

**Proper 7B
Mark 4: 35-41
June 21, 2009**

A few of you here today remember the day I came to All Saints to meet the search committee for my in-person interview, one of the final steps in the process of calling a new rector to this place. Most of you have no reason to remember that day. But I can tell you that it is a day I will never forget.

I got off the plane that Wednesday afternoon in September of 2006, knowing that I had plenty of time to make it from Detroit Metro to the festive gathering of vestry and search committee members that was planned for that evening. But as I waited for my rental car, I looked to the west and saw nothing but inky blackness, stitched from time to time with flashing lightning bolts.

Between me and East Lansing stood a violent and terrifying storm system. I started out of Metro just as it started to dump -- buckets, buckets, buckets of rain. The wind whipped leaves across the road. Traffic on 275 crept along at about 5 miles an hour. The radio reported a nine-car pile up on 696.

And as I crawled through the storm, praying that it would move on and finish up already, time just kept racing along. Four o'clock. Five o'clock ...I was going to be late for this most important gathering. And I began to wonder if I was even going to make it to East Lansing at all.

Then little voices of doubt and fear started nagging at me. What did I think I was doing? I asked myself. I had no business being here. I had left my daughter back at home with mononucleosis. What kind of mother was I? And did I really think this parish was going to want me to be its rector if I turned up two hours late? They would think I was a flake. A bad mother and a flaky prospect for a rector. And then could I really imagine moving here? Starting all over in a new place, at my age and stage of life? When things were nice and safe and familiar back in Maryland? How could I think of leaving?

I hadn't even made it to I-96 yet, and I had already convinced myself that I was a terrible mother, a lame excuse for a priest, and a weenie little homesick chicken. And every crash of thunder and every torrent of rain, and every heart-stopping sudden flash of brake lights from the cars ahead just seemed to say to me. "Go back. Give up. It's too much. You can't do this."

When evening had come, our gospel lesson tells us, Jesus turned to his friends and followers and said, "Let us go across to the other side." It had been a long day, a really good day of parable telling and disease curing and demon silencing. The crowds loved it. They loved Jesus. And I'll bet the disciples were wishing they could beach the boat that Jesus had used for a home-made pulpit, and wander back to Capernaum, where they could get some dinner.

But Jesus said, "Let us go across to the other side." And he curled up on a cushion in the stern of the boat and went to sleep.

And so these men, these fishermen, who had sailed on this sea ... well, let's be frank, the Sea of Galilee is really just a big lake ... who had sailed on this lake their whole lives, were confronted with a sudden storm. The Sea of Galilee is in a narrow valley, and it is fairly shallow, and sudden blasts off the Mediterranean often create these brief, but intense squalls. The disciples must have sailed through their share of storms many, many times.

But this one overwhelmed them. This one made them panic. This storm freaked them out so badly that they clambered to the stern where Jesus -- amazingly enough -- slept on through all of it. They shook him awake in their terror. "Teacher! Do you not care that we are perishing???" they shouted.

What was it about this storm, this time, that overwhelmed them so, that made these mature, experienced sailors and fishermen panic? What made them believe they were about to die?

I wonder if it had more to do with where they were headed, than with the storm that swamped them on the way. Jesus had told them to cross to the other side. To the pagan side of the Sea of Galilee. Where the Decapolis, the Ten Cities were. A region full of Gentiles -- Romans, Greeks, pork-eaters, idol-worshippers. Jesus had told the disciples to set sail away from their Jewish world and to head toward the Gentile world. Then he went to sleep.

And they must have wondered what they were getting into, really. They hadn't been following Jesus very long. They didn't know him very well. And if he was a Jewish teacher, a Jewish holy man, then why didn't he want to stay among his own people, to stay on his own side, where he belonged, where things were going so very, very well? Why mess it up by going to the other side of their little sea?

The storm that night might have been just another storm. But because the disciples were headed in a new direction, left to chart their own course while their leader slept, it became a far more terrifying threat. And as the water washed over the gunwales and the lightning flashed, and they crouched there, soaked, bailing till their arms ached, doubting their Master, themselves, even their own ability to ride out the squall, the disciples panicked. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus, waking, blinking, looked at the storm and said, "Peace. Be still." Then he looked at his friends. "Why are you afraid?" he asked them. "Have you still no faith?"

In Mark's gospel, the opposite of faith is never doubt, or atheism, or a failure to agree to some sort of dogma. In Mark's gospel, the opposite of faith is fear. And from this initial boat ride when Jesus sleeps and his friends struggle ... right up to the night in the garden when his friends sleep and Jesus struggles – the force that threatens to overwhelm faith is fear.

It is for us, as well. We know that God is forever calling us out of ourselves, out of our comfort zones, out of our safe and secure little lives, to head over to some other side of things, where we will be challenged, tested, threatened even. And sometimes we answer that call with great joy and great faith, but sometimes we just freak out because it seems too hard, too overwhelming, and too dangerous.

I have watched brides practically race down this aisle to take their groom's hand and fearlessly make a lifelong commitment. And I have sat in my office with a couple as their engagement crumbled under the weight of their fears. I myself have wept with joy as my babies were placed in my arms for the first time. And I have cried through long nights in terror, believing that the task of parenting was far beyond my ability.

And in these frightening economic times, we have all seen individuals and communities react in different ways. Some rise to the challenge ... people go back to school, retrain, retrench. East Lansing starts a tech incubator, lures IBM to town and lands the contract for the FRIB. But there are just as many people around here willing to write the future off. They remember when the car was king, when things were good. But now, Michigan has no future, they say. Get out while you can, they say.

There are many of us here today, who are at this very moment being lured out of our comfort zones by a restless Savior who will only rest if we follow his call. Jesus may be calling you to step out into a scary new vocation. Or to reach out to a stranger and make a friend. Or to change your long-held, fondest ways of thinking and being in order to become bigger, braver, more and more yourself.

And whenever Jesus calls us out of our comfort zones, whenever he tells us to head for the Other Side, wherever that other side might be, for you or for me, we are bound to be afraid. And the question then is, will we let those storms and torrents of fear overwhelm us? Will we let them hold us back from heading to the very scary place that Jesus has told us to go? Will we panic, turn tail, head for home and safety, or will we trust the One who sends us, and who travels with us all the way, even if he seems to be asleep?

On that horrible September afternoon, in the middle of that torrential storm, my faith finally overcame my fear. I kept driving, hoping, praying that I would make it, in one piece, and in time to meet the people of this wonderful parish. I got to Brighton, and the rain eased. The lightning stopped. The sun, sinking in the west, shone blindingly into my eyes.

I was going to make it. And what would happen next, when I arrived at last at All Saints ... well that would be up to God, wouldn't it? Going on three years later, I can imagine Jesus looking at me and smiling indulgently at how it all turned out. "Why were you afraid?" he asks me. "Had you still no faith?"