

Message for May 24, 2020

Mark 4:35-41 RSV

When I look back, it was one of the strangest things that took getting used to when we came to Milton. What I am talking about is the absence of Lake Ontario. I grew up in Oakville and since my parent's house was only about a mile from the shoreline, the lake in all its varied conditions was always there and it was a rare week when I didn't see it. When I took the Go train to Knox College I made a point of sitting on the south side so that I could see the lake. When I worked in Toronto all those summers ago, it was close to the lake at Queen's Quay. After my ordination when I went to my first charge of Brighton, Colborne and Lakeport, the lake remained a part of my life. The manse in Colborne was perhaps a mile away from the shoreline and I saw the lake virtually every day in my travels to Lakeport and Brighton. But then when we came to Milton? For the first time in my entire life I was not near the lake and as strange as it may sound, that took getting used to.

As you can probably tell I love the lake; indeed I love all large bodies of water. This explains one of my great pleasures in life which is simply sitting on the beach at Sauble doing nothing but gaze out at the water. God's people in days gone by however did not feel the same as I do. Indeed they hated the sea and lakes with a passion that we can hardly imagine.

The Israelite's origins of course lay in the desert. Then, after the Exodus when they settled in the Promised Land, they were confronted by what they called the Great Sea, known to us as the Mediterranean. It filled them with fear and loathing since it represented chaos and nature at its unpredictable worse. It was also the place where the leviathan and other great sea monsters lurked! To be fair though, they had good reason to fear the sea and other large bodies of water. With no compass or maps to guide them, going out to sea was venturing into the great unknown. Their ships were small and frail as well so it didn't take much to sink them. Perhaps the loathing of many for the water is best revealed in the last book

of the Bible, John's book of Revelation. When he describes heaven and the life yet to come he says that one of its greatest attractions is that the sea is no more. Truly our ancestors in the faith absolutely dreaded all large bodies of water and that is the background to today's scripture passage.

One evening Jesus decided to leave Capernaum and travel to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He and the disciples could have walked around the lake but as that would have taken far too long it was decided to go by boat instead. The Sea of Galilee was noted for both the suddenness and the ferocity of its squalls and sure enough one struck the little flotilla while they were out in the middle of the lake. The winds howled and the waves roared and before long the frail little ships were being swamped. But where was Jesus while all of this was going on? He was in the stern with his head on a pillow sound asleep!

Now the disciples simply couldn't believe it; here they were in danger of sinking and there was Jesus sleeping as if he didn't have a care in the world! They woke him up and frantically asked: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" Jesus' response was to command that the waves and wind be still. Then, turning to his disciples he asked: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" They however didn't have an answer. They finished bailing out the boat and continued on with their journey, all the while wondering, "Who is this man? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" Who was this man who could control the most dreaded elements of nature? What did this man mean for them and their lives? Indeed what does Jesus mean for us and ours?

In the days following the Second World War the World Council of Churches was formed. This organization looked long and hard for an appropriate symbol to describe itself. Inspired by the tempests of the time, a symbol was soon arrived at. The universal church was depicted as a storm tossed boat with a cross for a mast. This is an appropriate symbol for the church as it has made its journey down through the ages but the storm tossed boat can also be an appropriate symbol for each one of us as well.

If we want to, we can think of our lives as being like a voyage, and during our voyage we experience all sorts of different conditions. Sometimes our voyage is a peaceful one. There is a gentle breeze, the water is calm and there is nothing more exciting than the simple routine of our day to day lives. At other times our journey can be exciting; the wind picks up and we race across the waves of life bouncing up and down. And then there are the times when it rains or the winds are against us; we have to tack back and forth just to hold our position, never mind make any headway. At other times we may be becalmed or perhaps caught in a terrible fog, peering about in the gloom with a rising sense of panic trying to figure out where we are and where we are going. And then of course there are the times when the storms hit; the winds howl, the waves roar and the water comes crashing in and it seems as if we will surely sink.

The storms of life take many forms and vary in intensity. The storm for example may consist of the death of a loved one. It may consist of ill health perhaps, be it our own, our spouse's or that of someone else we are close to. The storm may sometimes consist of a family problem, a problem at work or money issues perhaps. And of course we are now living through what is for many of us, the storm of a lifetime; the present pandemic. This storm has had, in so many ways, a negative impact on all of us. Even now as things appear to be improving with such as more people returning to work and more of the stores reopening, the upset and fear remains. Can we venture out? Should we venture out? When will life get back to 'normal' and what will that 'normal' look like? The present crisis has left many of us floundering and when the storms of life strike we might well echo the disciples' cry, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"

Even as we ask this question though, we already know the answer. The great promise of the gospel is that God does care. That is why he became one of us in the person of his Son. That is why even now he joins us through the Spirit, the one whose coming we remember next Sunday at Pentecost. God most certainly does care. To be sure, we may not always be able to discern God's presence but nevertheless it is real; he is present and he is involved. Of course it takes faith to believe this and to trust in God our Father.

It is said that many years ago a passenger ship that was sailing from Liverpool to New York was captained by a man whose own family was aboard. One night a vicious squall hit. The ship was tossed about and all of the passengers woke up, many in a panic. The captain's eight year old daughter also woke up. "What's the matter?" the frightened child cried. She was told that there was a storm. "Is father on deck?" she asked. "Yes, your father is on deck" her mother replied. Hearing this, the little girl snuggled back into her bunk and in moments was sound asleep. The storm still raged but she had no fear since her father was at the helm.

We need not be overwhelmed by fear when caught in life's storms. We need not fear because we have faith and believe; rather we know that our Father is with us. With faith we can be sure that our anchor will hold no matter how grimly the storm may rage about us. To quote the old gospel hymn:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul,
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

Our ancestors in the faith feared large bodies of water with a passion that we can hardly ever begin to understand. "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" was Jesus' challenge to the disciples when they were caught out in a sudden storm. This is also his challenge to us when caught in the midst of life's storms, and that includes the one now affecting all of us. To quote a French fisherman's prayer: "Keep us our God, for your ocean is so wide and our boat is so small." How true. The ocean is wide, our boats are small and the storms may be both sudden and vicious, but keep us he does, now and always.