feet. But numbers alone can’t convey the fury of the storm or the terror of the men caught in it. This scene from the movie, *The Perfect Storm*, shows how it may have been. The 72-foot *Andrea Gail* was little more than a bathtub toy in the grip of such power.

The start of last Sunday’s sermon wasn’t nearly as intense. Jesus told a parable of a sower who flung seed every which way with no regard for where it landed. He was not anxious about the outcome. The sower had not studied botany, but he knew that God knew what to do.

Jesus told the parable to show how things work in God’s kingdom. It comes softly, quietly, imperceptibly, like the miniscule mustard seed that grows into a great shrub. It seems insignificant, delicate, and vulnerable to birds, bugs and blight. There are surely better ways to get a kingdom going but since when are God's ways sensible?

Today's lesson, Jesus and the disciples board a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Going by boat was Jesus' idea. Mark says he went, "*just as he was.*" He didn't bring sea rations, a rain-slicker, or a floatation vest. Tired as Jesus was from a long day of teaching, he climbed aboard, fluffed up a pillow and fell asleep. The sailing was smooth. It was peaceful and quiet, but it didn't stay that way for long. Jesus seemed to create scenes and storms wherever he went.

Winds swirling around the steep, rugged landscape surrounding the Sea of Galilee whipped up storms without warning. The winds that pummeled the boat didn't pack *perfect storm intensity*, but it was sufficient to scare the disciples to death. They hadn't asked Jesus to go by boat. Jesus told them to get on board, and sailed them into the sites of a double-barreled storm.

We believe in a God who leads and guides. Consider some of our hymns devoted to this theme:

- *Lead me, guide me along the way...*
- *He leadeth me, he leadeth me, by His own hand he leadth me.*
His gracious follower I would be...
- *All the way my Savior leads me...*
- *Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us...*
- *Take my hand and lead me Father...*
- *Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand...*

But the Lord who leads us beside still waters sometimes thrusts us in the eye of the storm. Commitment to Jesus won't insure a picnic. Your idea of a good time might be looking out for someone with Alzheimer's whose caregiver needs a break. You might put your life on hold for six weeks to care for a dying family member or friend. You might be called upon to make a decision that will leave you open to criticism and scorn, but you make the decision just the same because God touched your heart and you know you must. You might accept a call to

leadership in the church to help it navigate through difficult decision.

At the end of his term as president, Jimmy Carter didn't make millions on the presidential speech circuit. He didn't sit under a shade tree in Plains, Georgia, relieved that he was no longer the leader of the free world. Jesus sent him sailing into the storms of civil war to broker peace agreements. He went to the most impoverished places on the planet to help establish health programs and hospitals.

Traveling with Jesus requires leaving the safety of the harbor, passing the breakwater and heading straight into the stormy sea. This is where the disciples find themselves while their leader snores through the storm. Like the non-anxious sower who slept soundly, knowing God would produce a harvest, Jesus slept in peace while the storm raged around him.

Had I been on board, I would like to think that Jesus' presence alone would be reason enough to hold tight and hang on until the big blow subsided. Do you think the disciples would have survived the night if they had let Jesus sleep? It wasn't good enough that he was simply, *present*. "Wake up, Jesus! We're gonna' die -- or don't you care?"

Jesus stood and rebuked the wind, and then did the same with his disciples. "Why are you afraid? Where's your faith?" They weren't yet convinced that he would look out for them, come what may -- at least not in the way they wanted. They weren't ready to trust Jesus "as he was."

What about us? Do we come to worship with the attitude that whatever happens, it will be all right because we are gathered in his presence? It's important to come into God's house with an attitude of expectancy that something good will come from it. What a wonderful thing it would be if we could say, "Worship was wonderful today," even if only one person was touched by it.

We sometimes come to worship with grocery lists of the things we want from Jesus. “Please, Lord, don’t let a family feud break out at my Father’s Day party.” “Make my boss quit being a bully.” We want some peace of mind, a reprieve from worry, or the experience of feeling good for a change. Stop the waves crashing over the gunnels. We’re hanging on for dear life, Lord! Do something!”

Some churches market Christianity as a cure-all. If you’re depressed, unsettled, unhappy in your marriage -- if you can’t decide which school district to send the kids to, or not sure what you want to do with your life, we’ll help with that. Come to worship that will make you feel good every Sunday. Meet people who share your passion for a better, happier, prosperous life. Jesus becomes a means for getting what we want.

In comparison, I suspect there aren’t many messages that say, “Come to Jesus as you are and meet Jesus as he is.” You come asking Jesus to lead you beside still waters, but Jesus may trouble your waters and lead you somewhere else instead. Ask him for peace and he might give you a sword or a storm instead.

Speaking of prayer, someone said, “Sometimes I think we do all the talking because we’re afraid God won’t. Or, conversely, that God will. Either way, staying preoccupied with our own words seems a safer bet than opening ourselves to either God’s silence or God’s speech, both of which have the power to undo us.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent*, p. 51)

I’m reminded of the story about a songbird that was in a barnyard freezing to death. It was on the snowy ground shivering so bad it couldn’t make a sound. The farmer walked by and noticed the poor little bird. He picked it up and looked around thinking of how to warm it. Then he noticed a fresh steaming cow pie deposited by one of his steers. He took the bird and pushed it in. It wasn’t long until the warmth brought the bird back to life, and once again it broke into a beautiful song. The barnyard cat heard the singing and came to investigate. Seeing the bird in the cow pie, the cat plucked the bird out and ate it. The moral of the story is this: *“Not everyone who puts you*

in it is your enemy, and not everyone who pulls you out is your friend.”

Jesus slept through the storm, then calmed it. If the disciples were frightened before they woke Jesus, they were more frightened after he stilled the storm. Mark says they were filled with awe and wondered, *“Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?”*

They saw Jesus as he was. It was another step in their education to see that the ruler of the storm had come to bend the world toward his expectations. The question is will we love him and follow him even when doing it makes the going hard. Will we love him and trust him even when he is silent, or for all we know, asleep at the helm while chaos brews all around us?

There is another way to see this story – one that finds him asleep, not in a boat, but somewhere else. Seventeen hundred years ago, Saint Augustine said this:

“When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is aroused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune -- shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean that you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, let him keep watch with in you, pay heed to him.”

There is a sleeping giant nestled deep inside us waiting to be roused.