

## **Pentecost 4B**

### **Mark 4.35-41**

**Sunday, June 20, 2021**

One can easily argue that there are very few things in life that hint at the grace and peace of God more than the Fire Island Ferry. The smell of diesel fuel and the monstrosity of the boats themselves notwithstanding, stepping onto the Fire Island Ferry is a little bit of heaven right here on earth. The boat ride from the south side of Long Island to the thin, barrier island does not immediately conjure up images of heaven. However, after driving across the Throgs Neck Bridge, navigating Long Island traffic, and locating a parking spot in either Bayshore or Sayville, cares and concerns, worries and anxiety, indeed, STRESS itself melt away as the ferry leaves its moor and you head toward Fair Harbor or Kismet or the Pines. Fire Island's advertising promotes as much, "Even though it's only a short distance from Manhattan, Fire Island is a world away from the hustle and bustle of city life." It is the quintessential summer experience. Peace, quiet, relaxation. A slice of heaven here on earth.

Contrast this with what the disciples in our gospel text for today experienced. Their reality is more like a bit of hell here on earth than some celestial encounter. Rather than peace, quiet, and relaxation, they come face to face with the calamitous force of nature in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. This encounter is certainly not life-giving but, rather, life-threatening. To make matters worse, their friend, Jesus, remains oblivious to the whole thing, asleep in the back of the boat. At their wits end, the disciples cry out to Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" According to Mark, Jesus wakes up, rebukes the storm, the tempest ends, incredulously asks his friends why they are afraid and still have no faith, and leaves the disciples dumbfounded. Moreover, they find themselves more afraid than they were amidst the peak of the storm. "Who then is this," they wonder, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?" As one translation of the Greek--*phobos megas*--aptly renders it: they were afraid with great fear.

Afraid with great fear. A space and place that none of us want to occupy. While we live most of life somewhere between the two poles of peace and tranquility and a near death experience, it is clear which scenario we most desire. Buffeted by the struggles in life, who among us has not echoed the disciples' plea, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" or it's contemporary iteration, "We are dying down here! Help!" Thus, how often do we dream about those ferry-like moments when the world of cares and concerns impinge upon us? "Why can't we live in *that* reality more often?" we think. Indeed, the

capriciousness of life confronts us as a friend succumbs to a stroke or some other malady reminding us of our own fragility. The storm may be the chaos of relationships or work, where we possess little control and even less ability to manage the challenges that break over us like the ongoing surf. And, at times, the storms of life may be the literal thing. A blizzard or Noreaster or flood or tsunami or wildfire. All natural disasters that remind us of our limits and the overwhelming forces of creation. In those moments it is natural to be afraid with great fear. Indeed, we might feel as if we are Job himself confronted by God speaking out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? . . .

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"

Face to face with our limits and our powerlessness can be a deeply disturbing experience. Frightening. And fear is at the heart of today's lesson. Fear, however, is confronted in this story, not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the disciples. They do not, in their own power, still the storm or save themselves. Rather, it is Jesus who calms both them and the storm with the power of his presence. Which is the promise of the text. Despite our doubt and fear and faithlessness, Jesus is present to us and for us in the same way that he saves the disciples on the Sea of Galilee.

A photograph taken shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in the fall of 2005 shows the devastation of a cemetery in the historic district of the city, with trees toppled, debris covering the ground, and several burial vaults broken and smashed. But in the middle of the devastation, untouched by the storm, stands a statue of the risen Christ, arms extended wide, offering a benediction of calm amid the chaos. This is the icon for our experience amidst the chaos and cacophony of life. Jesus, with us, for us, and sustaining us throughout.

Of course, we do not always experience that presence or know of Jesus' providing. Indeed, we may think at times that we are abandoned. Yet, precisely in these moments, the experience of the disciples is a helpful frame for us. Jesus calms the storm. The disciples are saved. This is all well and good. And would that we have experiences that mirror the disciples. However, their encounter with Jesus after the calming of the storm--*phobos megas*--they were afraid with great fear should make us consider our idea of what engagement with the risen Christ meeting us in each moment means. The

disciples had spent months with Jesus. Nevertheless, they had no idea with whom they were dealing. While the calming of the storm reveals Jesus' power and power to save, they have been blind to him all along. Which may be another way to understand being afraid with great fear. They are in the midst of something well beyond them. They are out of their depth. They have no understanding of the one with whom they travel.

And is it not so with us as well? Christ present amidst the struggles and Christ bringing peace amidst the chaos. Yet, do we understand that presence in our midst? Is it just for our well being, salvation? Do we recognize the presence of Christ in each moment, beyond the pressing needs that we encounter? If so, does the recognition that Christ--and that power and power to save--is present in each moment shake us awake to a more profound understanding of God's presence with us *and* a more pressing call for us to live into the life God gives? Not that we are protected from every challenge, but, rather, we are equipped to embody that presence in the world trusting that it is with us and it does possess the power to transform lives, to save. How do we live if we believe this to be true? How do we see the world and one another if we trust this to be a part of life right now? How do we engage others if we live in the promise that we are never alone? And what do our daily actions look like if we trust that Christ walks with us daily? Attention to this reality can be difficult, particularly when we are buffeted by the cares and concerns of life. However, we miss out on the peace that Christ gives when we fail to recognize the gift of that presence here and now and always. The Fire Island Ferry offers a reprieve, though it is only seasonal. The gift that is Christ is eternal, and we are invited to partake ever and always.