

**Facing the Storm**  
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We all know about dealing with storms. We had a few last week, a relief in a year in which our precipitation is down a little. Rain makes things grow, and keeps us from using our sprinkling systems too much. But we also know about the terror that storms can bring. Just last fall we were hit by the remnants of Hurricane Gustav and the result of that was that several of us didn't have any power for a few days.

That's one kind of storm. But there are others. Some are from the weather, some are from the times in which we live. We have experienced storms internationally as we have watched the street riots in Iran over the previous election, or from the Korean peninsula as the nuclear threat once again rears its ugly head.

We have experienced storms from the economic crisis. Many of us are still dealing with looking for new jobs with which to provide for our families. Others are worried about their jobs, wondering if they will be the next ones to check out unemployment benefits. Still others are dealing with working in a job that is not using their talents to the fullest, leaving them depressed and frustrated, but also feeling stuck because there is nothing else out there for them.

And then there is the storm that affects us when we know that our lives are changing, when people are leaving and when we need to make some adjustments because of all that. As you can tell from your bulletins, we are having a congregational meeting this morning to deal with that kind of storm. Someone has kindly asked "What happens if we vote no?!" I really appreciate the sentiment behind that, but I really hope you won't vote that way. Not because I haven't developed a deep sense of appreciation and respect for this place and this people. But because there comes a time when you realize that you need to move on.

I am aware that the severity of this storm changes from person to person. For some of you this will not be so much a storm as a much needed breath of fresh air. For some of you this will be more of an inconvenience, a movement from one phase of life to another. But for some, this will be especially difficult. You will have to get used to someone else to preach and baptize and lead Session meetings. Some of you have developed an especially close relationship with me, for which I will always be grateful. Believe me, going through this experience is a bit of a storm for me as well; moving from one place to another is not easy, and having to start all over again just when you thought people had gotten used to you is not unlike facing dark clouds and lightning bolts.

But such is the way with following Jesus. There are always storms. There are always passages that are difficult to traverse. There are always those transitions which we wish we didn't have to deal with, but we have to anyway, and we wonder how are we ever going to make it through.

In a recent *Christian Century*, Kate Layzer, a UCC pastor in Massachusetts, reflected on the story of Jesus stilling the storm, and penned these words:

"Jesus' ministry is one dangerous crossing after another, starting with his baptism. The moment the waters close over his head, the moment God's rushing Spirit meets and merges with his, his path through the world becomes one of confrontation: confrontation between the way things are and the

way God means them to be. The unclean spirits don't want their boat rocked. Neither do the authorities. But the Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus. Rocking the boat is what he's come to do."

When faced with a storm, getting your boat rocked does not sound very reassuring. But there are some things which this story tells us about that we can keep in mind when the storms hit.

For one thing, remember who sent you out. Who had the bright idea of getting out on the water when they must have seen the storm clouds gathering? It was Jesus. Not only that, but where was Jesus taking them? To the other side of the lake – to the Decapolis, to where the Gentiles lived, all of those yucky outsiders, those people who didn't believe like the Israelites did, whose gods were something else, people that good, devout Hebrews weren't supposed to have anything to do with. To about the last people and at about the worst possible time, Jesus sends them out. Talk about rocking your boat.

When we start to wonder what are we doing in this storm, it might be helpful to remember who it was who sent us out. If it was our own great idea, our own egos, or that of someone else, that might be one thing. But if our setting out was in response to a yearning that God placed within us, that means we are headed in the right direction, even with the storm. It might just be that the storm is an indication that we *are* headed in the right direction. I know there have been times over the last nine and a half years when I wondered just what was God doing sending an inner city pastor to an affluent community in the suburbs. But always – always – in the midst of that there was the thought that God had brought us together for a reason. That reason might not always have been clear sometimes, but it was there. There was something that each of us needed from each other; I needed to learn something, you needed to learn something. Now God is calling for us to go on our journeys apart. There are still some things to learn, and it is God who is doing the teaching – and the sending.

Last week Art Hook and I sat down by my computer to participate in a webinar from the Alban Institute. It was part of a series of web seminars on ways the church is dealing with the economic crisis, and the speakers were people well known to some of us – Graham Standish and Diana Butler Bass. Standish, who is the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, is someone whose writings I have reflected on in many a sermon here. And he didn't disappoint. He said that just as the economic crisis hit his church had embarked on a million dollar building campaign. They needed it, he said, because the building was falling apart. He said that he and the congregation did some rather serious soul searching about just giving up on this campaign. But they had begun it in prayer, seeking where God was calling them. He said that a key question in their discernment was "How much do we trust God?" They have now raised over \$800,000, and will have enough on hand to start their project.

When you start out and run into a storm, it can be easy to wonder why you started this in the first place. But then you need to go back and remember that if it really was a seeking to faithfully follow where God was calling you, you can trust that God will give you the resources to make it across.

The second thing that we need to remember when we are in the midst of a storm is that little, enigmatic line at the end of the 36<sup>th</sup> verse: "Other boats were there, too." Why did Mark put that line in there? To paint a picture of what that scene looked like? Hardly. Mark is writing to a faith community, and he is telling them just what he is telling us – that we are not alone. When the storm breaks and we feel like we are getting swamped with things to do, committees to form and needs to meet, that we are not alone. Other boats are there, too. Other people are there to help us.

At our congregational meeting this morning is the Rev. Malcolm Shields, a former associate pastor of Parma South and a trusted colleague in this Presbytery. He is the chairperson of the Committee on Ministry, which you will get to know quite well over the next few months. The fact that the chair of this august group of folks is here at this church is a testimony to what high regard this Presbytery holds this church. You are not alone. There are a lot of people who are willing to help, who want to help. When we think we don't need anyone else, that we can handle this just fine all by ourselves, that's when we get into trouble. We need to remember that there are other boats in the storm, other boats which can help us.

The third thing has to deal with Jesus, because it was Jesus who sent us out into this storm to begin with. I've never been able to figure out exactly how he could be sleeping in a boat that is bouncing all over the place. But again, Mark is not giving us a blow by blow account here. He is telling us something. He is telling us that Jesus is so trusting of God's presence in his life that he can sleep through a storm.

But there is something else. When Jesus gets up, he doesn't say to the disciples, that's okay, you will be all right, don't worry, be happy. He says to the waves and the wind, "Peace! Be still!" And I imagine he didn't just say it softly. He must have yelled out at the top of his voice, probably a tough thing to do since he had been teaching all day. But he faces the storm head-on and he deals with it head-on, completely in faith that God has given him this power to bring order and calm.

In dealing with our storms it is not really helpful to deny what you are going through. It's nice to be a non-anxious presence, but then you still have to call a storm a storm, to call a grief a grief. Only then can you deal with it. Only then can you find the words to address it.

As we head into this storm and into all the storms we will face, we can cower in fear; we can drift in denial; or we can turn to Jesus and ask for help, for a word that will address the storm and give us what we need. Though Jesus had some tough words for his disciples and their lack of faith, give them credit for one big thing – they knew who to turn to, and they would remember this story from then on to help them deal with the other storms of their lives. And so must we. Amen.

Bible Text is Mark 4:35-41.  
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