

Delivered at Christ Lutheran Church
June 21, 2009 Pentecost 3B 2009 Mark 4: 25-31
Renata Eustis, Pastor CLC

Generally I'm someone who's really interested in the news. I like knowing what's going on, both close at home and around the world. But lately—more or less for the past year-- I've been in a bit of a haze news-wise. Yet, I have to say that the events in Iran following the election there have really got my attention. Some of it is because of fear—fear that Iran is kind of a loose cannon with potentially the power to wreak havoc in the world. But most of what has got my attention are the massive numbers of people who are protesting—in a place where that kind of action could cost them their lives. Like ancient Israel, Iran is a theocracy—which means that those who govern are understood to be in those positions by God. The Supreme Leader of Iran called the election “a divine assessment.” So it follows that all those protesting the results because they believe them to be fraudulent, are not only challenging the political system, *they are challenging God.*

Last night, thanks to the internet, I saw an amazing report from Iran. Mostly I heard it because the report was made on Friday night and it was dark. Yet, in the background you could hear the cries of thousands of people. The woman reporting said that each night the cries are louder than the night before. She spoke with such agony in her voice, question after question. “Where is this place where every door is closed? Where is this place where people are simply calling out to God—where the sound of “God is Great” gets louder and louder? It shakes me. *I wonder if it shakes God.* Where is this place where the young shed blood and people go and pray, standing on that same blood? Where is the place where *no one comes to our aid?* It is Iran.”

These are strong words. In them I hear echoes of the pleas of the disciples, on a boat being engulfed by waves, to Jesus who is sleeping through it all: “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*”

What a question! If you've asked that question yourself, you know what an agonizing place they're in. God, I believe you have the power to save me—to get us out of the mess we're in—and you're not doing anything. It's in those words from the Iranian woman: “It shakes me. I wonder if it shakes God.” *Could it be that you don't care, God?*

This is a question we ask—maybe many times—on our individual journeys. It is also a question we ask as a community. And it's a question that the early church community that the Gospel writer Mark was a part of also asked. During the time the Gospel was written, the church was experiencing a lot of persecution from the Roman empire. It was a hard time to be Christian—a small group, made up mostly of people who had to leave their religious tradition and all the social support that went with it. People who no doubt felt pretty powerless but somehow were seen as a threat by the powers that be. The question was a live one for this community: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

One of the early symbols for the church was a boat. It's where we get the term that refers to the part of the church building we're in—the nave. It's obviously related to the word “navy”. So if we draw the connections a little more—the members of the early church are like the disciples. They've followed Jesus on to the boat. After all, Jesus was the one who suggested getting in the boat—and going to the other side. They've just been good disciples, good followers of their Teacher. And what is their reward? A nice, smooth midnight sail across the Sea of Galilee, meaningful insight and interesting conversation with, Jesus, the guy everyone wants to talk to? Hardly.

And what about us, those of us in the boat called Christ Lutheran Church? We thought long and hard about making the journey of the renovation. With fear and faith, we started building. Within a short time the storm also started building—the stock market sank, some of us lost our jobs, some of us lost our savings. The waves started to seriously rock our boat later that month when the Oromo Lutheran Church suddenly decided to leave. Besides losing their fellowship we also lost an important source of income.

In the six months between September and March, we had five church members die. It's hard to escape being engulfed in the waves of grief and the sense of frailty that brings. We've also been rocked by the winds of change—that have affected many churches. More and more people find it difficult to carve out time for worship—some because of work and the demands of the rest of their lives, some for other reasons. So we've been frightened by smaller numbers in worship, wondering what this means for our future.

I think it's completely understandable why we would be scared and uncertain. I look at the lay people who have worked so hard and so long—and so responsibly—to move the renovation forward. Teacher, don't you care? Seems like a pretty honest question.

Though I'm sure there are dozens of other takeaways from this story, there are three that stand out for me. The first is that Jesus *is* in the boat. He's the one who invited us to follow him to the other side. In Jesus' time, the other side of the Sea of Galilee was Gentile territory. It was not a natural place for the Jewish disciples of a Jewish teacher to go. Yet, it was a place where the healing and liberating work of God was desperately needed. I wholeheartedly believe that we are on a journey to a new place. We are nearing the completion of a new physical space. But this space is not an exhibit of architectural beauty. This is a place where people can be fed by Christ, through the Word and through the Sacraments—but also through our words and the giving of ourselves to people who are hungry for life, hungry for love, hungry for a community.

I admit we may be tired and we may need to stop a rest and get replenished. Or maybe this is the moment for fresh sailors to come forward and keep us sailing toward the other side. But, in any case, I believe this part of the journey is every bit as important as what has already come.

The second takeaway is that God can work with us just as we are. I believe that God can work through our fear as well as our faith. There is a good amount of energy for

trying to do a better job of connecting with those who are already here and reaching out to new people. It seems like fear is a pretty big factor in motivating us to do things that are really good things to do—things that will strengthen us as a community and hopefully reach people who need the new life that the Gospel can bring. Jesus stilled the storm, despite the disciples' lack of faith. The miracle wasn't a reward for getting it right. The miracle was a gift, a gift intended to strengthen faith.

The last takeaway is related to the others. The storm is *not* the whole picture. God's power and God's action do not come at our command and often, not according to our timeline—but this does not mean they are irrelevant. What is so striking to me in the Gospel story, is that the disciples are more afraid *after* Jesus shows his power. It's after the stilling of the storm that Jesus asks: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The disciples were filled with great awe. A better translation is feared a great fear.

Knowing that God and God's ways are beyond what we can fully comprehend is a fundamental part of our relationship to God. It's what makes for reverence which is vital to what we come here to do—worship. And worship, in turn, feeds our faith. That faith enables us to engage the storm rather than jump ship. In faith, halting and intermittent as it is, we stay in the boat, inviting others to journey with us—knowing that we are not in control of the destination but that we are being led by the one who has given us his very Life. Thanks be to God. Amen.