

I Keep Search of Shalom **July 26, 2020**

Mark 4: 35-41

Late that day he said to them, "Let's go across to the other side." They took him in the boat as he was. Other boats came along. A huge storm came up. Waves poured into the boat, threatening to sink it. And Jesus was in the stern, head on a pillow, sleeping! They roused him, saying, "Teacher, is it nothing to you that we're going down?"

Awake now, he told the wind to pipe down and said to the sea, "Quiet! Settle down!" The wind ran out of breath; the sea became smooth as glass. Jesus reprimanded the disciples: "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?"

They were in absolute awe, staggered. "Who is this, anyway?" they asked. "Wind and sea at his beck and call!"

He woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!"

O God, sometimes life feels like a little boat in a big storm. We come here to experience a bit of quiet, a sense that even though we may feel that life is out of control, you are still sovereign.

Startle us with your truth, open our hearts to your word and grant us your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Karen Nguyen wrote a letter to the editor of the Gratiot County Herald Maybe you read it too. Karen is a 19-year-old Asian young woman. She was shopping at our local Meijer here in Alma. An unmasked elderly Caucasian man with white hair and long white beard riding on a motorized shopping cart – accosted her saying: "go back to our own country."

She said "never in my entire 19 years of life have I been so publicly ridiculed on the basis of race. To my face. In my hometown with my 9-year-old sister by my side. She said as soon as the words came out of his mouth, I froze. I didn't

say a single word. I just stared at him as he drove away. My heart and my stomach sank in my body. And then she says heart breaking words:

“I am afraid. I am afraid for my 4 younger sisters. I am afraid they may have to handle it alone. I am afraid that they will just accept it is a part of life, allowing themselves to be criticized for a piece of their identity. I am afraid for my non-English-speaking relatives who may walk about unknowingly they are being mocked or being mocked or scorned at.

I am afraid that these injustices will continue to burden our community and our country.”

I want to be clear as a white woman, I cannot possibly know what Karen must have felt that day in her home town grocery store. But my gut reaction – What the heck? The world is out of control! I think a lot of us feel this way.

The Wall Street Journal recently did a survey and found that most Americans are still concerned about the spread of Covid-19 coronavirus, pessimistic about the economy returning to normal this year, and are down on the Government’s ability to unite the country. The polls said that eight in ten US voters said they believe things are out of control. Just 15 per cent said the US was "under control."

A pandemic we cannot get a handle on, joblessness and businesses closing their doors-

- most of us can’t control the stock market, closing our business;
- we have no control whether schools will open or stayed closed -
- for some the reality who can’t control if they have food on the table or pay their electric bill.
- Someone who lives in a domestic violent relationship for 25 years feels stuck and like their world is out of control.
-

Lighter note - take Michigan’s weather forecast- Thunderstorms in the morning, cool 60s’, more rain and then 90 degree plus have all happened on the same day. The simple fact is believing that we are in control is an illusion - and we are not in control of very much.

I don't much like the sense of being caught in the force of anything I can't understand or control.

I don't know about you, or yes, better said, I think I do know about you, and you – and I – we like the sense that we are in control, at least of our own lives, that we're making the decisions, and running the show.

Here's the story –

one time the friends of Jesus found themselves out of control and scared to death. It wasn't the perfect storm, but it was all they could handle.

And of all things, he's asleep in the stern.

The crossing at night was his idea in the first place. He had been teaching in his favorite spot, beside the Sea of Galilee. It's actually a lake surrounded by mountains. When the crowd grew so large that he couldn't walk away, he suggested that they cross to the other side as the sun was setting.

There was a small sail boat, and oars.

And after dark, as occasionally happens, the wind came up suddenly out of the west, and the surrounding mountains acted like a funnel and suddenly the quiet lake was roiling and heaving and the waves were high and the swells made it very difficult to control the little vessel.

Peter, James, John and Andrew struggle to keep that little boat pointed directly into the waves. They are soaked as the constant waves splash over the bow. But if they slip sideways, parallel to the waves, they will be swamped immediately and go down.

So, they've hauled in most of the sail and they're struggling with the tiller and oars to keep the boat pointed ahead, and whoever is left is bailing with buckets, bowls, cups, bare hands, and Jesus is sleeping and someone – surely it is Peter – cries out Teacher, do you not care if we are perishing?"

Which is far too clean: and if it was Peter, it was "For God's sake Jesus, we're going down. Get up and help, or don't you care?"

Now at this point modern folks ask, "Did he really do what the Bible says he did? Did it really happen that way?" . . .

He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" and the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. "

And in a sense what comes next is worse because he asks "Why are you afraid?"

"Why are we afraid? Because we are about to die, that's why! Of course, we were afraid" . . . "

Have you no faith?"

"Well, no, since you asked, or maybe yes, a little bit but we were going down and having faith didn't seem to matter much."

All we can know is that something happened that night that dramatically changed their faith; that they learned something about themselves and him that they had not known before.

All we can know is that in the middle of a storm, his friends learned that they could trust him with their lives, that he was trustworthy, and that in spite of their fear, they could rely on his presence and his promise.

How do we live in a world that seems out of control?

First, we need to accept - the world seems that way because it is out of control and always has been. The sun rises whether we want it to or not, the toaster breaks, someone cuts you off on your way to work. We've never had control.

We have the illusion of control when things go the way we think they should. And when they don't, we say we've lost control, and we long for some sort of enlightened state beyond all this, where we imagine we'll have control again.

But what we really want is peace. We think that by having control we'll find peace.

Here is my symbol: my children's socks.

When they were small, every morning they would be on the floor, and every morning I would have the thought, "My children should pick up their socks." It

was my religion. You could say that my world was accelerating out of control—in my mind there were socks everywhere.

And then I would get angry and frustrated because I believed that these socks didn't belong on the floor (even though, morning after morning, that's where they were) and that it was my children's job to pick them up (even though, morning after morning, they never did).

I use the symbol of socks, but you might find that for you the same thoughts apply to the environment or politics or money. We think that these things should be different than they are right now, and we suffer because we believe we can be in control. It is an illusion.

Especially these days, we are given a reminder that we are not in control. A nurse in the Minneapolis told me that their ICU is full and people are scrambling to find space for those who do not have Covid 19. Some patients have ended up in storage closets. Then one day they were told that no longer did they have protection gowns and they would have to wash them in order to wear them the next day. The world seems out of control.

A friend of mind, healthy, runner – yet at the end of a routine physical, the doctor says – I'm admitting you to the hospital. You need by-pass surgery tomorrow. The truth is we do not have control.

A man who comes to the community café always ask for 8 meals. He doesn't have a family and lives alone. One day I was curious why so many meals - he said he was not sure when/if we get a hot meal again. Control over life is really an illusion.

What we can know is that this story was remembered and told for decades and finally written down and that it was a precious story to the early Christian community in the midst of fierce and unrelenting Roman persecution, their friends and loved ones hauled off and arrested and tortured and crucified and thrown to the lions, when the whole world felt very much like a pathetic handful of helpless people on a tiny boat in the middle of a great storm.

What we can know is that this story was a source of comfort for them, the source of faith for them, the source of their trust that come what may, he would not abandon them and that their future, whether that future meant the

arena, a cross, prison – was safe in his hands.

Well, where do you turn when the storm hits? Who can you trust? Who is your anchor? Who can you count on to be with you?

At another church, a four-year-old came out of Sunday School and put his finger right on it: "Mommy," he asked, "if God is in your heart, how can he be on the ground to help you?"

Precisely, do you not care that we are perishing?" an almost exact echo of the plaintiff cry of the children of Israel in the wilderness to Moses, "We're perishing – we're starving out here in the desert – don't you care?"

Echoed by Reynolds Price in his answer to a dying young man, Does God Exist and Does He Care?

Echoed in our dark night of the soul when we feel most alone, most helpless, and when the only prayer we can utter is, "Don't you care that I'm perishing?"

And what this story says is that God is not hidden somewhere in the remote reaches of the universe, passively watching this drama unfold. This early Christian story makes the astonishing affirmation that God is right there in that boat.

The promise is that Jesus Christ will not abandon us. Not that he will save us from the storms, but that he will stay with us. It is the promise and the ministry of his presence, his complete identification with us, his assumption of our humanity, his incarnation, his becoming one of us.

The ministry of presence is sometimes all we have to give to one another. In the midst of deep trouble, sometimes we can't fix it, or even make it a little better. All we can do is stand close, and hold on to one another and listen to one another.

And it is a promise, an ultimate promise, in the middle of the storm, that you are safe – forever safe. Mark says, "they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

Jan Richardson, whose husband died young and suddenly after less than a year of marriage – writes - We might (and often must) hope and plan and arrange and try, but faith enables us to be fully engaged while also realizing that we are not in control.

To be able to make an intense effort — to heal, to speak, to create, to alleviate our suffering or the suffering of others — while guided by a vision of life with all its mutability, evanescence, dislocations, and unruliness, is the particular gift of faith.

When the sleeping savior stirs in response to his disciples' cries, he doesn't tell them to have no fear. He instead invites them to examine why they are afraid — to consider how and why they have let the windstorm rule their reality — and calls upon them to have a measure of faith that will accompany them amid their fears and help to restore their vision.

How's the weather in your world this week? Are there any storms raging that have you feeling overwhelmed with anxiety or fear? Where might you find help amid the storm? How might God be inviting you to shift your attention in a way that helps you recognize that the storm does not have the final word? Instead of experiencing fear and anxiety as bullies that leave us feeling helpless, how might it be to receive them as messengers who invite us to refocus our vision? How would it be to pray that God would turn your anxiety into energy for moving forward?

Karen ends her letter: "If there was a main take away for this narrative, it's this: I hope people will continue to educate themselves on the injustices of this world and work to become more knowledgeable and more kind." The ministry of presence - standing together.

Ann Weems in her poem - *Searching for Shalom*

I keep searching for shalom, drawing my water from one well after another — but still I thirst for the shower of blessing that is shalom....

I keep searching for shalom away from crowds and commotion, but peace and quiet don't blot out the pain of broken hearts and broken bodies.

I keep searching for shalom, standing in holy places, sitting among the saints. Surely in the sanctuary, I will find shalom.

I keep searching for shalom but holy places are not magic.

Good works and printed prayers do not guarantee shalom. Beyond cathedral walls and above ethereal music, the blaring din of death persists. Back in the streets the people still walk in darkness.

I keep searching for shalom, but have I looked in all the wrong places?...

Here in the streets I find shalom. Shalom lives, not in the sanctuary, but in the streets...in chaos...on a cross. In the face of Jesus is the peace that passes all understanding—shalom!

Amen.