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“Navigating the Storms”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 4:35-41

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One of the unique things about living on Cape Cod, is how being near the water is such an integral part of our lives. Flying to and from Indiana last week underscored that fact. For example, we needed to cross water over a relatively big bridge, in fact a couple of big bridges, just to get to the airport in Providence. As our airplane made its approach on the way back into Providence, the view out the window was of massive bodies of water. Then, getting home and checking out the newspaper, I found many stories that related to water and where we live. Stories concerning our ponds and beaches, boating, fishing, the Steamship Authority, and much more. And, too, I think I'm like most of you in that we feel there is something special and comforting in living near the water. The magnificent vistas, the fresh air, the sea breezes, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and, let's not forget, the wonderful seafood. And yet, as modern day people, even with all our familiarity and knowledge concerning the sea, we also know another important fact. That raging storms can quickly arise. And so – the sea is to be respected.

But things were a little different for those living in Biblical times. Certainly they derived their food from the sea – they fished, they traveled on the sea, typically staying close to shore. But, 'respect' doesn't adequately describe how they felt about the sea. Instead, Biblical people were terrified of the sea. Terrified. So much of it was unknown. In the opening chapter of Genesis it states, “When God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The imagery of waters and darkness and a void... is basically a scene of nature in chaos until God brings about land, sky and light. And later on in Genesis it says, “Then God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarmed.” You could imagine how Biblical people were afraid of the sea, what was in it, and the power and chaos it was capable of creating. So is it any wonder that the writers of the Bible used stories about the sea and those raging storms to teach some important lessons on how to overcome fear? Today we're going to hear three of those stories - about Noah, Jonah, and Jesus.

First, Noah. Shortly after the creation story, regretfully we read in chapter 6 of Genesis: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth and that every inclination of their thoughts was only on evil continually... and the Lord was sorry that he made humankind.” Thus, the flood. But, the

Bible says, “There was one righteous man, blameless, who walked with God.” That’s a wonderful description, don’t you think? Someone walking with God. You can just imagine – seeing a good friend walking down Main Street, and you catch up to that friend, and the two of you begin walking together. Both of you adjusting your steps and movements accordingly, so that you get in rhythm with one another, journeying and communicating together. It reminds me of that great hymn, *In the Garden*. “*And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other, has ever known.*” That was Noah and God.

But the world around Noah was evil, so God sends a flood. Remember now, the waters back then represented chaos and terror and destruction. So God tells Noah to build an ark and coat it inside and outside with pitch, to keep the waters out. And the ark did just that. It allowed those on board to survive. And today a flood comes at us, not with water, but with all the hatred and violence and evil and sin that exist in the world. The flood comes at us with illness, stress, worry, addiction. And so we too need to build ourselves, and get on board, an ark in order to survive the chaos. And that ark, is the church. Where we hear God’s word, where we find God’s peace, where we learn God’s wisdom and direction for our lives. It’s interesting, don’t you think, that this very sanctuary, with all its great support beams and ribbing and planks, so much resembles what could be the inside hull of a ship. Yes, John Wesley is our ark. This church is like a great ship sailing through the chaos, keeping those destructive flood waters out. And I think we are blessed in this regard. But the fact of the matter is that we need to invite more people inside. We need to protect others against the flood. The lesson of Noah is that we all need to build, and get on board, an ark.

Our next lesson comes from Jonah. Now this story is so much more than a child’s tale about Jonah being swallowed by a whale. You see, Jonah was a prophet in Israel. And God told Jonah to go and preach repentance to the people in Nineveh, a great but wicked city to the east, in enemy territory, Assyria. But Jonah decided he wasn’t going to go. In his judgment, he didn’t think those people in Nineveh deserved God’s mercy, they only deserved God’s punishment. So Jonah decides to disobey God and run off in the opposite direction, heading west. He gets a ticket on a boat to Spain. But God thwarts his plans by sending a terrible storm which puts the boat and all those aboard in peril, as they’re about to drown and die. The crew asks, “Who on board has caused this?” And they cast lots. It was widely believed in the ancient world that lots were a method of divination that could determine the will of the gods. Well, the lot fell on Jonah, and the crew throws him overboard where he is swallowed by a great fish. And immediately the sea becomes calm. Three days later, the fish vomits Jonah out on land,

right back where he started. So reluctantly, Jonah now goes off to preach in Nineveh. And lo and behold, those in the city actually listen to what Jonah tells them. They repent, and the city is saved through God's great mercy and love. The writer of the Book of Jonah must not only have been impressed with Jonah's effective preaching, but also must have had a sense of humor, because he tells us that even the animals wore sackcloth and repented. As for Jonah – instead of being happy with his results, he's angry, because God saved those people. And he goes off and sulks. Now it's hot out and he begins to burn and get faint, so God grows a plant to shade Jonah. And then God allows a worm to eat and destroy the plant. Jonah again is upset - angry that God didn't save the plant. So God admonishes him, effectively saying, “Do you have any right to be angry? You feel sorry for the plant dying, which you had no part in creating in the first place, but you have no sorrow for the 120,000 souls living in Nineveh?” And, finally Jonah gets it. God's mercy and grace and love is for everyone.

It's interesting, I read that the Jewish Talmud, which is a written version of Jewish oral law, teaches a similar lesson about God's great compassion. Jonah probably should have been aware of the story, which goes like this. At the time of the Exodus, God was very busy and so he appointed a band of angels to take care of the parting of the Red Sea. There they were: the angels looking down from heaven waiting for the Israelites to arrive. When they did, the angels used the power of God to part the waters of the sea and the Israelites went through safely. But now came the Egyptians, all the men with their horses and chariots. Instead of allowing the waters to begin flowing immediately, thus preventing the Egyptians from entering the sea, the angels waited until the Egyptians got out into the middle of the channel. Then they released the waters and all the Egyptians drowned. The angels were happy and singing and God comes by and asks what's all the celebration about. So the angels tell God what they did. But God becomes angry, saying, “How dare you sing for joy when my creatures die. Don't you know that the Egyptians are also my children.”¹

Thus the lesson from Jonah is this: don't go against the will of God. For two reasons. One, for yourself. Because think for a moment of some of those tough storms you've gone through in your life. Was it really just bad fortune, or random suffering? Or, was it because you may have been constraining God's will for your life in one way or another? Not living or doing as God wanted? And, two, don't go against the will of God because you're only going to create chaos in the lives of those you touch, like those sailors caught in the storm with Jonah. Because think a moment of how your anger, your stubbornness, your attitude, may have adversely affected others. You see, God's will is for us not to be

¹ Talmud, Megillah 10b and Sanhedrin 39b

judgmental, or think that we're better than others. God's will is that we love one another. And someday we will all have to look back, and I don't think any of us want to say to ourselves, "Who was I?" "Who was I... to think I could disobey God."

Our final sea story and lesson comes from our gospel reading today. Jesus and the disciples are making their way across the Sea of Galilee when yet another terrible storm comes up. The disciples are in fear, terrified by the raging water. But where is Jesus? In the back of the boat asleep on a cushion, no less, the picture of abiding peace. So they wake him with their troubled cry, "Don't you care!" Don't you care! This is a familiar cry all of us have lifted to the heavens at one time or another, haven't we? So Jesus gets up and calms the storm, but he admonishes the disciples for being afraid and having no faith. And that's what this story is really all about. Faith and trust in God versus fear. You see, the disciples represent all of us as we make our way through the stormy seas of this life. For when the trials and troubles confront us, our first reaction is fear. The pandemic has been a perfect example of this. But Mark tells us that in the midst of this terrible storm, Jesus is totally at peace, totally calm. Why? Because Jesus knows that the storm will never harm him. He has power over the storm. So he could sleep. But there's more. You see, Jesus being asleep represents a divine power that is asleep within all of us. When Jesus awakens, he gives commands of silence and peace, and the winds and waves have no option to but obey. And we awaken that same power in our lives when we have faith. Faith and trust that Jesus can and will calm the storms that come our way. So that we can be at peace, confident that Jesus is in control.

Today we heard three stories about how to navigate those raging seas and storms in our lives. First... build an ark, second... never oppose the will of God, and third... discover the peace and power of Christ through faith in Him. Amen.