

JUST AS WE ARE
Selections from I Samuel 17; Mark 4: 35-51
Fourth Sunday in Pentecost • June 20, 2021
by Pat Berger

Did you catch that line in verse 36 of our reading from the Gospel of Mark? The writer said, "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was." What does that mean? Had Jesus spilled his dinner on his robe? Did he need a haircut? But: they took him just as he was, because Jesus said, Let us go to the other side.

And the storm about which we are about to hear in this reading is not the first storm at sea in our Bibles. When God first spoke to create, we are told that the earth was a formless void; it wasn't until the second day that God separated the waters, and the second day is the only day that it isn't recorded that God called the creative efforts "good." In the story of Noah, the "storm" word wasn't used, but we are told that the waters swelled mightily: things were assuredly out of control. There was a storm when Jonah was on a ship, running away from God. Any of those stories, and maybe others, may run through our heads when we read our gospel lesson for today. Some in this room may have been in storms at sea -- and I am most grateful not to be included in that number.

Jesus, however, had requested that they go to the other side of the sea. Going to the other side of the sea, at that time and in that place, was dangerous business. Some of these disciples may indeed have been fishermen in their previous lives, but most often their boats would have been out from the shore just a bit. They would not have gone far, certainly not to the other side of the sea; they all knew that demons inhabited the center part of that sea, and they caused terrible things to happen to small fishing boats. If you were in the center of the sea when those demons stirred up a storm, there was little chance that you would get safely back to shore.

And remember that at this point in Mark, we are still four chapters away from where the disciples really would know who Jesus was. Still,

they had seen some of his work already, heard some of his teaching - - clearly this man was someone special, and if he wanted to go to the other side of the sea, if he wanted to venture into Gentile territory, then away they would go. With Jesus. Just as he was. They got in to the boat and started off; Jesus, for his part, went to the back of the boat and went to sleep.

And, the aforementioned storm came up. The storm was fierce enough that the boat was being swamped; even though several of the disciples were fishermen, or maybe because of this, they were quite frightened. This was no little squall. They awakened Jesus: didn't he care that they were about to die? Well, of course he cared, for goodness' sake; this was the son of God (but they didn't know that yet). So he stilled the sea; this IS the son of God. He wasn't being gentle with the sea, when he said, "Be still!" The Greek word translates as well to, "Be muzzled!" and to, "Shut up!" He was stern with the sea, and then there was a dead calm. Yes, he cared for the disciples; they would be held in his hands under all circumstances. Did that take care of their fear? Not quite; the NRSV says that they were filled with great awe; King James version says that, "they feared exceedingly;" the Greek translates best to, "they were afraid with great fear." We aren't told whether they were still afraid because their boat was almost swamped -- or if they were afraid because of what Jesus had just done: who calls out to the elements and the wind ceases and the sea becomes a dead calm? If one didn't know who Jesus was, there was more than one thing to be afraid of here.

David's story from First Samuel requires that we imagine a different kind of courage. David seems to be not at all afraid under what most would call terrifying circumstances: the Philistines were gathered for battle on one mountain and the Israelites were across the valley on another mountain. Out of the Philistine ranks came a very big man, Goliath by name, who wore armor from head to toe, had a bronze javelin between his shoulders, and a spear whose head alone weighed about 30 pounds. Send someone to fight me, he said. Saul looked over all of his men, who of course have taken one look at Goliath and rapidly found something else to do. David, a young boy

we are told, went to Saul and said, "I'll go." No, no Saul said, you're a young boy; this man has been fighting his whole life. David assured Saul that he had grabbed lambs from the mouths of bears and of lions; he knew that God would be with him -- he would be fine. Saul then dressed him in armor; David could not move under all of that weight, so he threw it off and proceeded to move toward Goliath, just as he was, just who he was, with his shepherd's staff and five smooth stones and a sling. Now he was ready; now he knew that, with God's help, he would prevail. "You come with sword and spear and javelin; . . ." David said to Goliath, "but I come in the name of the LORD." And with a stone and his slingshot, he did indeed prevail. David survived; Goliath did not.

David prevailed: protected -- held -- by God, and by slinging one stone. We, too, are God's beloved children, and are held and upheld by our God and by the Son Jesus and by Holy Spirit. That does not guarantee us, any of us, a storm-free life or a life without some in it who look really big and as if they may be carrying big sticks. This past year has been an example of that to a very great degree. Each of us could tell stories of how things changed for us during this year. Each of us could tell stories of how things have changed for others, close to home and far away; watching the evening news has sometimes required that we hold our breath. At the Presbytery meeting a week ago, we heard some of how things have changed in the Presbytery during the past year, and thoughts about how they may change more in the year and years to come. And there will be changes at Plymouth, now that Pastor David has announced his upcoming retirement.

We can end up in some difficult, even very difficult, circumstances. There may be pain; there may be suffering; there are times when we need Jesus' touch more than others. It could be that for someone, or for a group of someones, you may be the one -- you, just as you are, just who you are -- you may be the one who reminds that God and God's capacity to hold and uphold is much greater than any of us have imagined. Perhaps you may be the one, this time, to say, "You

are God's beloved child; do not be afraid." Maybe you say it to another. Maybe you look in the mirror and say it to yourself.

Let us pray.