

Awakening Jesus

Mark 4:35-41

June 24, 2012

I.

One of the best ways to get more deeply into biblical passages is to ask questions about them. That's the third method of Bible study we are using in our 40 Days in the Word course.

For example, we can ask questions about what happened in today's readings and what they meant at the time. We can ask what timeless truths emerge from them and how they apply to us today. Our course materials even suggest some specific questions to consider, not all of which always apply to every reading. And, of course, new questions also can arise.

Let's start with some very general statements from all of today's readings, and then see how they contribute to a basic principle that governs how we relate to our Lord.

The first idea is that what seems impossible is not that way when God is involved. Our Old Testament story of David and Goliath is a classic example of that. That's a great story, isn't it? No problem is too big for God, not even a fearsome giant who is nine feet tall.

The next idea is that the Lord is near and watches over us. The Psalm recounts that when people cried to the Lord in their trouble, he delivered them from their distress.

Another timeless truth is that we do have to cry out, so to speak, and ask God for help. We cannot do it all ourselves. Our New Testament reading says not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God.

And the basic theme that runs through all these readings is that we are not in control of our lives. Certainly we can make choices, and those choices can affect and influence how a lot of things happen. But there is a limit. We also know that some things are beyond us.

II.

And one of the most convincing realities that demonstrates we are not in control of our lives is storms. The awesome power of nature is a constant reminder of how fragile our lives and possessions really are. I just say the word "Katrina" and we know what I mean. Even on a lesser scale we are at the mercy of lightning, tornadoes, and floods.

And of course we see that this leads right into today's Gospel from Mark. It's the well-known story of Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee. But, just for information, this is not when Jesus walked on water. That's an entirely different story that comes later.

And if we ask questions, we will see that there are several possible sermons in this short reading. Some relate to our lives today and others are more explanatory of Jesus' ministry.

For example, at this point Jesus had been teaching and preaching on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, and I could explain how this crossing to the Gentile side foreshadowed the birth of the Christian church for all people and the subsequent storms that the church endured.

Or I could talk about how the disciples were only dimly becoming aware of Jesus' true nature as the Son of God. This story still is early in Jesus' ministry, and he had just begun his miracles. And so his command of the forces of nature was a new and dramatic thing for them to see.

Or I could preach a sermon about how early Christians used an image of a ship in a storm with a cross for a mast as a symbol for the church. And this could lead into how the General

Convention of the Episcopal Church in Indianapolis next month might suggest the image of a ship in a stormy sea of divisions and controversies

And, as you might expect, the most frequent application of this reading is that just as Jesus helped the disciples get through that storm on the sea back then, he also can help us get through the storms, and trials and tribulations, of our lives now.

Those are good sermon topics. But obviously I could not cover them all in just the forty-five minutes that we have for our sermon today. Ha! Ha! Just joking. My time here will be much shorter than that, and I want to take a different approach anyway.

III.

So, let's get right to the reading. We should begin by knowing that the Sea of Galilee is no ordinary body of water. It is over six hundred feet below sea level. It's long and narrow and shallow, with steep cliffs at the southern end that act as a funnel for the wind. This makes it susceptible to sudden violent storms.

And we know what happened. Jesus and the disciples were in a boat on the sea, and sure enough a storm came up. The disciples began to worry and sense danger.

And remember that several of the disciples were fishermen who were familiar with the Sea of Galilee and its weather patterns. They had seen storms before and were used to unusual weather. So for them to be concerned, this must have been a serious storm.

Then what happened? While the disciples were struggling with the weather, Jesus was sacked out! Snoozing in the back of the boat. Everyone else was rowing, bailing water, and trying to stay afloat, but Jesus was having a nice little nap.

I remember when I was growing up on the farm, and a storm during the night somehow had blown open one of the gates to the pasture. Some of the cattle had gotten out and were roaming in the back yard. My father came into my room very early in the morning and wakened me to help him get the cattle back through the gate.

That didn't interest me a lot. I was still sleepy, and it still was dark and cold and rainy. I wish I had known about this Gospel back then. Do you think I could have convinced my Father that I should be allowed to go back to sleep because Jesus was sleeping while others worked?

In any event, back to our story. Jesus wasn't worried about anything, The disciples, however, were a little irritated. They allowed their fears to overcome their faith.

So they woke Jesus and spoke to him in an accusing way. They suggested that he was unconcerned about what happened to them. "Teacher," they said, "Don't you care if we drown."

And isn't that an echo of millions of prayers and pleas and cries of anguish over the last two thousand years. "God, where are you, don't you care."

When we consider the scope of human suffering throughout history, calamities for nations, adversity for entire races of people, and individual tragedies that change our lives, we can only imagine how many times people have called out in fear, or anger, or heartbreak to a God they thought had forgotten them. "God, don't you care?"

IV.

And this brings us to the point I want to make today. Jesus is with us just as he was with the disciples in the boat. He does care. But sometimes we, like the disciples, must take the

initiative to go to him with our problems. Perhaps we also have to rouse him to attend to us. We, like the disciples, have to ask. He might even be waiting for us to do it.

And this raises an interesting question about our reading, doesn't it? Suppose Jesus was not really asleep. What if he was playing possum? Maybe he was watching out of the corner of his eye to see what the disciples would do. Perhaps he wanted to know whether they trusted in him or thought they could handle the situation on their own without him.

This might be suggested by what happened next. Jesus got up, spoke into the storm, calmed the wind and the sea, and asked, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Perhaps he meant that if they had faith they would have called on him earlier instead of letting the situation almost get out of hand.

What about us? If we don't rely on our faith we are unlikely to call upon Jesus, even though he might be watching out of the corner of his eye to see what we do. But if in faith we do call upon him, then the Holy Spirit will lead us to put him at the center of our lives.

This is part of our reading from Philippians we heard earlier in the service. Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

And this means Jesus wants us to pray, early and often. We cannot wait until the last minute when the boat is about to sink, so to speak. We are called to have a relationship with our Lord and Savior all the time. He doesn't want us to leave him to sleep in the back of the boat. He is here to help us through the storms, but it's up to us to go to him.

V.

There's an old saying about dealing with people who are helping you or working with you to complete a project. It uses the analogy of an airplane, and says that if you want people involved with the landing, they also should be involved with the take-off.

And the point of that rule is that it is not a good idea to start out on a project on your own, and then expect people to help you later when difficulties arise. They might or might not be willing to do so. It's much better if everyone is on board from the beginning.

We easily can apply the airplane analogy to a boat; perhaps even a boat in a storm. If we want Jesus to help us arrive at our destination, perhaps it would be a good idea to include him in the departure. And he might even have a better idea about what our destination should be, or the course we should take to get there.

And if we have faith enough to do that, Jesus will not be sleeping in the boat but rather holding the rudder. And the journey will be smooth, the winds will be gentle, and the seas will be calm. *Amen.*