

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Year C

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Text: Mark 4:35-41

Title: “The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus: Calming the Storm”

We use to own a 25 foot sailboat which we sailed on the Saginaw Bay. I love to sail. There’s just something about being on the water with only the wind to push you about, something about having to work with the breath of God in order to get somewhere that feeds my soul. But my friend Bob Harvey doesn’t agree with me. Bob is a retired UM pastor who was not and is not a sailor--and never will be again. He was invited by Phil Rice, another UM pastor who many of you know. He has preached here a time or two. Well, Phil owned a sailboat and he invited Bob and Neil Sheridan, another RUMP—“retired UM pastor”—to head out on the Saginaw Bay for a day of sailing. The three of them were on the 23ft. boat that day when they started out under bright blue skies looking forward to a day away with fair winds to blow them where they would.

Now Phil is an experienced sailor, had been captain of his own boat for years. And so they were out there under the power of sail enjoying each other’s company and the gift of God’s breath. They had lunch on the boat and then at some point one of them noticed the sky was getting dark on the Standish side of the bay. Real dark. Black even. Phil—apparently--was a veteran of the storms that sometimes arise on the bay and wasn’t concerned, not in a hurry to get the sails down. They had plenty of time to take down the sails before it would get to them, and so they just kept on sailing.

He had no idea how hard and fast this storm would come. Before they knew it the storm was upon them. The waves were huge and because they didn’t get the sails down in time, the fierce wind pushed the boat over on its side, so much so that Bob flipped from one side of the cockpit to the other as he struggled to put on his lifejacket, so much so that Bob said the mast was actually in the water at one point. Water was pouring into the cockpit and Bob said he nearly fell overboard. Somehow Phil managed to get the motor going and headed into the wind. The boat rose to the top of the waves and then slammed into the troughs. Somehow they eventually managed to get the sails down and ride it out. The storm passed.

That night the evening news reported a tornado had been spotted in the Thumb. And so my friend Bob came home with this harrowing tale of his first and last experience on a sailboat. “Never Again!” he told me when I asked him if he wanted to go sailing with me.

Sometimes when we get together we’ll talk about that day--very briefly because it obviously isn’t a pleasant memory for him. And yet, it’s one of those experiences that describes what life can be like. We don’t always expect the wicked storms that come our way. We can’t

always predict when chaos will strike. We start the day thinking it will be fair winds and a beautiful day on the water and the next thing you know, something happens we don't expect and our lives threatened in real or imagined ways. If that isn't challenging enough, there are plenty of people out there who try to stoke the up our fears, especially in an election year. We are warned about storms to come, catastrophic storms that threaten our very existence. How do we navigate the voices, the storms, the threats?

I love the way the Gospel According to Mark tells the honest truth about life. It's like being on a boat together out on a lake that is so often beautiful. On this particular lake Jesus sails with his disciples, the Golan Heights look like cliffs along the eastern edge of Lake Galilee and the hills of the region of Galilee are on the western shore. So the lake is cradled between these two geographical highlands. Lowest fresh water lake on the face of the earth. Here, the winds can gain strength quickly from the north from Mt. Hermon--a mountain high enough to keep snow on its cap through the summer--and rush through the narrow valley in which the lake sets. Some say waves can get as high as 20 ft. in the 7 mile wide by 13 mile long body of water. Fierce storms! Enough to knock a sailboat boat on its side or swamp a fishing boat, causing veteran fisherman like some of Jesus' disciples to fear for their lives.

Jesus and his disciples are in the boat. They start out apparently with calm winds, but things change rapidly. The wind rushes through that narrow valley. The waves pick up, so much so they have trouble controlling the boat, so much so that waves break over the gunnels, and it looks like that boat is going down. And unbelievably there is Jesus in the back, sound asleep, with his head on a pillow.

The disciples on the other hand begin to panic. These are the people who were closest to him. Over and over again they've experienced the presence of God in him. If anyone should believe—if anyone should get who he is—you would think it would be them. You would think that his closest followers wouldn't be afraid, but not so. They get scared in spite of who they are discovering him to be. A little wind blows up in their lives and they panic. Jesus obviously isn't afraid. He's resting comfortably. But not the disciples. They're huddled together trying to decide if they should--and who will--wake him up.

Isn't that the way most of us live our lives as followers of Christ? Sometimes we get scared—we're anxious about something. We try to deal with it on our own. It might have something to do with being fiercely independent or maybe not wanting to bother God with something we think doesn't require God's attention. God has other more important matters to handle, after all. We decide not to wake Jesus. But when the fear becomes intense, we manage in a weak moment to call on Christ for help. Sometimes we're right with the disciples when they shout: "We're dying here! Don't you care?"

Now, you might think that having Jesus in your boat would guarantee some smoother sailing. I mean there should be something that improves our lives by following him shouldn't there? Shouldn't we be able to avoid the storms? But, no, with Christ in your boat you meet the same scary wind and waves as everybody else.

Okay, so we meet with the same storms but at the very least, when the hard weather comes you'd think you could count on feeling him work on your behalf, fighting for you, working the oars, bailing the water, but apparently not always. During parts of some storms it may seem for all the world as though Jesus is sound asleep. "Lord, don't you care?" And when that happens it's an appropriate question to ask. Every day, and throughout history, men and

women of incredible faith have cried that question from the darkest places: "Where ARE you, God? Lord, why don't you answer? Where's the help? I'm dying here!" Even Jesus cried this prayer from the cross. "My God, why? Why have you pulled out on me?"

Thank God that's not the end of the story. The Gospel According to Mark tells us that Jesus gets up, reprimands the wind and says to the waves: "Peace...Be still." The wind dies down and the peace does come.

One commentator makes the point that this story loses some of its power if we think of it as only a miracle story. Jesus does this amazing thing, but it's done. It's not going to happen again. Not to you or me. If it's just a miracle story then you might say: What could have been more of a thrill than witnessing this miracle of Jesus' calming the storm? But what if the miracle of breaking natural laws wasn't the only point? What if the miracle Jesus wanted to show them was not only the miracle of calming the storm but the **miracle of calming them in the storm** (see L. I. Sweet, Quantum Spirituality [1991], 165). **Was it only the waves and the wind Jesus was commanding, or was it maybe also their anxious hearts he had in mind when he said, "Peace...be still"?**

In Adam Hamilton's book upon which this worship series is based, he shares the story of one of their church staff members who faced a double mastectomy. (p. 108)

Throughout this whole cancer experience, the visual I've attached to it is of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus has been a presence in my boat through all the loving people he's put around me. They remind me that he is here with me and that the waters can be calm. Today my whole team gathered in the hall at the church, wrapped me in a prayer shawl, and prayed for me. Our team and lots of other people—church members, friends, family—have continually written notes and e-mails, or they've called or stopped by for a hug. For me they are the boat and the hands and face of Jesus.

I've learned so much about god's love as the recipient of all of this. Knowing that these people are praying for me, feeling Christ's presence and love through them has been the only thing that makes me calm and brings me peace I know it will continue to do so tomorrow. It's like riding a wave of prayer. I can physically feel it, the way you do in a boat when the water is calm (p. 108, The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus, Adam Hamilton.)

The presence of Jesus in your boat brings peace and calm in the midst of life's storms. It does, however, mean the need to trust that he is present and willing to support you, willing to calm you. Who is in your boat? Are the voices of fear and panic overwhelming you, then trust the One who says "Peace! Be still!" Trust the One whose peace passes all understanding.

Maybe you are aware that you are sitting in a boat right now. Early church architects referred to the space in which you are sitting as the "nave" which comes from the Latin "navis" meaning "ship". It's also the root for "Navy". We are shipmates in the Lord's boat this morning, and we are workmates for God when we leave here having experienced the calming

presence of God. When we are able to trust in the One in the back of the boat, we find our strength, our purpose, and clarity as we recognize what one hymn writer sang:

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

(My Life Flows On (How Can I Keep from Singing))