

Of Stones and Storms  
24 June 2018  
Pentecost +5B  
I Samuel 17.32-49 and Mark 4.35-41  
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Have I told you about my favorite yoga class? The one I used to attend every Saturday morning in Richmond? It was a 75 minute vinyasa class in an un-air-conditioned room, and the instructor often said things like, "It takes so much courage just to show up on your mat today. You are so brave for being here in this moment, right where you are." It was some real privileged, white lady talk. Yes. I hear it. But I also felt the blessing in her words and accepted them each time. I was showing up. I was bringing myself to that moment and that breath. I was practicing being courageous and brave, even if I don't really think of myself as either. Sometimes just showing up, again and again, even if it is one breath to the next breath, is an act of total bravery and total courage.

I want to extend that blessing to you here today. It takes so much courage just to show up in your pew today. I hope that's not a comment on my preaching but on the sacred experiment of what we are trying to create together here as a people—vulnerable, honest, true community shaped by a grace and empathy and love that extends to everyone in this place and then out through these doors to neighbor and stranger and even the whole world. You are brave for being here in this moment, right where you are. Because I know that you are a lot like me, and there are days when stepping into a church building to affirm a sacred story and a radical faith in one we cannot see is nothing but courage. To stand and speak aloud with sisters and brothers beside us our prayer of confession and affirmation, to pray aloud of our trespasses as well as those who trespass against us is a brave and bold move. To climb in a boat together, heading off in the same direction, especially when we already know storms we face and think we have no capacity for new ones, is nothing short of a miracle.

Jesus has been in that boat all day. At the beginning of Mark 4, "Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables."<sup>1</sup> He taught from that boat, parable after parable, riddle after riddle, mystery after mystery, all day long. Without amplification, he made his voice louder just to the edge of shouting. What he had to

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4.1-2

teach them was more important than the exhaustion in his body. He taught, then retreated to the smaller audience of the boat and did a little explaining, Back and forth for a day until evening came. And only then did he tell the disciples to pull up anchor and set sail for the other side as they left the crowd behind. They took him along, just as he was. Jesus, like every exhausted preacher, climbs in the stern and falls asleep. Passes out. Can't hear and isn't listening for anything or anyone.

And in this moment of total exhaustion, after a long day of work and explaining, ministering and teaching, a mega-storm hits. That's what the Greek says it is. This is not a big, afternoon thunderstorm in late Spring. This is an unexpected, crashing over the boat, out of nowhere, great storm.

Of this storm, Matt Skinner, notes, "It threatens to sink the boats. If the disciples who fished for a living think they are bound to perish in the tempest, we should trust their judgment. Nothing indicates they overreact; this is no common storm.

Yet Jesus sleeps on a pillow, declaring a placid confidence (see Mark 4:27; Psalm 4:8; Job 11:18-19).<sup>1</sup> When his companions wake him, accusing him of indifference or negligence, they have lost hope; their words reveal that they have already figured out how the story must end."

But just as the parables he'd been teaching never ended the way the crowd thought they would, this story will take a twist, too. "Jesus doesn't calm the storm as much as he overpowers it and brings it to heel. When he rebukes (*epitimaō*) the violent wind and demands a still silence (*phimōō*) from the chaotic waters, it recalls him doing the same when he compelled unclean spirits (see the same verbs in Mark 1:25)."<sup>2</sup> The great storm is met by the great calm, and both have a shocking power and force behind them.

The boat is floating along; the fishermen know this boat, know these waters, then SUDDENLY and IMMEDIATELY there is a great storm. It's terrifying when we think our boat is sailing along just fine. We've navigated these waters a thousand times. We don't anticipate the ride being any different this time. We take for granted the ease with which we will make it from one shore to the next. Then all of a sudden, shockingly fast, that great storm materializes. A shocking diagnosis, a child battling illness we can only witness but cannot stop, a blind-sided layoff at work, the sudden threat of divorce, a shocking outcome in a political election, images of an immigration crisis at the southern border seared in our imaginations. Storms rage. We know them. And we, like

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3677](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3677)

the disciples, are terrified and begging Jesus to wake up and do something for us before we are sunk.

Do we understand it takes courage the size of the storm to stand up and face it? The disciples didn't. They were just as afraid of Jesus' great calm as they were of the great storm. You see, it takes bravery as great as the wind and the waves to silence them and still the boat once more. It takes an audacious, sure-footed courage to speak a great peace into a great storm. The disciples cry out for Jesus to bring that great calming peace, but he turns to them and asks why they didn't stand there and do it themselves.

The disciples were afraid, but this time of Jesus' great calming presence, and they kept heading across the boat where he would minister some more. I like to think he climbed back in that stern and immediately fell asleep again. All we know is he is met in a new region by a new need and a man overcome with demons that possessed him just as soon as they reach other other side. This great storm happens in between a great teaching and a great healing. In between is where it hits.

Skinner again observes, "Jesus likes to show up in liminal spaces in Mark -- sites of transition or risk. He chooses to go to marginal spaces, away from life's regular patterns: near a graveyard (Mark 5:2-3), at a deathbed (Mark 5:40)...He situates himself at geographical boundary-lands, like the wilderness (Mark 1:4-9, 35), mountaintops (Mark 3:13; 6:46; 9:2), Tyre (Mark 7:24), and Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27). He also goes to sociopolitical borderlands, politically charged locations like a tax collector's home (Mark 2:14-15) and the land outside of Jerusalem during Passover (Mark 11:11, 19)..."

Life stands toe-to-toe with death at many of the borders in Mark...In liminal places, Jesus conducts ministry, opens minds to new possibilities, and sets people free to enter into a new future in freedom and wholeness. He meddles with borders, not because he has a penchant for chaos, but because the reign of God extends divine holiness and a commitment to human well-being to places that we might have thought were beyond the limits."

We know the great storms. We're living them. We want to get to the other side and ask God to provide safe passage. Guess what? That's not the story here. The story isn't that great storms will come but Jesus will stand and silence them for us. We know that the wind and the waves come up, crash over us, and we cry out to God to make it stop. Each one of us wants for someone or something to step in and make it stop. But Jesus' equally overwhelming great calm lands on the disciples who are shocked by the peace that came over the whole place AND Jesus' great frustration that they could be doing that work themselves. Why are they afraid to stand with courage and bravery and face

the storm on their own? Why don't they understand that the great calm and the great peace of their Divine Creator is within them even in their fear, even in the liminal space, even as the waves and wind crash and threaten to destroy.

How fascinating that the lectionary guides our imaginations to the story of David and Goliath, a boy at a border-land, a liminal space, a battle at the border. On one side of the border is a big, strong, giant of a man holding all the power and all the threats. On the other are the frightened, exhausted troops of Saul and a boy who has left his task herding sheep to check on his weary brothers. When he discovers no one is willing to face Goliath, David stands before Saul and volunteers.

He is small. He is young. He is untrained. He is unqualified. How is it that David stands there, unafraid, and walks toward the battle others fear? He knows he can face Goliath because he has faced bears and lions and not been harmed. He knows that it was the Lord who saved him from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear. And so he knows in his bones that the Lord will save him from this strong and powerful warrior. He knows that God is the one who has been with him all along, protecting and providing, guiding and going alongside. He knows that he doesn't need the armor or a king or the weapons of warriors. He needs only what is true to who he already is. And God will be with him, guiding him always, going alongside. Because God always has.

Friends, you are so brave for showing up today. It takes so much courage to keep showing up for your life. For your friends. For your neighbors, and strangers, and the fight for justice you have in your belly. It takes courage and bravery to stand in your own two feet and speak great calm and great peace into the world's great storm. But you can do this. Because God is with you, guiding you, walking alongside you.