

**Fifth Sunday After Pentecost**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**St. Francisville, LA**

**24 June 2018**

One of the fascinating phenomena in today's weather forecasting is the great accuracy with which we can predict the arrival of a storm. Science has given us doppler radars, 24-hour weather station, great satellites and other ways of predicting when a bad storm is planning to make landfall. I am very grateful for this, but, there are times when even all our sophisticated forecasting is rendered useless by a sudden storm. We saw this happen in 2016 with the flash floods that affected nearly 2 dozen parishes in Louisiana. The forecasters announced rain in the forecast, but never in their wildest expectations were they ready for the 500-year floods that unnamed storm produced. Many of the people involved in helping those who were affected were shocked by the ferocity of the floods when we started going into people's homes. The devastation was widespread and, in some towns, it was catastrophic.

Sometime we are able to anticipate storms, but often these storms just happen to us and we find ourselves unable to cope. This is the case of the Apostles today. These are experienced fishermen and they were able to predict the weather fairly accurately. They had methods of doing this that had proven successful for many years. Yet, when Jesus says, "Let us go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee" none of the Apostles oppose the idea or try to stop him. As far as they are concerned, the weather was calm and they could expect smooth sailing. Yet, when they travel just a few miles, a fierce storm develops and the boats are about to capsize. At a time like these, all passengers were expected to help the crew fight against the storm in whatever way they could. There is a lot of chaos that develops and working together could make the difference between survival and death. We assume that all the passengers in the small boats were helping deal with the crisis. All but one. Jesus of Nazareth remains asleep on a couch in the stern.

The story tells us that one of the disciples comes to Jesus in accuses him of not helping. He says to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" In other words, "We are all pitching in and are dying of exhaustion. Can you help?" There is no reason here to believe the disciple is asking for a miracle. He may just be asking for Jesus to join the crew in fighting the storm, like everyone else. The passage tells us that Jesus "Woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm." Jesus wakes up and takes command of the storm with just a few powerful words. The disciples are astounded and confused. They knew he had power, but, now they realize that this power includes command over nature. They know he can heal and expel spirits, but now they see him exert dominion over the weather. They exclaim to each other, "'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

After the event, Jesus asked them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They had seen him expel spirits, cure a paralytic man, successfully argue

against the teachers of the Law, cure a man with a withered hand, and teach rooms full of people, but they still have no idea who their friend was. They still don't know his true identity. In Chapter 5 he will perform a number of outstanding miracles, yet in Chapter 6:1-6 we hear that Jesus is amazed at their unbelief. In a way, Mark is telling us that great miracles don't necessarily lead to faith. Watching Jesus do great things is no guarantee that the disciples will accept Jesus as Messiah. In fact, when he begins to show them that he is not the military leader they are looking for many of them leave him, even though many of them had seen the miracles and the great acts of power.

Now, many preachers moralize this passage prematurely. Let me explain. We read this passage and we automatically conclude that the passage is about us and Jesus is telling us that if we trust him he will calm all the storms of our life. It is possible to arrive at this point, but, first, what is Mark telling us? First, let us ask the question, "What or who is on the other side of the lake?" The answer is The Decapolis, or the 10 gentile cities, These are small villages, rather than cities, where the inhabitants worshiped pagan religions, practiced all sorts of spiritism, did not keep a Kosher diet, and many openly and purposely resisted the God of the Jews. They were polytheists, they believed in Temple prostitution, they sacrificed animals to their idols, they offered libations for the emperor, etc. In many ways, Jesus and his disciples re marking into enemy territory. Other clues that these are Gentile territories are given to us by the stories that take place "on the other side", one of which includes a pig-farmer and a herd of pigs. There were no pig farmers in Israel, as the law prohibited anyone to work with, touch, or eat the meat of pigs.

The second question is, "Why is Jesus going to Gentile territories?" This is a good question. If Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, then his mission was to the children of Israel. But, perhaps stories like this point to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God to all nations, cultures, and ethnicities. This story has to do with Jesus' mission to the Gentiles, which becomes the Church's mission to the Gentiles, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. If you remember how the Gospels end, we see the mandate to preach the Gospel., "Beginning in Jerusalem and then to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the world". It was Jesus' desire to bring all nations to himself and to incorporate all nations into the history of Israel. The promises made in Scripture to the Jews, now apply to people of all tongues and all backgrounds.

This story then is written to the early Church of the year 70, a church that is having many difficulties in its task of spreading the Gospel of Jesus throughout the world. There are many storms that affect the early Church. there are persecutions, incarcerations, separations from family and loved ones, loss of property, risk to families safety and well-being, and martyrdoms. At the time of the writing of Mark, the young Church in Rome had just gone through a serious persecution at the hands of Nero. The Emperor had burnt one third of the city a few years back and then blamed it on the Christians. Even though the Emperor had died in the year 68, by the year 70 the persecution was still in full force. At the same time in Israel, the Zealots had been engaged in a bloody revolt against Rome since around the year

66. This revolt ended with the killing of thousands and the complete destruction of the Temple. Unfortunately, many Christians were caught up in the revolt or were victims of Rome's violent response against the revolt. To make a long story short, the early church had been in the middle of a storm for several years and many were beginning to lose their faith. This story reminds them of their mission to the Gentiles, but, most importantly, it reminds them that "The only safe way to 'cross over to the other side' is to trust Jesus to calm the storms that will arise because of the missionary effort to 'Gentiles'" (Stoffregen at [www.crossmarks.com](http://www.crossmarks.com)).

This is an evangelistic story and not a moralistic story. The conclusion is not that if we believe in Jesus he will calm all the storms in our life. But, I keep thinking of the Latin word, "Navis", from which we get the word "Nave". The nave of a church is the area where you are seated. The most common translation for "navis", however, is ship. So, in a way, we are all in a ship. The church itself is a ship and our destination is not some place above this world, some place we call heaven, but rather, the destination is the ends of the world. We are on the march to preach the Gospel of Jesus and to advance his kingdom to the ends of the world. This is what is all about. Spreading a message of love and acceptance. A message of forgiveness and redemption. A message of salvation for all who accept Jesus.

Now, since we are a ship, we must ask another question. "What type of a ship are we in?" For many churches, their ship is fancy cruise, filled with likeminded people who look and act like them. This cruise ship is prosperous, wealthy, well equipped with the latest technology, and operated by the most qualified and gifted preachers an expensive seminary education can provide. These are beautiful ships with incredible sound and video systems, sophisticated marketing strategies, and clever stewardship campaigns. Unfortunately, although these churches often get bigger and bigger, you don't see those ships going anywhere. They forget that the mission is a mission to Gentiles. The dock is placed in some beautiful spot with great views and spacious surroundings and they get busy at the task of taking care of themselves and becoming more prosperous and isolated from the world.

But, the Church Jesus envisioned is much simpler and humble enterprise. The ship is a wooden ship, with a few holes that require constant maintenance, and with dedicated people who don't let any storms deter them from their mission. Jesus himself is at the helm and the church knows that as long as he is on the helm they are heading in the right direction. The storms will come and go, but the church works together to cope and deal with those storms, always focused on the ultimate goal of spreading the Gospel and filled with hope that the captain of their ship loves them in indescribable ways and will eventually lead them safely home. There is no crisis that can separate us from his love. As long as we give him the help we are in safe hands. We keep moving, we keep marching on, we keep doing the mission he has given us to do, and we never lose hope. He is with us and we are safe. May he continue to bless you. Amen!