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Mark 4:35-41

ROCKING THE BOAT

If you are like most people, you have dreams that recur again and again – dreams of flying, or falling, or being chased and finding it difficult to run? I have two dreams that haunt me again and again. In the first, I am in college and I am a no show at some particular class (probably a foreign language or math class that I could not talk my way out of). I am running to get to a room where there is an exam being given at the end of the semester, but I haven't been going to class. In fact, I have no idea what the class is about or what I was supposed to study; but I need it to graduate. Just as the exam is handed to me I wake up.

A second dream is like it. Only it occurs in the present. I am speaking to a large audience some place, but I can't find my manuscript, or I can't find my way to the auditorium, or both. The crowd grows larger and the hour grows later, and something keeps me from getting where I am supposed to go to do what I am expected to do. I wonder if I can do the speech or sermon without a manuscript, and what would happen if, finally, I were dangled over such a moment without any notes? Could I preach without notes? Could I speak out of my own experience in the moment and trust that the words would come? I mean, don't I know to do this by now?

“And they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. I wonder if you caught that particular phrase in the text. I think I've missed it all these years. Just as he was. What is Mark talking about? What haven't the disciples bothered going back to get or to do? It sounds like they are in a hurry, and they need Jesus to come with them.

What is so urgent that it can't wait until morning? And as one scholar put it, why is Jesus, the one who announced the journey “to the other side” to begin with, suddenly cast in this passive role? “They took him with them” sounds a

bit like a toddler that you buckle into the car seat as you head home to bed. “Shall we put him in his pajamas first? “No, let’s not wake him; take him just as he is.”

In all honesty, I think that the phrase “just as he was” means tired from teaching and healing all day. I think it means exhausted, which the writer may have added to explain why, after all, even the messiah might fall asleep in the boat on the way. Today we might wonder if he hadn’t shaved, and had a five o’clock shadow — but since he probably had a beard, this wouldn’t really apply. Or I wonder if he has already fallen asleep and sudden woke up and remembered that he was expected “on the other side.” And maybe he looked like we all look when we first wake up?

I’ve seen all the pictures of Jesus hanging in churches. He always looks fresh and ready for anything. But here is a rare hint in the earliest of the four gospels that there must have been times when Jesus of Nazareth had his moments, and not all of them were ready for prime time. “Just as he was?” I know the old gospel song, “Just as I am?”—which was to be sung in my boyhood church at the end of the service over and over until someone came forward to be saved, but this is Jesus we are talking about!

Is he not dressed properly? Does he not have his notes? Is the hour late? Is there perhaps a crowd that is gathering “on the other side?” Does this mean there were times when even Jesus may not have been at his best — but was needed urgently, “just as he was?”

People have told me that they sometimes they dream that something happens in the middle of the night and they have to appear somewhere in their nightclothes, or “just as they are.” Did your mother ever tell you to wear clean underwear just in case you were in a car wreck? Have you ever worried that something really important might happen in your life just when you looked your worst?

In my imagination I see Jesus with heavy eye lids, and dirty fingernails. I see him wishing that he had never suggested that they go to the other side (which as we all know was Bible code for where the Gentiles are). But the disciples took him at his word and commandeered him (“leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was”). It helps me to imagine a conversation that might have been, but never made it into the Bible. Something like this between two of the disciples:

“Didn’t he say, ‘let’s go to the other side?’” “Well, yeah—but look at him, he doesn’t exactly look ready to go anywhere — especially not to the other side. You know it’s dangerous over there, and we had best have our talking points

and a good night's rest. And besides, the weather doesn't look so good. I mean, there's a nice big crowd right here and these are our people? Can't we all just get some sleep and then go to the other side in the morning?"

"Well, fine, you tell him. No you tell him. He said, 'let us go.' And if he is willing, we should be willing, and besides, you don't look so hot yourself. We'll take some other boats with us. Pull up the anchor and let's go. 'Right into that storm?' 'Yes, right into that storm'."

It is just one more crossing over and whether we like it or not, we all have to do this all the time. Three years ago, I stood in the back of the little chapel in the Paseo holding on to my only daughter's arm. Music was playing, and it was her wedding day. I knew what I was supposed to do — walk her up the aisle and then answer the question from Rabbi Packman, who officiated at her wedding, "Who brings this woman to be married to this man?"

What was I going to say, "Not me . . . I'm not ready for this?" She had already told me, "Dad, let's go."

When Cass turned 16 and was ready to start driving, I was not ready for it, because I didn't want to cross over from the land of getting to drive him everywhere to the land of lying in bed at night wondering if that call will come, the one that begins, "Mr. Meyers this is Officer Duncan of the Oklahoma City Police Department." For a while I used to hope that he couldn't find his keys so I could drive him. Because I looked at him, "as he was," and he didn't look ready to me.

So they get into the boat and push away, and Jesus promptly falls asleep. Which confirms my suspicion that he was exhausted, since sleeping on a boat heading to a dangerous destination in stormy weather is not ideal for sleeping like a baby. But if you read what comes right before this story, he has been teaching all day and he has been teaching one parable after another. That is tiring; all those people scratching their heads and wondering what in the world you are talking about and asking strange questions.

And you'll have to forgive me, but this is how my mind works. I wonder if he snored. I've always wondered if Jesus snored — because if more people would just let themselves consider that possibility of a snoring Jesus, we would make real progress toward closing the gap between saying that Jesus was a real human being, and meaning what we say! Just as he was. Just as we are — all of us, crossing over from wherever we are right now, to where we must go — through one storm after another.

My goodness. When I think about it, the ministry of Jesus was one dangerous crossing after another. Beginning with his baptism. When he got in that line, he signed his own death warrant. A voice comes from heaven that I suspect only he heard, but the voice might just as well have said, “Your life just got a lot shorter.”

Here is the world as it is — entrenched power, cruelty in pursuit of wealth, gross inequity in the sharing of the world’s resources. Second-class citizenship for women; disposable children, dictators that don’t know when it’s time to leave, occupying armies that are on a noble mission and can’t understand why people hate them. Or let’s make this closer to home shall we? It needs to rain around here, and if you are a farmer, you are not sleeping well at all. It is now the driest six month since the dust bowl days.

When Jesus was lowered down into the waters of the Jordan by that wild man John, I wonder if he could hear his own heart beating? I wonder if he knew that everyone had changed and there was no turning back?

Every time he healed someone; every time he rocked the boat, the unclean spirit would cry out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth.” Which is demon talk for, “would you kindly leave us alone, because we are having ourselves quit a run here, and you are the only prophet we have seen around here for a long time that frightens us. Because we know that you don’t know how to stay in your place and not rock the boat. Give it up. Take a nap. You look like you could use some sleep.

I now believe that everything he did was in one form or another, a crossing over. When he told a parable, he took his listeners to the other side. When he allowed them to pick grain on the Sabbath, and the authorities challenged him, he said, “So your rules are more important than your children?” (That’s a paraphrase, but I think it’s accurate). If someone is hungry, God doesn’t close the store and say come back tomorrow.

When he went into the Temple that fateful day and turned over the tables and made a mess of things, he proved once and for all that anger management is not always the best approach. Sometimes you have to rock the boat and say, “This cannot stand.”

The remarkable people’s movement that is sweeping the Arab world is a movement nobody saw coming, like the fall of the old Soviet Union, another world-changing event that none of the experts predicted, not a single one. All of a sudden, people who have been oppressed for a long time decide that they will go, at great risk, to the other side.

The authorities don't want their boats rocked, especially when it is already taking on water, so they always blame outsiders. But the spirit is wild and beholden to no one. When Jesus said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me," we hear that as a great thing. You go Jesus. But he might just as well have said, "Therefore all boats will be rocked, and I may not even make it to the other side." Therefore, let us go . . ."

And you know the story. A great wind arose and the boat was being swamped. And the question that his disciples ask is the existential question of all questions. It is the lament of this and every age. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" We are drowning here and you are asleep.

And the response to that question is the answer to the problem of human existence itself. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

I have come to believe that the word faith is so corrupted in our time with connotations of what one "believes that I would like to see the church largely replace the word faith with the word trust. Have you no trust? Oh ye of little trust.

One thing is certain. The storms will blow up, suddenly, and sometimes fiercely, and you will wonder why no one seems to care that you or someone you love is perishing. Oh, you picked a fine time to go rock the Gentile boat. We could have just called it a day, but no, you said, "Let's go" and now we are going alright. We are going down.

But I suspect that what Jesus knew is that if we don't go we are dead already. I lived in Detroit for a few years, and General Motors knew how to rest, how not to go (to the land of the electric car, or just any car that someone actually wanted to buy). They knew how to avoid the storms of innovation and risk. They knew how to stay on the only they had ever known—why go to the other side? An electric car? You've got to be kidding. Only a sissy would drive an electric car!

In 1970, someone dared to name a day after the earth. Earth Day. "Do you not care that we are perishing?" Oh, well, right — but I say we stay on this side, because if we go to the other side, we might lose our way of life. "But don't you see? Cleveland's Cuyahoga River is on fire; and Rachel Carson warned us in the sixties that one day we might arrive at just such a moment as this and discover a "Silent Spring." So let's not just do one more study, let's go to the other side. Let's change our relationship with energy and the earth.

When Dr. King was called to stand with sanitation workers in Memphis 43 years ago this week, he looked very tired. There was dissent among his followers, who thought he should speak only about integration and never about economics, but then how is justice to be done when people who work a grueling job every day don't make enough to live? Money is one of the primary ways that we keep some people on one side and other people on the other side and then we use the threat of storms, or tall fences, or gated neighborhoods to keep anyone from crossing over. But Dr. King said, "Let's go."

Health care for everyone? Don't rock that boat; don't set sail into that socialist storm; let's do it with tax breaks and the magic of the marketplace — let's give people medical savings accounts so that they can save enough money to get sick and also to retire.

Have you noticed that Jesus seems willing to talk to not only everyone, but also everything? He talks to the water. He talks to the demons. He talks to Pilate. He talks to the woman at the well. He makes eye contact with the whole world, and things change. He talks to the opposition (what a concept). He talks to hostile foreign heads of state, he talks to sinners, Samaritans, and people who are really out to destroy him, or at least won't lift a finger to save him.

Even his own disciples, who are fishermen after all and should know a thing or two about the storms that blow up on the Sea of Galilee, have to be talked to — eyeball to eyeball. Have you no trust?

Well, sure — but Jesus, we're not exactly in a strong position here. You look tired, we've got no weapons; no real plan when we arrive on the other side — and now the boat is sinking. How much trust are we supposed to have?

And Jesus seems to be saying, "As much as you need to cross over."

Just a little bit more than the winds and the waves; just a little bit more than your fear of conflict; just a little bit more than your appetite for power and dominion; just a little bit more than the sin of self-doubt that infects us all; just a little bit more than our fear of death. That's how much you need. Enough to cross over.

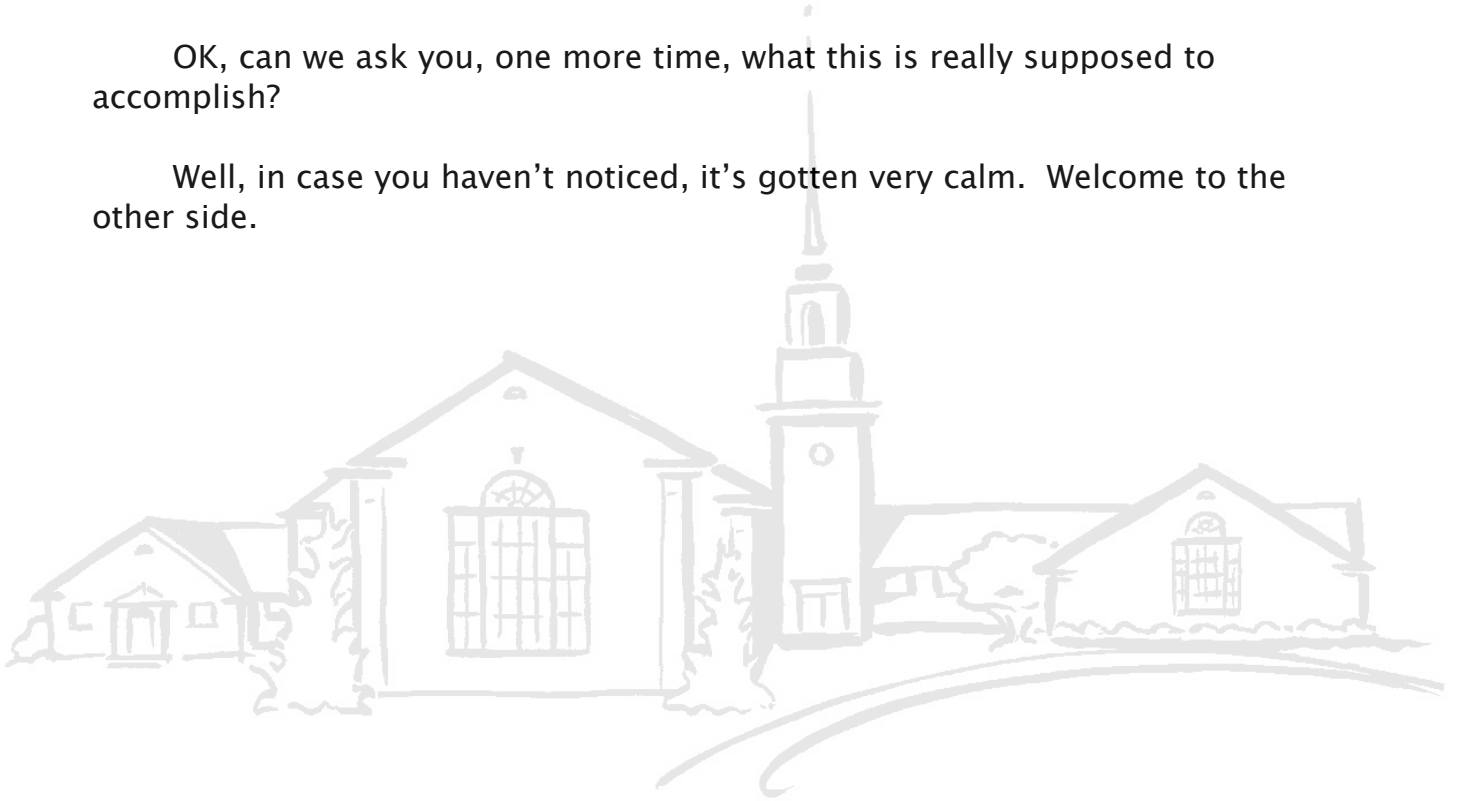
Could we take a little time to get ready? "No. I'll take you just like you are."

Could we find a bigger boat? "No, this one will do just fine."

Can we be a little more circumspect in talking to our enemies? “No, I want you to talk to everyone, and to everything, and if nobody will listen, then pray for them.” Our enemies? Yes, pray for your enemies.

OK, can we ask you, one more time, what this is really supposed to accomplish?

Well, in case you haven’t noticed, it’s gotten very calm. Welcome to the other side.



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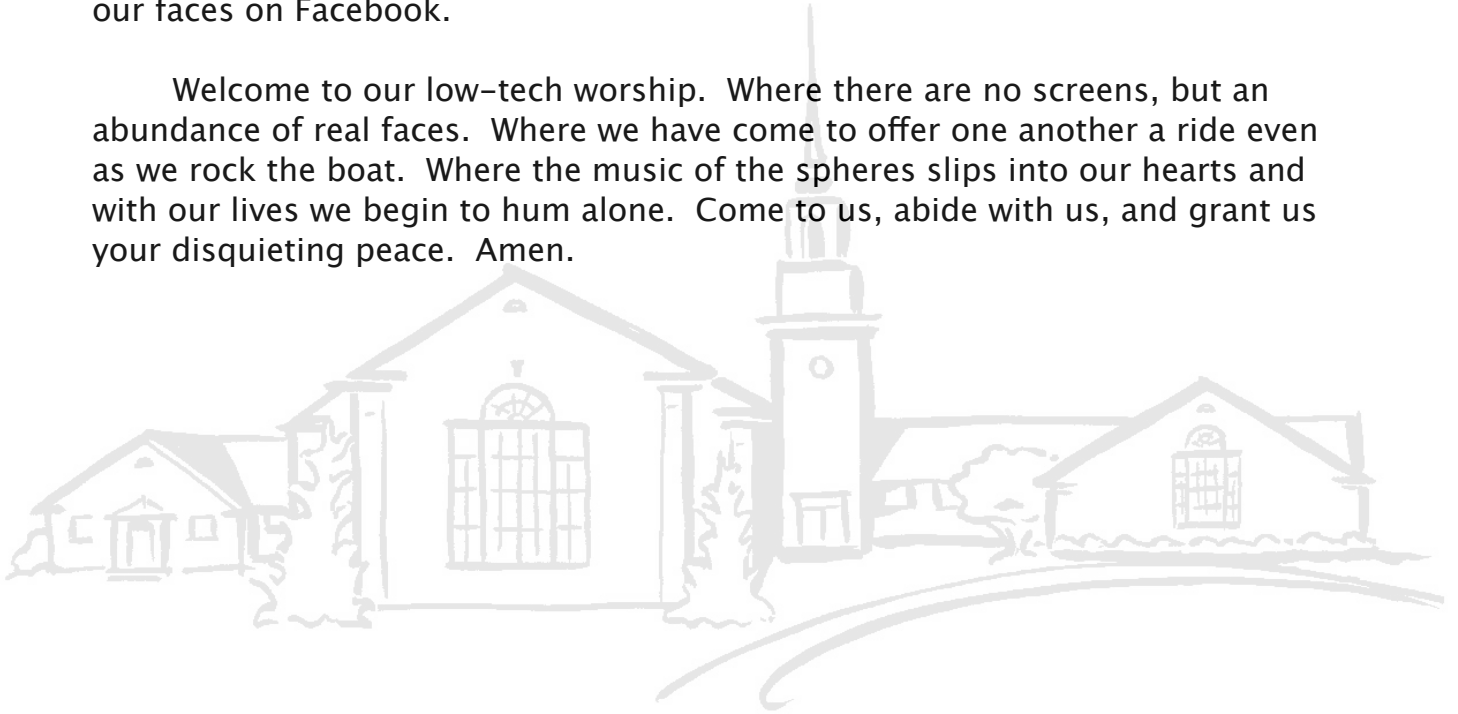
Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, April 10, 2011

Lord of Life, here we are, one tiny slice of your creation meeting in the remarkably homogenous little corner of your world called N.W.OKC — Oak City as we like to call ourselves these days. Most of us are white; by the world’s standard, most of us are rich; most of us don’t think about where our next meal is coming from, and most of us are interested in spirituality, but precious few of us are interested in being undone.

Many of us notice that we are tired, and that sleep does not come easily, and Oklahoma’s poet laureate Lauren Zuniga wondered aloud in one of her

poems how it is that we need energy drinks when we don't work as hard as most of our ancestors, the kind you can get at the convenience store that offer both caffeine and serenity at the same time — except that we are always staring at screens of one kind or another, and it is this passivity that makes us tired. We are meant to do, not to contemplate doing. We are meant to “go,” not just to think about going. We are born to look each other in the face, not just share our faces on Facebook.

Welcome to our low-tech worship. Where there are no screens, but an abundance of real faces. Where we have come to offer one another a ride even as we rock the boat. Where the music of the spheres slips into our hearts and with our lives we begin to hum alone. Come to us, abide with us, and grant us your disquieting peace. Amen.



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