

We pray, Lord Christ, that you would be the light of our discernment and the wings of our imaginings and that you would be the ground of our journeys, now and forever. Amen.

The story this morning from the gospel of Mark takes place by the Sea of Galilee. It is evening. After a long day spent preaching to the crowds, Jesus and the disciples leave by boat for the other side of the lake. Jesus falls asleep in the boat and continues to sleep, even during a wild storm. Although many of the disciples are seasoned fisherman, they panic and I imagine them shaking Jesus awake roughly and yelling over the fury of the storm, "Teacher, don't you care that we are drowning?" "Teacher, don't you care?" That question is one of 4 questions in this story, each of which could be the subject of a sermon. Frederick Buechner, a well-known preacher, offers this advice about Scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks." Think about some of the great questions the Bible asks us – "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4), "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22) "What are you looking for?" (Jn 1), "Do you want to get well?" (Jn 5) "What is truth?" (Jn 18) Buechner goes on to say, "When you hear the question that is your question, then you have already begun to hear much. Whether you can accept the Bible's answer or not, you have reached the point where at least you can begin to hear it, too."

So let's go back to the question the disciples ask Jesus, "Teacher, don't you care?" Many of us know this question well. Some of us come easily to the belief that Jesus cares for us. Others, for various reasons, do not. Some of us have been wounded by bad religion. Others have suffered forms of abuse — emotional, physical, sexual — that make it very hard to trust in anyone's goodness, even God's. Others of us have sought help and experienced a sleeping Jesus. Did Jesus care that the disciples were about to be swamped in a boat? Does Jesus care that we are up against some tough stuff in our lives?

Yes, the answer is yes.

But caring doesn't mean that all of our problems will go away
or that everything will always turn out all right.

Jesus promised to be with us always, even, especially, in the storms of our lives.
He didn't promise to take them away or prevent them from happening.

The next two questions are Jesus' questions.

In the calm after the storm,

he asks them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Why are we afraid? Fear seems to stalk us throughout our lives.

As children, we are scared of the dark or Santa Claus.

You learn pretty quickly as a parent that Santa looks terrifying to a 2-year old.

Teenagers are well acquainted with fear –

fear of being excluded, being made fun of, and social media pressures
that are hard to imagine for those of us who grew up without them..

And then we move into adulthood

and I don't know of any more fear-inducing moment
than when your first child is born.

That is just the beginning of endless worries
about their happiness, wellbeing, resilience.

And, of course, it never ends, no matter how old our children are.

And then we move on into middle and old age with fears about our health
and that constant drumbeat always at the back of our minds, the fear of death.

We are mortal.

And we haven't even mentioned the bigger threats
of pandemics and climate change.

It seems as if there is always at least one if not several things to be afraid of.

In fact, there are few things to be as scared of as when Jesus said,
take up your cross and follow me. He meant it!

The next question is, "Do you still have no faith?"

Well, sometimes we do and sometimes we don't.

Mark frames this story with 2 very different views of the Kingdom.

In the chapters preceding the calming of the sea,

Jesus describes the kingdom of God as small, secretive, and quiet.

The kingdom is like a mustard seed, so tiny it's almost invisible.

The kingdom of God is the sowing of seeds so tiny
they're often snatched by birds or choked by weeds.

In the chapters which follow today's Gospel story, however,

Jesus manifests a kingdom of dramatic, supernatural power.

He casts out demons, raises a little girl from the dead,
heals a hemorrhaging woman, feeds five thousand people
with a few handfuls of bread and fish, and walks on water.
To have faith is to hold these two pictures of the kingdom in tension.
To allow God to reveal himself in both.
Yes, sometimes Jesus demonstrates his power
in miraculous, Technicolor ways.
At other times, though, he wants us to trust
that his quiet, abiding presence in our lives is enough.
Jesus' power can be paradoxical; it comes to us in seeming weakness,
in quiet whispers and tiny gestures.
The hiddenness of God, in other words, is simply that. Hiddenness, not absence.

It's interesting, helpful I hope, to juxtapose this gospel story
with the other reading this morning from 2 Corinthians.
The Gospels seem to be full of questions but, interestingly,
Paul's writings contain almost no questions.
Unlike, Jesus, who taught by zinging pithy, unanswerable questions
to his followers, questions that still sear our hearts today,
Paul was more of a didactic teacher, laying out all the reasons
we should believe or do something.
He is filled with passion and conviction
and he won't rest until we not only agree with him
but have become active followers as well.
So Paul's style is completely unlike Jesus'
and he also couldn't be more different from the disciples.
Unlike them, as they stand trembling and questioning in the tossing boat,
Paul is standing on firm ground with Jesus as his foundation.
He is serenely and absolutely confident, not only that Jesus cares,
but that in and on him alone, rests all that we are. He is anything but scared.
No one would have ever asked him as the disciples asked of Jesus,
"Do you not care?" He cared so deeply, so completely.
Paul is saying to us in this passage, Don't waste your time being scared.
Don't operate out of the restrictions of fear.
If our foundation is in God, we have nothing to fear. Nothing.
God is our beginning and our ending and all that gives us life in between.
Don't squander this marvelous life that God has given us.
God is always ready to listen. God is always ready to help.
Now, today, is the time God is ready to listen.
Now, today, is the time God is ready to help.

Paul describes what his life has been like since he became a follower of Jesus – he’s been jailed, beaten up, slandered and sleepless and yet he cannot imagine doing anything else. He thrives on all of the tumult and discomfort. Because being alive in God, working for those things God loves – compassion, justice, mercy, freedom – is so much more worthwhile and lifegiving than anything else he can imagine. And he wants us to experience how exhilarating that life in God can be. Anything less is accepting the grace of God in vain. Open your hearts he says to his readers. Enlarge them to the point that they can take in all of the beauty of this world.

So we have two ways of encountering God in front of us. We might be the kind of person who revels in questions, whose life history seems to be strewn with various questions we have explored. It’s the questions that really resonate inside us, that challenge us, that won’t let us alone until we wrestle with them a bit. Most of these questions have no answer but they address issues that never grow old. When you hear the question that is your question, press in close and listen: God is near. Or we might be the kind of person who just knows, knows, that God is there. There is a deep and abiding faith inside us that cannot be shaken. It was and is and always shall be. However we find God, in the questions or the certitude, in the wrestling or the resting, God is there and eager, eager, to be found by you. The only tragedy is not looking for God at all. That would be a terrible waste of the marvelous life that God has given you. Amen.