

Message for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (6/20/2021)
Mark 4:35-41

How do you handle crisis? Are you able to recognize your stress response, self-regulate, and do what you need to do to move through the situation? How does your family handle crisis? Is there a person or persons on whom you can rely to remain calm, provide perspective, and keep everyone focused on your family's priorities? How does your school or workplace handle crisis? Your congregation? Your community?

There are several ways to approach today's Gospel from Mark. It's a miracle story, demonstrating Jesus' power to save; it's an epiphany, a revelation of Jesus' intimacy with the Creator who brings order from watery chaos; it's a commentary on the faithlessness of the first disciples, and thus a challenge to the rest of us to do better. But, this time through Mark's famous story of the storm at sea, I'm struck by the characters' markedly different responses to crisis, and I'm curious about what those responses have to say about leadership, trust, and the ways we contend with adversity.

Like the gospel story in general, this is a story about divine accompaniment. Jesus sets the course – “Let us go across to the other side” – but then he joins his companions in their vulnerability on the sea – “they took him with them... just as he was.” When the storm begins to rage, Jesus and the disciples are quite literally in the same boat.

Accompaniment, however, does not mean that Jesus joins the disciples in their panic. At least four of them are experienced fishermen, nevertheless their skill is no match for the severity of the storm, and the boat is quickly overwhelmed. It's an impending disaster, but the disciples and Jesus react quite differently to frightening circumstances. "Teacher," they shout as they shake him awake, "do you not care that we are perishing?" The fact that Jesus is asleep in the first place is telling. He must have some underlying sense of assurance that allows him to rest even in a potentially hazardous situation. But in their alarm, the disciples mistake his calm for indifference: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

Notice how the disciples' stress response implicates Jesus in their emotional process. They're afraid, so they lash out. The storm is no one's fault, yet the disciples' first instinct is to reproach Jesus for his perceived lack of compassion. This is emblematic of anxious systems – families, organizations, or communities. The group tends toward emotional reactivity, not self-regulation. And, that reactivity has the power to create conflict and dysfunction.

For his part, Jesus doesn't respond directly to the disciples, but to the conditions of the crisis, turning to the sea and commanding it to be still. In other words, **he declines to be drawn into the disciples' panic, but focuses instead on the threat, summoning the resources he has at his disposal to mitigate it. And, by resisting the disciples' emotional paralysis, Jesus is able to deliver the whole group.**

The late rabbi and renowned family therapist Edwin Friedman would frame this story in terms of what he called “well-differentiated leadership.” According to Friedman’s definition, differentiation is the process whereby a member of a group develops an integrity and sense of purpose apart from the regressive emotional dynamics of the group. Differentiation is “the capacity to become oneself... with minimal reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others.”¹ A well-differentiated leader is not self-centered, but rather self-secure; not unfeeling, but rather willing to “take responsibility for [their] own emotional being and destiny.”² And for these reasons, a well-differentiated leader can remain present and non-anxious in otherwise anxiety-provoking circumstances. “Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks the disciples once the storm has ceased. “Have you still no faith?”

What do you suppose makes the difference? What are the factors that contribute to Jesus’ capacity for healthy differentiation, or anyone’s capacity for that matter? Although the kind of poise Jesus exhibits may appear to be the product of natural confidence and maturity, it’s not just an accident of personality. Recall that Jesus’ sense of self is rooted in God’s embrace at his baptism: “You are my beloved child,” the voice calls from heaven, “with you I am well pleased.” That secure attachment sustains Jesus through an extended period of testing in the wilderness, an experience that builds his resilience and resolve in the face of hardship. And finally, Jesus arrives on the scene in Galilee with

¹ *A Failure of Nerve*, 194.

² *Ibid.* 9.

clarity about the divine project that is his vocation: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”³ **Owing to these experiences, Jesus is secure in his identity and sense of purpose. And, that’s what prepares him to face the storm at sea.**

What are the formative events in your story? What relationships and experiences have prepared you to contend with the storms that arise in your life? Maybe you have a memory of a storm that you weathered well, giving you the confidence to endure new trials. Maybe you have a memory of a time when your boat was overwhelmed, an experience of trauma that informs the way you react to adversity now.

Whatever the shape of your journey, friends, whatever your resources for survival, you have a word to which you can cling in every storm: “You are my beloved,” God declares in the baptismal promise, forever securing you in God’s embrace. What’s more, in our promises to each other, we step into the boat together: “People of God,” the presider calls out at every baptism, “do you promise to support [these saints] and pray for them in their new life in Christ?” And, the assembly calls back, “We do.”⁴ **Storms will undoubtedly arise, but their certainty is all the more reason to weather them together, placing our trust in the one who is in the boat with us, the one who speaks peace to the wind and waves, and peace to our hearts in the midst of them.**

³ Mark 1:9-15.

⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 228.