

REFLECTIONS



THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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?”

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A QUESTION OF FAITH

by

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Every story in the Bible is layered with meanings. Miracle stories are no exception and most, if not all, are there for us to explore and probe the meaningful depths they contain. Miracle stories in the Bible are there to deepen our faith that God is involved in our day to day lives. Paraphrasing the author of the Gospel of John at the close of chapter 20, we read, “Jesus did many other *miracles and signs* in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that you might *have faith* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and *that in faith you will live confidently* through him.”

We don't need stories to prove the existence of God or proof that God can perform miracles because most of us, through the eyes of faith, have witnessed the miraculous handiwork of God in our own lives. Miracles always take us by surprise, but it takes faith to see them as such or they merely become an unexplainable phenomena that has no particular meaning in our lives. One of my favorite biblical scholars and authors is Rabbi Jonathan Sachs who wrote in his book, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, “Faith is about seeing the miraculous in the everyday, not about waiting every day for the miraculous.”

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The miracle of Jesus calming the sea paints a picture, an icon, or a triptych to meditate on.

If this miracle story was to be depicted as a triptych, the first panel might portray a boat packed with Jesus' disciples. The boat has a mast with the sail loosed from its fittings and flapping wildly in the wind. The boat is being buffeted by the waves on all sides and filling with water. Nobody is in control of the boat's rudder. Jesus is asleep in the stern near the rudder and appears oblivious to the storm raging about him. The disciples, drenched with water, are depicted pleading with Jesus to wake up, with gesture suggesting they want him to take control of the rudder. Jesus does not appear wet at all and has a serene expression on his face.

In the second panel, we see Jesus standing serenely at the stern, ignoring the rudder, with one hand raised to the wind and the other pointing to the waves. He appears to be talking while his drenched disciples are crouched down and holding on to the sides of the boat, the mast, or each other.

In the third panel, Jesus hands are still in the position we saw them in the second panel, but now the sky is blue and cloudless, the sun is shining, and the sea is as calm as glass. The disciples are no longer wet, their face are lit with a mix of amazement and laughter. If this triptych was in a museum, a docent might ask, “As you are looking at this triptych, what do you think is going on? What is your take away?”

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Like most miracle stories in scripture, this story takes on a parabolic hue that allows us to see it as a metaphor for something much larger than a one-off phenomenal event some millennia ago. As such, let's take a deeper look at this iconic miracle story and treat it metaphorically. Like all stories with a parabolic hue, their intent is to place ourselves in them in order to find their meaning. There are many ways to look at a story like this one. The following is just one example:

We're in a boat with Jesus and his other disciples riding on the Sea of Life. The boat's name is Faith. Storms happen very quickly on the Sea of Life. When they occur they can rock Faith to the point we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed by the never-ending onslaught of issues and problems driven by the winds of disappointment, discontent, division, and general dysphoria. When these storms continue for a time, it can appear that Jesus is sleeping on the job so we pray, “Wake up Jesus! Don't you care about that we're about

to fall apart and sink in our despair?” So Jesus wakes up and he says to winds of our disappointments, our discontents, our divisions, and dysphoria, “Peace! Be still” and suddenly things quickly settle down and Faith is sailing calmly on the Sea of Life.

The story doesn't end there. Jesus has some questions of his own, *“Why were you afraid? You are in safe in Faith. You were acting as if you're paddling through the Sea of Life without a boat.”*

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It is easy to lose sight of faith during the storm squalls that quickly happen in our daily lives. There are times when it feels like we're trying to paddle through life without a boat. Even when we're sitting in the boat of Faith, the nave of a church, we can be swamped and buffeted by the fierce wind and waves of life. We feel drenched with disappointment, discontent, and dysphoria. It can seem as though God is not present, but God never leaves us. Within such life-storms, however, we, like Jesus' disciples, can experience the calming presence of God in our midst.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Where is your faith?” He wasn't criticizing them for a lack of faith, but making them aware of it. The irony in Jesus' question is that it was their faith that led them to awaken him to take control of the boat they were in. What they didn't expect was Jesus ignoring the rudder to direct their lives but rather taking control the elements of their situation; the wind and the waves, the very causes of their concern. God controls the very issues we are concerned about, and in the calm that ultimately follows such life-storms, the faithful see God's miraculous handiwork in their lives.

Amen.

HYMN

*My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary,
Savior divine! Now hear me while I pray, take all
my guilt away. O let me from this day be wholly thine.*

*While life's dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread,
my zeal inspire. Bid darkness turn to day; wipe sorrow's
tears away, nor let me ever stray from thee aside.*

(Ray Palmer 1808-1887)