

Sermon October 17 2021 Ned Allyn Parker

SCRIPTURE: Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

SERMON: "Storm Stories" The Rev. Dr. Ned Allyn Parker

Pray with me: Loving God, may we experience just a moment of peace in this sanctuary. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts come together to form that sanctuary in this time. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

I have two stories and then some thoughts. Story number one: This story that was just read, Mark 4:35-41, is the first Biblical story that I learned word for word when I was six years old. Now why would a six-year-old learn an entire Bible story at the ripe old age of six? I'm so glad I asked! Here's why. So at the time, my family and I were living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and my dad was the president of what was then called the Network of Biblical Storytelling. He was responsible for planning this week-long event that was all about telling Biblical stories. There were workshops on how to learn stories, how to memorize stories, how to emote when storytelling. He was so busy planning the event that, even though he was supposed to give the final story on the final night of this week-long event, he'd been so busy planning that he didn't learn the story. So the International Network of Biblical Storytelling Event was going to be held in Maine, and on a good day the drive from Philadelphia to Maine is about eight hours. This time it took about ten hours. And my dad spent ten hours telling this story over and over and over. I was six years old, so my brain was a sponge, and it was all just coming in to my brain. So by the end of that ten hours, I could probably tell this story backwards, and certainly could tell it forwards.

We pulled into the conference center in Maine, and here are storytellers coming from all over the world, from Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, Mexico, and from all over the United States. My dad puts the car in park, and he's centering himself, getting ready for this week of storytelling, and from the backseat I say, "You know what? I could help you tell the story. Because after ten hours, trust me, I know this story." And without missing a beat, my dad says, "Alright, how about this? I will tell the story, and you do the sound effects?" And I was like, "Yes! I can do the sound effects. Absolutely. No problem."

So we go through this amazing event, and I'm the only child there, so I'm kind of working my way through these different workshops, and everybody was so gracious and welcoming me in. And the whole time, every morning I would wake up and I'm practicing my wind noises, and

I'm practicing my wave noises. We come to the final night of a week-long event of international Biblical storytellers, and my dad is telling the final story. We go up on stage, and he has a microphone at the front, and I have a stool and a microphone behind him. He starts the story, and he gets to that part, "And the wind rose up," and sure enough, I went "*wooosh*". And then he says, "And the waves began to crash," and I went "*wooosh*", very dutifully doing my job at the back. It's at that moment that my dad looks out at this crowd of 700 people from around the world, and realizes that not a single one of them is looking at him. They're all looking at the six-year-old making the racket at the back of the stage. And he panicked. In fact, he panicked so much that he looked at me, he looked at them, and four verses in to a six-verse story, my dad said, "I forget the rest of the story!" He ran to the back of the stage to pick me up under his arm, and ran offstage.

Now, I could have finished the story. And I knew, even at six, the significance of this moment, the fact that it was the final night, the final story. As I stood there offstage with my dad, I had one feeling: shame. That shame was something that bubbled up. It felt like a storm inside of me. A literal storm. As I stood there, red-faced and probably crying some, we heard one person start to clap, and then a couple more start to clap, and then before we knew it, my dad and I received the only standing ovation of this entire week-long event. He pulled the curtain back, pointed out to the audience, and he said, "They're clapping for *you!*" In essence, he said, "My son, peace, be still."

Now fast forward to 1992. We've actually moved to Maine, and we're living on the coast in this tiny little fishing village called Port Clyde, Maine. If you don't know where Port Clyde is, if you've seen the movie "Forrest Gump," Forrest runs back and forth across the United States, and when he gets to the east coast he runs out onto this causeway that goes to a lighthouse. That lighthouse is on the tip of Port Clyde. That's where I was baptized by my dad.

In 1992, some of you from New England might remember that Hurricane Andrew made it all the way up the east coast. My best friend was Jeremy Davis, and his dad had a lobster boat. In order to get out to where that lobster boat was moored, his dad had a skiff, a little motor boat. The day after Hurricane Andrew came through, Jeremy came down to my house and said, "Listen, I know you're from Philadelphia, and you might not get this, but the best stuff washes up onshore after a storm. So I think we should get in my dad's skiff. We should take it out past Marshall Point Lighthouse where there's this tiny little island, and I bet we're gonna find some good stuff out there." I was like, "Sure, alright, always ready for an adventure. Count me in, I'm ready!" This is the day after a hurricane, which means the waves have not gone away. And we're in an 8-foot skiff with 9-foot swells, and the green water is coming up over the front of the skiff. There's two 16-year-olds who think, "Oh, we're totally invincible, no problem here, right?"

So we go up past the lighthouse, we get to the island, and we realize the only safe way to approach the island is in this little cove where the waves aren't coming in. We beach the boat and start making our way around the island, and indeed, Jeremy was right, storms wash the best stuff up onto the beach. We found lobster traps and buoys, old pieces of driftwood, and pieces of what we were sure were sunken shipwrecks. We collected as much as we could and got it into the skiff. We had been on this little, well, more sandbar than island, as the tide was actually coming in, so that cove that we used to enter safely was not really so much a cove any longer.

The waves were coming in, and Jeremy said, “The only way we’re going to be able to do this is if we back out. Because if we try to go out forwards, the propellers will get caught in the sand. And if we try to go out sideways, the waves are going to come up over the side of the boat. And so the only way we’re going to be able to do this is to back out. So you have to take that oar, and you have to push us off and keep us perpendicular to the shore. And I’ll get the motor started and we’ll back out and we’ll go home.”

“I’m from Philadelphia! You think I know how to push off with an oar?” But I did it. I grabbed the oar, dutifully started to push off, and just as I did, a wave came sideways hitting the boat. I lost my balance, fell backwards with the oar – do you see where this is going? – fell backwards with the oar, hit Jeremy across the head, knocked him unconscious in the back of the boat. I’m from Philadelphia! I don’t know how these boat things work! So there’s Jeremy unconscious, and a storm raging, and I have no idea what to do.

Eventually, Jeremy wakes up and has some choice words for me. He gets the motor started and we’re able to make our way back from the island. But as we do, all this has taken so much time that in fact the waves have completely settled, and a fog has descended around us, and we’re completely disoriented. So Jeremy cuts the motor and we sit there in the stillness for a minute, and we look around, and we try to look for something that will give us bearings of some kind. Then off in the distance we hear that Marshall Point Lighthouse foghorn start. And Jeremy says, “I knew where we were all along.” And he starts the motor, and he looks at me and he says, “You know, I’ve always got you, man. I really did. I knew where we were all along. I was just messing with you. I always have you.” We made our way back to port safely.

In both cases, I felt like I was in some kind of storm, both the internal one and then a literal storm, the shame of my dad forgetting the story, and knocking Jeremy unconscious in the back of the boat. But in neither case was I alone.

As I said at the beginning of the service, we have storms raging around us right now that we are in the midst of, that we cannot see the end of. The waves are coming up over the bow. The green water is coming in. We’re masked for a pandemic. Some have to stay online to stay safe. We’re in the midst of racial reconciliation after 400 years. The climate is changing. And there’s market instability. We come together here, not only to lift our prayers and words and music to God. But we come together here, whether in person or online, to hold those prayers together in the shelter of this harbor.

We have the power to do that. You know why I think that? Because when Jesus said to the disciples, “Have you still no faith?,” it was a little ambiguous. Most pastors will preach that Jesus was saying, “Have you still no faith in God after you’ve seen all that God has done?” Or “Have you still no faith in *me* after you’ve seen me work miracles?” But Jesus had been asleep at the back of the boat, and he was now talking to a group of fishermen who knew waters, who knew storms. And I can’t help but wonder if, after everything they had been through, Jesus was saying to those disciples, “Have you still no faith in each other? You’ve carried each other through so much.” And Jesus’ question echoes down two millennia to us, to have faith in one another. To have faith in our doctors, to have faith in our pastors, to have faith in our neighbors, to have faith in the people who we gather here with. “Have you still no faith?”

We recognize that we are in the boat together. It is in moments like this – when we gather, when we pray, when we hear exceptional music – it is in moments like this when we can see the end of the storm, when we can have that foretaste of hope, of joy, of peace. “Peace, be still.”

“When peace, like a river, attendeth my way. When sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’” These words were written by Horatio Spafford immediately after learning that all four of his daughters had died at sea in a shipwreck during a storm. So we channel the peace that he sought. We say to each other, “Peace, be still.” We have a foretaste of hope, knowing all will be well, all manner of things will be well, all will be well. Amen.

*Our guest pastor: Ned Allyn Parker grew up in the small fishing village of Port Clyde, Maine, which often becomes a backdrop for his narrative sermons. He is a third generation American Baptist minister and holds a BA from Hampshire College, an MDiv from Andover Newton Theological School, and a DMin in preaching and homiletics from Seattle University. Ned and his rescue dog Lucky like adventures and long drives with the windows down.*