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Mark 4:35-41  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
June 20, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *And they awoke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

At the beginning of last week's sermon, I mentioned that – because the non-festival half of the Church Year's lectionary readings typically follow one Gospel account, any notable progression of thought in the lectionary readings also most often implies a progression of thought in Jesus' own teaching. So, if last week, Jesus *taught* about the Word raising up from the smallest of seeds the kingdom of God (on earth, namely "the Church") to be this strong tree, firmly rooted in and safeguarded by the outstretched arms of Christ Crucified, and solidly standing steadfast against all the winds and storms of the world... if that was the *teaching* in last week's text, then in today's text Jesus illustrates his teaching with real life.

In fact, how does our text begin? "On that day" – *which* day, the day Jesus had taught the parable of the mustard seed

growing up to be a tree so sturdy that all the birds can settle in and nest under the safety of the Church rooted in the outstretched arms of her cross-bearing Messiah, as proclaimed in the holy Word and the seed of faith it plants in the heart.

Yes, on that very same day, Jesus puts the teaching into practice. Perhaps that immediate application would be helpful for us... for, often the teaching is received with joy but becomes easily forgotten when it doesn't apply *immediately*. Because daily life distracts us, we begin to claim the teaching was "irrelevant," only then to have forgotten it when the exact situation arises some time later. Thus, we ought always be immersed in the Word of God, for the more we are in God's Word, the more we will appreciate its truth, its timeliness and the depth and breadth of its constantly immediate relevance to every situation of daily life.

Yet, for today's purposes, we should see that Christ knows the need to help his disciples immediately connect the dots. So, he puts them into the boat to go across the lake, knowing full well that the storms will come, and they will forget the day's parables (after all, "what do mustard seeds grown into bird-shielding trees have to do with drowning in the middle of a storm," one might ask without connecting the dots), and they will need to learn that their safety is in Him... because that's where the Word is always pointing us... right to Jesus.

We know the account well; but, consider it in light of the parable Jesus just taught: have you ever wondered *why* he is asleep in the boat during a storm? Is it just because he's disinterested, motion sick, or a heavy sleeper? Couldn't the image be misinterpreted to think Jesus is oblivious to our immediate needs? But, recall the parable: the mustard seed grows up so large "so that the birds of the air can make nests" in its branches. They can nest and settle in without a care in the world because of the trustworthiness of the kingdom of God as it has been grown up by the power of the Word that points to Christ. And, to illustrate that comforting truth, here is Christ himself, nestled into the boat cushion, settled in without a care – even during a threatening storm that batters the boat so that seasoned fishermen fear for their lives. But, the promise holds: you are safe in the ark that is the Christian Church – why? Not because the Church is itself your guardian and Savior, but because it belongs to the God and Christ who *is* your guardian and Savior.

And that's a key point in Jesus' teaching in today's text, isn't it? That, to have him in the boat with us, to have him as the one actively and immediately and presently caring for the life of the Church, is to have **God** with us – Immanuel – not just a celebrity whom adoring fans have mistakenly idolized as a god, not just a *messenger* of God, not just a good teacher *about* God,

but to have God Himself in the boat with us. To have God with us is no small matter. How sinfully do we worry that He is asleep and unaware, so that we even growl at him to wake up and show the least little bit of interest in our plight!:

- “God, don’t you care that we have Covid?! If you’re not going to immediately eradicate it, at least stop serving us at your altar for a while so that we can take care of it ourselves!”
- “Lord, don’t you mind that the country of our citizenship seems to be burning to the ground on all sides? If you’re not going to raise up a political Messiah, at least suspend the Fourth Commandment for a time so that we can devote ourselves to true patriotism!”
- “O God, supposed Great physician, don’t you care about my cancer, my heart disease? If you will not heal me, at least give me authority over my own body to care for myself as I see fit!”
- O, Lord of Marriage and Family, do you not care that my spouse and I are struggling, that my children seem to be sliding away from their baptismal faith? If you will not act, at least allow me to redefine expectations of marriage to defend my interests, or allow me to concede a few articles of the Faith my children think are outdated, so as to keep their love?”
- O, Giver of all good things, don’t you care I don’t have all the joy and contentment I want; at least, then, turn a blind eye as I choose to be my own god; turn a deaf ear to my self-petitions, “My will be done.”

Now, how does God respond to all this fist-shaking? Let's take a step back for a moment and consider that:

There are two ways to interpret how God is going to see us through difficult times when our trust in Him wanes. One is to say that God defends the Church from evil only by his mercy and compassion. That sounds very "gospel-like," and most of the Christian Church in America took this route during Covid, saying, "In Christian freedom, do whatever emergency thing you need to do. God will understand because he is merciful." But, is that what the Scriptures say?: Does Jesus say to his followers in the storm, "Do and think whatever works best for you right now, and I'll be here for you when you've gotten yourself through this mess"? Again, does he awake and say, "Gee, tell me how *you'd* like to calm the storms, and I'll do it *your way*"?

No, rather he controls the situation and chides their doubt and skepticism: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Or, as in our text, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" That's the Scriptural route – that God *defends* us (let's be careful to distinguish his defending us and '**saving us from harm**' – first article of the Creed – from his **saving us from our sin** – second article of the Creed. Perhaps a better word than "saving us from harm" would be "safeguarding" us from harm). From sin, He saves us by His mercy and grace. But from harm, he defends us and

safeguards us by his *holy might, his fatherly goodness, and authority over His creation*. That's the Scriptural route, as God silenced Job's complaint:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. And, who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?”

Stunning, really. We don't expect such scathing rebuke of one of the world's earliest victimhood complainants. Repeatedly, God blasts away at Job's arrogance in questioning God's plans, and God humbles his pride.

But God doesn't blast Job just to heartlessly lecture him, but to awaken him to the subtle reality of his doubting and questioning: “Job, do you really think My plans can be thwarted? Do you really think I've lost control over My creation?”

Let's be honest... that's what we often think, isn't it? That's why people leave the faith! They think that God's Word, His holy will, His plans might be done in *heaven*, but we just don't think they're doing enough here on *earth*. We wonder if his will can be done on earth, whether His kingdom can come upon the earth, whether He really has any say in our daily bread or maybe it's just about me working overtime for it.

How easily we fail to see not only how God is at work behind His chosen instruments, but how powerful the Scriptures

say He is to govern and care for all creation. Yes, it seems the *first article* of the Creed is so often challenged by our sinful psyches... as we assume the God powerful enough to create all that we see before us has now somehow lost His influence and authority over His handiwork... and now, the new god in charge and with all the answers is Me. When we don't like God's plans, the substitute God is always Me. And if Me is threatened by the storms so that Me realizes he/she is a false god and no match for the true storms of life, like death, then Me begins to panic and rewrite reality... either growing bitter or growing despondent in Me's unbelief regarding God's authority over his handiwork.

Yet, what do the Scriptures say? What do we see in our text: that winds and waves obey Him not merely to carry out a moral of the story that we should feel less anxious about daily life; the winds and waves listen to Him because they know He is God and they know the Word of God is not to be mocked. They know the authority of God is no joke. Even inanimate objects like rocks will confess and sing his praises if the faithful turn cold!... How contemptible are we sinners that we think it is our place to decide whether or not the holy Word of God should be cherished...whether we deem the God *worthy* of being listened to, heeded, and trusted! We even think we have the authority to

determine whether God's work in history gets to be counted as a part of true history, or whether God himself even "gets to exist!"

Yet, even Covid submits to Him when He says, "Yield to the doctor's efforts, the therapeutics, the recovery efforts, the vaccines; above all else, yield to My timing; this pandemic will go so far and no further," He says. And it will not end before or after He determines it to be so. Yes, all of creation listens to Him. Waves cease, flood waters recede, rocks give water, manna falls from heaven, water gives new life, bread and wine host the Body and Blood of Messiah, mountains could move when the capital "F" Faith (the pure doctrine of Christ Jesus) ...that Faith of the mustard seed is confessed. That faith, the object and author and perfecter of which is Christ Jesus, that faith may take cover with and know safety in Him... not because he is a mere sympathizer and consoler, but because He is the God-man who stretched out his arms upon the cross and uttered even more powerful words – "It is finished" – so that we might have shelter living life at the foot of that cross.

God's plans in Christ Jesus cannot be thwarted. He will see us through pandemics and diseases and disasters by calling us to repent of our clamoring, frightened faithlessness and comforting us to rejoice in God's forgiving us, joining Himself to us, and clinging fast to us... all because of and for the sake of Christ Jesus.

He will safeguard and deliver as He sees fit, just as He did, for example, for our congregation through Covid.

Now, you might say, “Well, that’s easy to say *now*, Pastor. But what if things had gone differently. What if people had gotten sick and died or the authorities had closed us down?” God is not God *conditionally*. He doesn’t stop being God just because He allows us to be disciplined by illness, over-reaching authorities, and so many other consequences of the Fall for which we have a share of the blame.

His ways are not always our ways; His wisdom is far above our wisdom. And his kingdom is not of this world, so that it sometimes may seem this world is untamed in its rebellion against God. But, against such storms, the Church still has the outstretched arms of Christ crucified. We still have the shade of his cross, the certainty of the empty tomb, and the safety of his churchly ark. And, He promises to bring that whole Church out of this world and to that final promised land that is the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. That’s our inheritance in the safety of the outstretched arms of Christ Jesus. That’s the certain ‘shade’ in the heat of life’s day under which we can settle and make our nests. That’s the strength of the boat when the waves are crashing against the Church... a strength so certain and secure that it leaves us nothing to fear, but rather- as

Luther says – we may simply (in certain confidence) lie down in the boat and peacefully recline with Jesus.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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