

Highfield Road Uniting Church

Mark 4: 35 – 41

Facing the Storms



The little girl cries out in the middle of the night, frightened by the thunder and lightning from a big storm. The mother rushes in and scoops the girl up in her arms and, with coos and shooshes and the warmth of a cuddle, whispers “There’s nothing to be afraid of, it’s just noise and light.” Is that the right set of words? Or would “Do not be afraid, I am here” be a better lesson?

There may be nothing to be afraid of in a little girl’s bedroom, but there are plenty of storms in this world to bring on fear and worry. Real storms that bring destruction and death; political storms that bring anger and frustration and very real suffering to some; family storms of anger and blame that bring hurt and isolation; workplace storms of financial troubles that bring unemployment, stress and worry; and the metaphorical storms of illness, death and grief. There is plenty to be afraid of in this world, and in our lives, and being told not to worry often causes the most worry. “Do not be afraid, I am with you” is a much better thing to say and to hear. Jesus cried out to the storm “Peace! Be still”, but he was also talking to the disciples. “Peace, do not be afraid. I am with you, why is your faith so easily swayed?”

We can get into theological trouble with this story of Jesus and the disciples on the sea when we see it purely as an account of an actual event. Mark’s readers saw it as a story about the storms of life and they knew exactly what the story was saying about Jesus. Under persecution from both their Jewish neighbours and the Roman officials, denied employment and shunned in the marketplace, they understood the story. Jesus was sailing from Jewish territory into Gentile territory and facing a storm; this was Mark capturing their life! They knew Jesus to be with them in their little boat, facing the storms and saying “Peace! Be still.” They had answered the question about who this man was who orders the wind and the waves about, and they had moved from fear to peace.

Most of us don't see many storms - at least not like the storms we see on the news each night. Real storms, wars, terrorist attacks, civil unrest, murders, and so on. We are isolated from the storms of poverty and homelessness. While we don't follow the Prosperity Gospel line that we are blessed by God because we believe, we are thankful to have sufficient resources to be comfortable and to live in a peaceful, law abiding nation. Unlike the Early Church, we are not under persecution, shunned and belittled for our faith. But there are other storms that we cannot avoid - the storms that come with being human, being mortal and being in families and community. For us, these storms can be just as scary, or even more so, because in everything else we are feeling so secure. So the deep question from this story of the disciples in the storm is: "Are you going to face the storm with fear or with faith?"

The disciples had seen Jesus cast out evil spirits, heal people, teach with deep wisdom and confound the religious experts, and yet, when they had to face the storm, they gave into fear. Fear that ignored that Jesus - God with us - was with them. Fear that caused them to cry out, like all who feel themselves abandoned by God, "Don't you care that we are perishing?" And Jesus chided them for not having faith: faith that would have allowed them to say to one another, "Yes, there is a storm, but Jesus is with us; do not be afraid."

Many of us see our friends, neighbours and family go through storms. Like the mother in the night, we want to go to them and say "Do not be afraid, I am here", but often we can't. It may not be appropriate, we may be distant, or we may not have such a close relationship. But there is still a place for the Gospel, a time to put across the simple, faithful message that Jesus can be with you and be a secure point in the storm. A time to say, "You do not have to live in fear, Jesus can be with you." Or, more likely, a chance to say, "I have faced storms in my life and found Jesus to be with me, calling me to peace."

The Apostle Paul did not have an easy time journeying through the Roman Empire to share the Gospel. His opponents didn't shy away from dispensing beatings or imprisonment. Paul had to earn an income to support his travels, and many times he had no place to sleep or no food to eat. He knew about facing storms, even if he didn't use that language, and yet he didn't give in to fear. He faced the storms because he knew the Lord who was sending him into those storms. And he could boldly tell the people at Corinth that he and his fellow workers were:

genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet living on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Paul had not given into fear; his faith held him in peace even during the many storms in his life. Here he was, passing that message on to his people at Corinth. And judging by the issues,

complaints and questions in both letters, they were a people who needed to hear a word of peace amid storms, and faith in the face of fear and doubt.

Mark has given us a story of Jesus and the disciples, and there is a lot in this story; its importance is shown by Matthew and Luke taking it up as well. It has connections to other stories in Mark's Gospel that bring out answers to the question "Who is this man?" It has echoes of Old Testament stories that open other learnings, through both positive and negative associations. It can be read as the first of a new set of stories about Jesus' identity, or a continuation of the parables of faith and growth. But at its heart, this is a story about how we live out our lives as the people of God in Jesus Christ. Do you know that Jesus is with you, and can that knowledge bring you to faith and peace through the stresses, worries and traumas of life? Can you say "I will not give way to fear, for Jesus is with me"? That is faith amid the storm.