

June 20, 2021 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost – Reflection
1 Samuel 17:32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

As I mentioned last week the theme that has captured my attention as I prepare messages inspired by Mark's Gospel is: "The Kingdom of God has Come Near". The beginning of Mark's Gospel contains descriptions of what happened as Jesus worked and taught. We see in that work the reality of that statement that "the kingdom of God has come near" often manifested among the people to whom he had been sent. The healing of the sick and the casting out of demons was seen by St. Mark as a direct result of the kingdom of God coming near. Also, in order to help explain that reality, Jesus gave his disciples some word pictures such as the Parable of the Sower. While many of his parables required explanation in private, some of the imagery was powerful enough to make some sense of the impact that the kingdom of God coming near has on the earth. In the passage assigned for today we see yet another aspect of the kingdom of God coming near and the result of this manifestation is awe on the part of Jesus' disciples.

In the account recorded by St. Mark a routine event became an encounter which produced wonder and awe. Jesus and his disciples had been ministering – probably still in Capernaum – and it was time for them to move to another location. Jesus had indicated that the 'other side of the lake' was to be the next destination and so they got into a boat to make the crossing rather than making the journey on foot. The presence of experienced fishermen in the boat may have calmed anyone nervous about travelling on water, that is, until the storm began because anyone who has ever been on a boat in open water during a storm knows how frightening this can be. Everyone except Jesus was panicking. Fear of drowning was very real and so, when they saw Jesus asleep in the boat, they scolded him for not caring. The calming of the storm – this demonstration of Jesus' control over the environment – is quite a spectacular display. As I think about it in the context of 'the kingdom of God coming near' I wish to offer these few thoughts.

Our Collect for today contains the words: "**O God our defender, storms rage about us and cause us to be afraid**". Into the midst of what was probably an ordinary kind of day a storm threatened the lives of those disciples in the boat. This wasn't a storm that they were facing on their own since there were at least 13 people in the boat but fear threatened to overwhelm them anyway. 'Storms rage about us', the Collect declares, and it doesn't take too much imagination to translate troubling events going on in our lives into storms. The loss of control the disciples of Jesus

experienced in the boat is felt in many other events in our lives and fear is a natural reaction. The fact that Jesus was able to sleep through the storm tells me that he was able to find security in the midst of the trouble and I, for one, want to know how to do that. I believe his sense of calm came from his trust in the God who had sent him on the mission to the other side of the lake and on his greater mission of salvation. This confidence did not make him take unnecessary chances, such as throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, but it obviously allowed him to rest in the trusted arms of God and to not panic even when a storm was raging around him. I yearn for that ability. There have been times when I have been able to enjoy a sense of calm while others are fearful but more often than not I join the throng of people who are worried and upset. I have found myself, at times, wondering why God isn't doing something about the predicament and accuse him of sleeping on the job. When I read through some of the Psalms I realize that I'm not alone in that thought. Storms indeed do rage about us and cause of to be afraid so what are we to do about that? What might the fact that the kingdom of God is coming near have to say to us in the midst of our fear?

The disciples of Jesus cried out to him and he responded quickly to address the cause of their fear. It seems to me that we are to do a similar thing. The fact that the kingdom of God has come near means we can call out to God for help and trust that an answer is also near. In the case of the disciples in the boat the answer was dramatic and immediate. At other times the answer from Jesus came in a more delayed way (think of the raising of Lazarus) and at still other times the predicament is not removed but peace comes into the heart of the sufferer (St. Paul in prison, for instance). When storms rage about us and cause us to be afraid it is not a sign of weakness or a lack of faith that causes us to call out for help. Jesus chided his disciples about their lack of trust in God to keep them safe but he still stepped in to help. As the disciples gained in experience of God's goodness they grew in their ability to trust in the midst of difficult circumstances. This has been my experience as well. My life has had its share of storms but it has also had a share of God's peace being spoken into the situation. There have been many times when I have wondered if I will survive the storm or if the congregation in which I have been serving will survive. I cannot count the number of times God has essentially spoken to the storm and calmed the waves and each time that has happened it has strengthened my faith in God's care. I do not pretend to never being afraid but I can honestly say that I have grown in my faith. I sometimes contrast the disciples in the boat with the stories of the disciples after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John had been arrested but calmly faced the 'storm' that was

the ruling council. I take encouragement from the knowledge that my predecessors in the faith learned this level of trust in God which means that I may be able to do so as well.

We are surrounded by events that may be viewed by us as storms and they may be causing us to become afraid. We, like those disciples before us, are still learning to trust in God completely and God understands this fact. As we cry out in our fear our Friend and Saviour will step in and bring the effectiveness of the Kingdom of God to bear on the situation. That may be a dramatic and immediate removal of the source of our fear or an increased ability to cope with the circumstances. Regardless of the answer we can grow in our trust that God is always by our side. We grow in this trust in our personal lives and we grow, as a community of faith, in that trust together. The stories we have of storms that have affected our faith communities are also stories of the way Jesus has been with us through those storms. Perhaps we need to share those stories in that light - as examples of how wonderful our God is. In generations to come when the story of the Pandemic are told I hope that the evidence of the Kingdom of God coming near are also shared. There are indeed some things to fear and at times Jesus may seem to be asleep in the boat and, if he is, perhaps that means God has everything well in hand and we can try to calm down. If we do remain afraid we are to call out to our Friend and Saviour and He will speak peace into our lives. Let us remember the times when God has helped us in the past. In a conversation I had this week with someone who is in the midst of a storm he remarked that he felt that he was in the middle of the "Footprints" poem being carried in the arms of God. If you feel the storms around you are causing you to be afraid I hope you can take comfort from the fact that you are being held in the loving arms of Jesus.