

PILGRIM

C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

JUST AS YOU ARE

Mark 4:35-41 June 21, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Our Mark text for today tells us that the disciples took Jesus in the boat, "Just as he was." They are in this tiny boat on the Sea of Galilee and they are in the middle of a terrible storm. Apparently it is not uncommon for a storm to form quickly on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are terrified! Where is Jesus? He is asleep on a cushion in the front of the boat. It is a remarkable picture – terrified disciples – peacefully sleeping Jesus. They wake Jesus. "Do you not care that we are perishing?" Well, of course he cares, he is in the boat with them. Jesus calms the storm. Then he asks the disciples, "Have you no faith?" I wonder what he is talking about. Is faith having the same sort of calm as Jesus in the storm? Is faith just letting Jesus sleep on the pillow? Is the lack of faith that he is the rescuer, the Savior?

What do we make of this story?

Certainly the early church in Mark's day would hear the story gladly. One early symbol for the church was a boat. They would hear the story and see the boat as the church trying to make its way in a turbulent time. They would see the sea as the realm of evil, dominated by demons. The storm was like the persecution they were undergoing in the time of Nero. I suspect that sometimes it seemed to them, too, that the Lord was asleep or uncaring. The early church needed to be reminded that God was with them in time of a storm. This incident of the storm on the Sea of Galilee would be an allegory for them – it would bring them comfort and hope.

The story is contemporary for us. We are confronted by storms. Just read the paper. "State (Alabama) 2nd in U.S. Gun deaths." "Families lose Life Savings in Investment Scam." "Merger Leads to 5,000 Layoffs Locally." "Church Divides Over Abortion Issue." Sometimes, we find ourselves in the midst of a storm. Like the disciples in this story, we are afraid.

We are too sophisticated to believe that demons have any power in our world, aren't we? Maybe. But there is plenty of superstition to go around. A friend of mine quit taking the local paper because it didn't carry the daily astrological forecast. You catch the elevator down at University Hospital to the 14th floor. You never pass the 13th floor because it is not listed. And there is a proper way to hang a horseshoe over a door so that the good luck doesn't pour out. Like these early disciples, we too have fears about who, or what, is in control.

Of course fear can destroy us. The question of Jesus' identity appears frequently in the Gospel of Mark. A suspicion that God does not really care what happens to us will erode our religious life. Same is true in human relationship. When we sense that others do not care what happens to us, the relationships die.

One thing we need to be reminded of in this story is that Jesus is present with us in a storm. In the Gardner Museum in Boston hangs Rembrandt's painting of "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." Looking at the painting, one can sense the danger the small boat is in and the panic of those on board. The small boat is being lifted on

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the crest of a giant wave. The sail is torn and lines are waving in the wind. Five of the disciples are struggling to hold on to the mast. The rest are in the front of the boat clustered around Jesus. They are clearly frightened. The moment captured seems to be Jesus saying, "Why are you afraid?" If you count the figures in the boat there are 14. You have the 12 disciples and Jesus. The fourteenth person is Rembrandt. He has painted himself into the scene. The painting serves to remind us that when we find ourselves in the midst of a storm that Jesus is there with us.

To me, one of the best lines in the text that speaks to us is the line that the disciples took Jesus into the boat "just as he was." Maybe that means they took Jesus as he was rather than who they wanted him to be.

"What you see is what you get." Do you know that saying? We sometimes use it about a person to say they are the same all the time. They don't have any hidden agenda. They treat everyone the same. They speak to everyone the same. "What you see is what you get."

There are times when we would like to use the gospel to present Jesus as just another helpful means of getting whatever it is we think we want or need. Are you sad? Come to Jesus and he will fix that. Are you lonely, confused, addicted? Come to Jesus. He loves you so much he will get busy for you. But when we are out of the panic of a storm, we do not see God regularly interfering in the course of nature to set things right for his favorites or for those who have prayed for deliverance. If that were true, we would never have to face the consequences of our action or suffer the risks that everyone must deal with. To think that God could and should keep the rain off our parade, no matter what is happening to others is an assumption or arrogance which the life and teaching of Jesus does not support. In our story for today, the disciples are reminded that whether their lives were spared or not, they could not fall outside of God's concern.

Where is God when our boat begins to sink? Right there in the boat, as Jesus was in the boat with the disciples. We can't make God into Santa Claus or make Jesus into our errand boy. God's presence is not a guarantee or freedom from the storms of life. God's presence is there to calm the storm in us. God's presence is to remind us that whatever we go through God loves us and is with us. Living out our lives is that love of God seeking to find expression through us. "Just as he is" reminds us that we can always count on God's love and presence to be with us.