

Some Peace & Quiet

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 20, 2021

based on Mark 4:35-41

I begin with a TRUE STORY. The date is 1896 ...

... a midwinter day, off the coast of Massachusetts. The crew of a fishing schooner spots a bottle with a note in it. The schooner is on Georges Bank, one of the most dangerous fishing grounds in the world. Finding a bottle with a note in it there is a dire sign. A deck hand scooped it out of the water, the sea grass was stripped away, and the Captain uncorked the bottle and turned to his assembled crew and read to them the following fateful words:

“On Georges Bank, with our cable gone, our rudder gone, and leaking. Two men have been swept away and all hands have been given up . . .The one that picks this up let it be known: God have mercy on us.”

The note was from the *Falcon*, a boat that had set sail from Gloucester the year before. It hadn't been heard from since.

From this little bit of evidence it is believed that one of the Falcon's crew must have wedged himself against a bunk in the foc'sle and written furiously beneath the heaving light of a storm lantern. This was the end, and everyone on the boat would have known it.

How do people act on a sinking ship? Do they hold each other? Do they pass around the whiskey? Do they cry?

This man wrote; he put down on a scrap of paper the last moments of twenty men in this world. Then he corked the bottle and threw it overboard. “There's not a chance in hell,” he must have thought. And then he went below again. He breathed in deep. He tried to calm himself. He readied himself for the first shock of sea.”

That story, 125 years old, comprised the first paragraph from Sebastian Junger's 1998 non-fiction best seller, *THE PERFECT STORM*, about the loss of the fishing vessel, *The Andrea Gail*; which went down with all hands off Massachusetts in October of 1991 in what one meteorologist called "the perfect storm." It was perfect in that it was created by such a rare combination of meteorological events that it created conditions which could not have been worse: 120 mile/hr winds and waves which were higher than a ten story building.

You may remember that President John Kennedy, whose PT Boat was severed by a Japanese Destroyer in the South Pacific during World War II, had, on his White House desk, a block of wood with the words of an old fisherman's prayer carved into it: "O God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small."

We are gathered this morning in what churches often call sanctuary. Sanctuary, of course, means "safe place." Well, the central spot within that space where congregants gather for worship has long been known as the nave. It's not hard to make the little jump from the word "nave" to the word, "navy." It reminds us that the earliest medieval depiction of a church is a ship.

The meaning behind that is that the church is a little dedicated space where we seek safety and solace in a world that is very like the sea. It can seem calm and lovely enough, a summer breeze cooling your face, but in a moment it can all change and terrify. We need a place of shelter, all of us, and church should be that for all.

The first image of the Bible in *Genesis* chapter one is the image of the spirit of God hovering over a watery chaos like a purposeful mother bird hovering over her young in the nest. That is our founding image, people. That image is the rock our community is grounded upon.

Before the advent of this feminine image for God, there is nothing to creation but watery chaos.

The next archetypal water story in the Bible is, of course, that of Noah and his ark. In a children's sermon on the passage, I typically ask kids what an ark is, and they invariably say it's a boat ... and they are correct – but I also let them know that the Hebrew word for ark also has a *value* meaning to it. An ark is, in fact, a treasure box. It is a place God told Noah to construct that is meant to hold the things that God deemed most precious – in this case it is the remnant of all the living creatures of the earth.

Now, all that is preamble to this morning's story.

Like last week's tale of the sower and the seed, this story of Jesus is very like a parable. Jesus is in the boat with his disciples. The image the gospel writer, Mark, has in mind is a picture of Jesus in a boat on the sea of existence. He is with his people. It's therefore a story about us because, in a sense, we are also in the boat (remember Noah's treasure box) with Jesus, on a perilous journey.

Sailing with Jesus is no canoe trip on a placid lake. They launch out on a day with a few billowy clouds and not long after, there is a great storm. The waves rage; the boat is threatened. And Jesus? He is asleep! There he is, sleeping placidly on a cushion, curled up in the fetal position, sleeping like a baby, and everyone else is terrorized by the storm. The contrast between the peacefully sleeping Jesus and the terrified disciples is sharply drawn.

The disciples are beside themselves. They have no idea what the hell to do about their situation. It's them against the elements. The storm is an act of God, so they go to the one they think is close to God.

Their question is the same as ours when we are up against elements with which we have no control at all: *Do you not care that we perish?*

Their tone is fearful and strident. They've taken Jesus's cavalier posture as an affront to their existence. It may seem irrational of them, but it is what it is.

When so little is in our control and we find ourselves up against something that is, frankly, life-or-death, we all tend to get cranky.

I remember once sitting in a hospital waiting room for a friend. Sitting close to me was the cutest little blond-haired girl. She was two – maybe three. Her mother was right next to her looking at a magazine.

The little one sat there, rocking that adult sized chair as kids that age habitually do, looking straight ahead at nothing in particular, and she was saying one word over and over: “No.” “No ... no ... no ...”

She said it cheerfully enough; and I did not notice her NOT doing what her mother might have wanted her not to do.

When I looked closer I saw that this little girl was on oxygen. Her mother, as I said, sitting right beside her, was custodian of the oxygen tank.

There it stood like a little sentry with about twenty feet of coiled hose on it and my heart just filled up for her and her mom.

Soon, someone came out of the main door calling the little girl’s name and the mother said, “Let’s go; doctor’s just going to take a picture of your heart.”

“ ... just going to take a picture of your heart.” Well, that said it all.

When life is so out of our control: when we are so incredibly dependent on someone else or something else -- maybe the only thing we can do to save our sanity is just say NO – and to say it a lot.

You know the feeling. I know you do.

In the midst of the storm, when the illness threatens, when the clouds turn dark and the wind howls; when all seems lost, there comes this strong calm voice of Jesus that says “No. Stop. Enough!” Actually, he says, "Peace! Be still!"

It is meant for the storm, but it is also meant to be a message directed at our unquiet hearts, we who put ourselves inside the little story, we who inhabit that little narrative treasure box. And it delivers needed comfort to us.

The story does not explain how that is done. It only asserts that in the storm, Jesus cares, speaks, saves in some way. Here is good news in the middle of our worst times.

In this week's text we learn, NOT that God is omnipotent or omniscient – just that *God cares* and it's meant to be enough.

This week, even our very conservative US Supreme Court spoke a similar loud “No” in a 7-2 ruling against the voices of chaos that want to take away health care from millions of children in this nation. To the state of Texas, it said, loudly (in a way that only the Supreme Court has power to utter) “Stop your appalling threats against the health of children and the poor in this country.” “Enough of your mean spiritedness.” Maybe that's not the intent of their corporate message, but it is the message nonetheless.

The Texas lawsuit may be the last in the latest series of petty lawsuits against the Affordable Care Act.

Sadly, Texas has long been a foot-dragger when it comes to simple justice. It was the last state in the union to finally abolish slavery – the anniversary we call Juneteenth, yesterday, was made a national holiday.

Again, the federal government pronounced an historic, “No,” to the forces of racism and injustice that still rear their ugly heads every chance they get.

Let me repeat, the “No” I'm talking about here is a rebuke of the powers of chaos and meanness and are therefore a resounding “Yes” in favor of justice too long withheld.

Speaking for God, Jesus, in today's parable, said, “Peace, be still” to all archetypical powers of chaos.

Chaos vs. order.

Theologian, David Bentley Hart was a strong voice against what, 15 years ago we called, the *new atheists* – I'm speaking of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the late Chris Hitchens – three very bright thinkers.

These “new” atheists said that it is ridiculous to believe in some great, all-powerful, all-knowing force who governs the universe and determines the movement of everything. There is too much chaos in the world, and too much unresolved human suffering and pain, to believe in such a God, they have said.

David Bentley Hart says that thoughtful Christians acknowledge that with children suffering from cancer and heart disease *it looks* as if chaos has the last word in the universe, but we should deny it the last word.

Yes, it's as if sometimes the whole sea of life is in upheaval and what Christianity has to offer is this small but brave Palestinian peasant speaking a tiny, “No,” (like a three year old) to the chaos, but that word, “No,” is, somehow, in fact, the last word. It's a word that says to scoffers, “Not so fast. There may be more than we think, here.”

There's a wonderful documentary on Netflix now called, *Black Holes; the Edge of All We Know*. It documents the late Stephen Hawking's findings about how Black Holes that suck up everything, actually *emit* energy. That energy was first thought to be random; chaotic; defying the laws of physics – until a team of physicists determined that that energy was not random at all. It seemed entirely random, until they looked more closely. And what they found filled them with awe.

And that's how Mark's story of Jesus ends, too; a story that begins in the chaos of nature, echoed by the chaos in the hearts of the disciples who scream, "Teacher, don't you care if we perish?" -- and ends, finally, in a terrifying awe.

Jesus' calming of the wind and the waves did anything but calm those in the boat. They shook, asking one another, "Who is this? Look! Even the wind and the waves obey him."

So, look, we all know that bad things happen to good people, and on a daily basis. We are not ones who believe that only bad people suffer misfortune. Life is so often just plain unfair. Babies are too often born with heart problems. We know this.

Now, we all have our own ways of dealing with such a world ... rationalization, cynicism, Bible Study, yoga, prayer, meditation, denial, alcohol, wishful thinking – you name it. But what if God also has mysterious ways of addressing the worst things that come our way?

What if God is busy rebuking injustice, stilling some storms that appear and disappear around us? What if sometimes our anguished cries are actually heard and our tragedies are addressed. Not, of course, in *our* time, but in God's?

What if the arc of history does eventually bend toward justice? Might we find that to be as discomfoting as the initial storm?

The Rev. Fred Craddock tells a story I will close with – it's of a young pastor visiting an old, very sick, woman in critical condition in the hospital.

He asked her, upon leaving, "What would you like me to pray for today?" With her last ounce of energy she replied, "That God will make me well."

He sighed, then prayed, "Lord, if it be thy will we pray that this sick sister might be healed. On the other hand, if it is not thy will, we pray that she might be given a positive attitude, a willingness to accept her situation. Amen."

As soon as he finished his prayer, her eyes opened. She sat up in bed, threw her feet over the side, stood up, saying, "I'm well. I really think I'm well."

She bounded out of the room, heading for the nurses' station shouting, "Look at me!" she said, "I think I must be well."

The young pastor stumbled down the corridor, headed out of the hospital, into the parking lot. Before he pulled out his key to unlock his car, he looked up and said, "Don't you *ever* do that to me again!"

Amen