



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR B, JUNE 20, 2021

1 SAMUEL 17: 1A, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; PSALM 9:9-20; 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-13; MARK 4:35-41

## WHO IS IN OUR BOAT?

**Mark 4:35-41** [*When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*]

We call the space where we gather here for worship the cathedral “nave.” The word has a long and heralded tradition in the Church; “nave” is from the Latin word for boat, from which we get words like “navy.” Many churches have ceilings that reflect the hull of a boat and other imagery drawing us to consider our connections to the water. The image of this big concrete box serving as our boat made me chuckle this week, but you may know that concrete boats are actually a thing.

I had a parishioner in my first church back in Arkansas who had long since retired from his work as an industrialist based in Pittsburgh. He was born in 1914; his grandfather had co-founded a business building skyscrapers,

bridges and roads with partners Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Mellon. Ed, my parishioner, who had spent a career in the family business, loved concrete, and though widowed and homebound when I knew him, would regale me with story upon story at his kitchen table when I brought breakfast from IHOP as part of our sharing communion.

Ed was a great storyteller. Once he told me about building a concrete boat in Seattle. It was the 1970s, him newly retired and in search of a new hobby, he told of building a yacht with a concrete hull and decided to enter the annual Seattle to Honolulu race. At this point in the story he dropped his head and mumbled, “Oh, that was a disaster,” as if

briefly reliving the traumatic memory. Curiosity sufficiently piqued, and the fact that he was alive in front of me thirty years later, I asked for the rest of the story.

The boat served us well, he said, but he hired his friends as his crew, offered to pay them with an unending supply of beer on the journey...then dropped his head again, and said, “Oh, that was a disaster...”

What happened, Ed? “Well, we were not skilled navigators. I knew we were in trouble when the Indonesian Coast Guard boarded our ship...Head drop again, “Oh, that was a disaster.”

With this third refrain of disastrous memory, he told me that the government of Indonesia required him to hire a seasoned captain who got them to Honolulu two weeks after the race ended. He left the islands by air with his wife, never to see the boat again.

The master storyteller who laid down the Gospel of Mark delivers a captivating story of a boat on open water—in this case the Sea of Galilee. The scene is situated between the west bank where Jesus has been telling stories in his own right—parables, cast alongside the hard life his Galilean companions had there to help make sense of it—and the east bank land of the Gerasenes, where it was even

tougher to eke out an existence. For some reason, Jesus decides to make the passage by boat, as the sun was setting, and just as a storm is blowing in.

These fishermen tagging along should have known better—they knew how to read the skies and how to measure the wind with a raised finger. It is no small storm; we are told it is a great storm—the Greek word *meas*...a mega-storm. The sort that could sink ships.

This is still early on in Mark’s gospel, and we are let in on the secret that those disciples won’t get till the very end, and maybe not even then—that Jesus is a messianic figure, the Christ, with divine powers capable of even stilling stormy waters.

Perhaps we sitting in this boat are a bit humored by the disciples’ appeal to sleepy Jesus—do you not care that we are perishing? Maybe we don’t identify with them in the moment, but the story is designed to draw us in nevertheless.

Is there any part of you that wants to be in that nave with Jesus? And, at some level, isn’t that why you are here in this nave today—to be in the boat with Jesus, even when the storm builds? Especially when the storm builds?

Water, and especially open water, is one of those archetypal images that attends to a range of emotions—we are drawn to the water, we need it to live, for our cells to respire, for our spirits to be refreshed, for our souls to be renewed. And yet there is also an archetypal portal into the psyche's deep chasm of fear, where watery tendrils tighten their grip, pulling us down into the abyss of a swollen, choked panic.

This nave is not a place we come to circle the wagons, to clench up against all that imperils us.

This nave is not a place we come to be assured of any righteous superiority or immunity against the wiles of the world.

We come to this nave to be reminded that Jesus is in the boat with us, or to put a finer point on it—to be reminded that this Christ resides deeply within you. Will you awaken him?

The storms still come, and we tell the story of Jesus week by week in this nave so that when the storm comes, as it will for all of us sooner or later, we will remember that Christ is there.

St. Augustine said it this way: “*So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, [and your] boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering...[remember] Christ is asleep in you...Rouse him, then...*”<sup>1</sup>

The storms still come. Sitting in this nave will not inoculate you against them. It was six years ago this week that nine people studying the bible were killed at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston. A year ago this week our city and nation were roiling with a latent realization that racism is more strident and insidious than many of us once believed. This past week the Supreme Court used a technicality to rule against the city of Philadelphia in a case essentially declaring that same sex couples could be deemed unfit to serve as foster parents if agencies choose to conclude that on religious grounds. It was hurtful, and we gather in this nave this morning to tell a different story—one of dignity and respect, justice and peace...one in which Christ says get in the boat together. That's how we find our way.

The storms still come, but we have a story of hope and courage to help navigate through the storm, and we gather in this nave this

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Sermons 63:1-3*, as cited by Sarah Jackson Shelton at <http://day1.org/1326-the-sleeping-jesus>

morning to tell that story. It is a great story! It includes grand and joyful accounts of same-sex couples being great parents who join us in this nave, and we know Christ better because of their presence and witness among us. Our story includes a new priest leading our worship today—the first Black American man made a priest in the history of this diocese, raised up here in this cathedral community, and we know Christ better because of his presence in this boat. It

includes a story about a big concrete box, never finished, but still serving nearly a century on as a beacon of buoyant hope on the hill, a lifeline and a testimony to all that Christ is present in this stormy world, and that no one is beyond the reach of his outstretched arms of love, nor should they be from ours.

That is our story, folks! Full of hope. And Lord knows this broken hurting world needs hope right now. So share it! Live it! Be it!



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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