

It was a dark and stormy night... a good beginning for a book. I was sitting at table in a favorite restaurant with a friend in New Orleans who knows me well. We were talking about where we had been in the two years since the storm, and I told her “the chaos that is my life began long before Katrina.” She said: “now that’s the first line of your book.”

When chaos threatens order in our lives, we have a choice. We must choose to act in faith or to live in fear. We could rightly cry out: “God, don’t you even care?” We may wonder if God sleeps through the storms of our life? The Hebrews described God as the victor in combat with the forces of chaos. In the Psalms, where the mythical monster Rahab represented the powers of chaos, and God alone was the ruler of the sea – of chaos. In the beginning, in the creation story God conquered the sea, and out of chaos came order. When a sudden fierce storm threatened the disciples, they cried out in anger and fear asking why Jesus did not care that they were about to perish from the storm.

It was a dark and stormy night...well, actually, it started out as a calm evening when the disciples took Jesus and set out by boat to cross the Sea of Galilee away from the crowds on the western shore, the Jewish side. They were headed to the eastern shore that was a predominately Gentile area. It had been a long day of teaching and healing, and Jesus was tired, more than tired, and he fell asleep in the stern of the boat. Yes, he was weary, but he was so much at peace – so trusting in God – resting comfortably – that he did not awake when the storm blew up – a strong storm by Mark’s account, with fierce gusts that stirred up the water and rocked the boat.

At least four of the disciples were professional fishermen. They knew well that small boats caught out on the sea would be in immediate danger. So for them to react in terror to this storm tells us that it was a significant event, a terribly frightening storm.¹ It would be natural for those in the boat to call out to God to save them. But they did not cry to the

God in their midst to rescue them. Instead they woke Jesus and condemned him for not caring about them. Did they not know by then that Jesus was from God? Perhaps not! Jesus had just that very day explained everything to the disciples, yes, in parables, but he also explained the puzzling parts of those parables to them. He expected them to have faith. A response of faith rather than one of fear is what he had stressed in his instruction to them, yet they still lacked faith and were seized with fear. They still did not understand who Jesus was.

Jesus rebuked the wind just as he had the demon early on in Mark's Gospel. You recall his first miracle where he revealed who he was by healing the man with the unclean spirit rebuking the spirit and saying "Be silent and come out of him," and the unclean spirit obeyed. And on the Sea of Galilee that dark stormy night he rebuked the wind saying "Peace! Be still!" and the wind obeyed. Jesus then spoke harshly to the disciples for choosing fear over faith. In the original Greek translation Jesus asked "Why are you so cowardly? Do you still not have faith?" They were in awe, our translation says, but again, turning to the Greek: "they were afraid with a terrible fear" – they were afraid of Jesus – this man who had power over the storm, power over mother nature, power over chaos. The disciples respond in fear, not faith and wondered: "Just who is this man?" Jesus's had been addressing his disciples and the Jewish community using ordinary terms set into his teachings, his parables. But while they saw him as their teacher, their rabbi, he also was one of them. And, as he slept at the back of the boat, that is how they still saw him – as one of them, their leader, yes, but one of them. The disciples shook their friend out of his sleep to complain that he did not care that they were in danger, not because they knew that he was God and could miraculously save them from the storm. Yet he did just that. Jesus was no mere human being. No, he had God's power to still the storm. He had the power to offer the disciples true peace.

It was a dark and stormy night on the Ouachita River.² We had a houseboat on the river where I spent many days. One night we were up river at a beach. All the other boats

left fearing rain. But Jim and I and some other friends were swimming and playing in the sand and cooking on the boat and enjoying one another, and we stayed a little too long. We were overcome by a fast approaching storm with lightening and thunder and blinding rain. My father, navigating by memory and the light from the lightening striking the river bank on either side of us, guided us safely home. I still do not know how he did it, but no one cried out in fear because we trusted him entirely. He did not have power over the forces of nature, but he had enormous skill, and we had total confidence in him. Chaos did not win that night.

On another dark and stormy night an engine on a Delta 737 failed. In my sanctified imagination, I see us all on that plane together. Perhaps it was a swarm of cycadas that caused the engine to fail. Do we curse the insects that fouled the engine. Do we panic? Do we cry out? Do we pray – out loud? Do we comfort the elderly great-grandmother in the next seat who has never flown before today? Do we react with faith in the skill of our pilot or do we allow fear to take hold of us and even spread the chaos in us and through us to those seated around us?

The story of Jesus calming the sea (on that dark storm night) makes me wonder how we might calm the storm of doubt – even our own fears, our own doubts – that threaten the church and the spread of the good news?

We live in a very secular society. And yet, we all know of people who radiate God's love so much so that they spread peace to all around them. I know people who have no fear even in the fiercest of storms. And I have known people with confidence in their abilities, those with gift to communicate the stories of God by interpreting Bible stories in a manner that others can hear and understand. Could it be that we are being called to relate what we know to those who have never heard God's story? We might start with a conversation that begins: "I was reminded of two stories this week that intersect in a profound way." And then we could tell them the stories we heard today, beloved Bible stories we have known since we were children. But, remember, while many may have heard the powerful story of David and Goliath from the Old Testament, they may never have heard of Jesus's power over the stormy sea as told in the Gospel according to Mark.

My sisters and brothers, we have been blessed with all we need to tell the stories of God – stories that have the power to settle disputes...to calm storms...to convert hearts. My brothers and sisters, may we never lose heart – lose faith – in the face of chaos and the storms of our lives. And may we have the courage to share the stories of God with the world.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ The Sea of Galilee is located in the east side of Galilee, in the north of Israel. It is a fresh water lake about 65 square miles in area; it has 34 miles of shore line, is 13 miles long by 7.5 miles wide at its widest, and is shaped rather like a pear or a violin. The lake is quite shallow only 144 feet at its deepest. The entire lake is located within a great depression, about 689 feet below sea level – the Mediterranean Sea that is. It is the lowest sweet water lake in the world. The hills around the lake are 1300 to 1600 feet above the lake's level. This depression is part of the Syrian-African fault line, which includes the Dead Sea. Most of its water comes from the northern Jordan River, but also from springs that flow from the surrounding hills in the winter time. The Sea of Galilee is known for its violent storms, which can come up suddenly and be life-threatening for any on its waters. The most violent storms, however, are caused by the fierce winds which blow off the Golan Heights from the east. One such storm in March of 1992 sent waves almost 10 feet high that crashed into downtown Tiberias and caused significant damage to the city.

² By some accounts the Ouachita River the second most beautiful river in North America. I skied every week on that river, and it is lovely.