

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Mark 4:35-41

Even though He sleeps, Christ is in the boat!

It is kind of funny how often the pictures don't seem to match up in any clear way with the lessons on our bulletins. I knew one pastor who swore he'd go crazy if he saw one more picture of a mountain. I really had to laugh when I saw the cover for this week, though. There is a picture of the Christian life for you. A young couple, sitting on the same chair, husband pontificating on some Bible verse presumably, and wife listening attentively and with enthusiasm. Tricia and I used to sit like that, and then we got married, and now, after I've packed on some seminary pounds, I don't know we could find a chair to hold us. Many of us want this to be the picture of the Christian life, but then you turn it over, and actually read Scripture, and you realize a better picture would have poor old Job covered in boils with his wife telling him to curse God and die or Jesus' terrified disciples straining at the oars in a furious squall.

Boats and God don't go together well. Water is not the problem. Jesus walked on water. Moses walked through the Red Sea. Joshua walked through the Jordan. The issue seems to be more with boats. When God judged the earth in the flood, Noah was holed up in a giant ship that he built while being mocked by the neighbors whose carcasses now floated by him. Jonah boarded a boat to escape God's call to go to Nineveh, but ended up in the belly of a giant fish. St. Peter left a boat to walk on water, which went well for a while before he thought through what he was doing and sank. St. Paul was shipwrecked on a boat to Rome and bitten by a snake. When God tells you to get in a boat, or out of a boat, testing and trouble seem to be the order of the day.

Yet, when Jesus told the disciples to get in a boat with him and cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a sea known for the nasty tempests that could kick up without notice from time to time, they got in a went. They took Jesus out to sea, just as He was, no questions asked. Faith was pretty easy when all seemed well. But they would soon learn what Noah, Jonah, and, later, St. Paul, learned all too well: boat plus God equals a test of faith.

When I was younger my parents sprung for fancy swimming lessons for me. My Uncle Jeff and my Dad threw me in my aunt's pool and told me I could swim. I couldn't swim. At least, I didn't think I could swim. But, you know what, when sink or swim came, I learned I could swim. Sure, my Dad and uncle would have saved me if I'd sunk, but that didn't mean that I shouldn't be tossed in the water. So also, Jesus saved St. Peter when he sank, but that didn't mean that he didn't learn by taking those first few steps of faith off of the boat.

Years later, I realized that this is the same way that infants are taught to swim—infants who are probably not as big of babies as I was. My cousin learned to swim that way. It was amazing. They tossed these little kids in and they just took off like fishes. Of course, they had been taught to hold their breath, to go under water, to paddle and so forth earlier, but they still had to get wet in a big way to learn the lesson. So also, Jesus had just been preaching and teaching, explaining parables to the disciples, before they got into the boat. But, sometimes Christians have to get wet in a big way for the lesson to really take hold.

The Christian life is one of faith. The Bible tells us this repeatedly and clearly. Faith is taught with the Word, that is most certainly true. The Faith is based on historical facts and figures. The Faith is learned, but, unfortunately, it is not tested like algebra or chemistry. It is tested in the water. It is tested with times when our will, our ability, our capacity to do anything to save ourselves or fix the problem have been tossed out the windows and we must rest alone in God's will, His ability, and His capacity to save, revealed in Christ. Faith is trust, not a rational decision. All our planning and plotting gets blown away when a tempest too great for us to weather alone comes along.

At first glance, it would seem the disciples passed the test. After all, what should faith do in times of turmoil besides look to Christ. And that is what they did. They turned to Christ to save them. They held out hope that there was something He could do to help, even if it was straining at the oar with them. We would expect Jesus to wake up and praise them. But, no, just the opposite happens.

Jesus was tired. You know the feeling. He had been preaching, teaching, counseling, traveling, and so forth. He had been in the sun all day. He was tired. Who can blame Him? And, like a lot of tired people, Jesus didn't want to be woken, especially unnecessarily.

And that is where we can get distracted or confused. How did the disciples wake Him unnecessarily? He was sleeping. They wanted Him to save them. Obviously, they had to wake Him up. Nope. They needed to go back to Christmas and remember who it was sleeping in their boat.

How easy it is to lose Jesus divinity in His humanity, in His simplicity and run-of-the-millness at times! He sleeps, so we assume we must wake Him to save. He is so like us, and so we forget how different He is in His similitude. Think back to Christmas. Remember some of the verses we sing so joyfully then. "This is he whom heav'n taught singers Sang of old with one accord; Whom the Scriptures of the prophets Promised in their faithful word. Now he shines, the long-expected; Let creation praise its Lord" (CW35). He who sleeps is He who reigns from all eternity. He who takes His pillow and rests in the stern is He who sees all, knows all, possesses all power, and uses all power to save. He is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is weak to take our place. He is strong to save.

Jesus had come to save. He had to die on a cross, not drown on the bottom of the sea. With Him with them, the disciples were safe. They did not need to wake Him. It was enough that He was in the boat. He was their guarantee of life. Whether he slept or strained at the oar, He was the One through whom the seas were made, and by whom the ocean's boundaries were set. Asleep or awake, the eyes, ears, and heart beating with love of His divinity was active and in no need of rest. Weak faith awoke the Savior, and weak faith received its salvation. Strong faith would have let Him sleep and ridden the storm out. Strong faith too would have received salvation. The Savior does not begrudge them their weak faith—He answers its plea—but He does exhort them to stronger faith. Both weak faith and strong faith look to Jesus, but strong faith trusts more that He is who He is.

There is a debate about the origins of Aran Knitting, some proposing a noble and colorful origin and others refuting it. As you might guess, the story of the noble and colorful origin is more interesting. Here it is. Irish families out of love knit sweaters out of love with a waterproof knitting style and a unique design to mark them with their family's design, which, by the way, made it easier to identify bodies when they washed ashore. Christ also has dressed in a waterproof robe of His righteousness, proven in Baptism when we lived in the same waters in which our old Adam was drowned. And the family seal has been placed upon you, not that God might bury you when you wash ashore, but so that He might claim your body to raise it by the same power that brought our crucified Savior from the grave. No storm can swallow those dressed in Christ.

Luther said a proverb for the Church should be "Christ is in the boat, even though He sleeps," (Luther), and that is really all that matters. Has God called you into a boat lately, or allowed you to be placed into one, in the midst of a storm so fierce it seems it might swallow you up. Remember that the difference between the unbeliever and the Christian is not that one has troubles and the other doesn't, but that the Christian knows that Christ is in the boat, even if it seems He sleeps, even if it seems He should act quicker, and that Christ is their guarantee of life. That storm was good for the disciples. Three of four Gospels record it for that reason. Storms can be good for your faith as well, so long as they fix your eyes on Christ. As I have told you many times, when you look at the ceiling, remember it looks like an upside boat, and remember the Church is God's ark, weathering tempest and trial with Jesus at the head, whether He sleeps or strains at the oar. At times we might wish He would do something more spectacular than rest in bread and wine and speak promise through a minister, but it has always been enough and always will be enough for the Church to know that, no matter how loud the winds howl or the waves crash, Christ is in the boat, even though He sleeps. And He is in the boat, so you can sleep in peace as well, even while storms rage. Amen.