

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
24 June 2018

Scripture readings:

Job 38:1-11

Psalm 133

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

We have Boy Scouts with us today. We're glad you're here!

I must confess when I read this lesson I had a lot of questions about what in the world is going on with Jesus and this boat. First of all, they're not making really good judgments, are they? They decide to go out onto the sea when it's already getting dark. And leaving the crowd behind and going out into the darkness, they get into the boat. Jesus is in the back of the boat, and he falls asleep.

Now I have questions about what it means when it says, "*They took him [meaning Jesus] with them in the boat just as he was.*" I must say, I wonder whether or not that meant he was dead drunk. Just as he was. Or maybe he was tired - but not really with it, not wide awake apparently. So something was bothering Jesus.

And they sail as the day is getting darker and darker and darker into territory which is then disturbed by a great storm. They're not the only boat there, but they're the only boat about which we hear anything. They're the only boat from which we get a message. Things get really bad. The boat is about to capsize. It's being swamped. They're worried that it's going to sink. And of course if it sinks, they go down with it. This is in the days before life rafts, vests, and water safety and canoe instruction, etc., etc., etc. They were fisher people; they weren't particularly good swimmers necessarily. And they were really worried.

They go back to Jesus whom they trust implicitly, and they ask him whether or not he cares. Aren't you concerned? Aren't you worried? Don't you care that we are in danger and possibly going to lose our lives?

So Jesus gets up from where he is, and you know what happens. He says, "*Peace! Be Still!*" and calms the sea and the storm, and a dead quiet falls on the circumstances, the surroundings, in the atmosphere and on the sea.

It engages me to believe that for some reason 2,000 years ago somebody thought it was important to tell us that Jesus was not just asleep in the back of the boat, but on a cushion. What does that mean? It was for comfort, no doubt. They wanted him to be comfortable, no doubt.

Turn around and look at the pictures on the back wall. On the left you see Mary with Jesus - as a small man, not really a baby. And then you see Jesus as a man on the other side. And they're sitting on thrones. What's on the thrones? Cushions! So I have a suspicion that we are told that Jesus is in the back of the boat on a cushion because this underlines that Jesus is Lord, is a king, is important, and he's occupying the best seat in the house.

If you know of any churches that are called cathedrals, they're cathedrals not because they're big, but they're cathedrals because they have one special chair for the bishop, and that chair usually has a nice plush cushion on it. It has something to do with comfort. It has something to do with position in the boat and in the world which Jesus occupied. They carried him into the boat, so they put him in that position. They put him in that throne.

The story specifically says he's in the stern. He's in the back of the boat. I think this is probably in the days before captain's wheels. You know how you steer ships with big captain's wheels. There probably was a rudder, but let's imagine there was a captain's wheel. And there is Jesus - get this - asleep at the wheel. *[laughter]* And they don't like that because when Jesus is asleep at the wheel, they're in danger and they know it, and they are in *real* danger! So they go to wake Jesus up, and as soon as Jesus is awake and experiencing what they're experiencing with them, things get better for them. The sea calms down, the winds are quiet, and they are again secure.

Well, I thought about this story and I thought maybe this is a story about Christians needing to pray harder or better, or faithful people needing to call on God more often and then God will do exactly what you want God to do for you. I think that's a pretty screwy concept of what God is, don't you? God, my Santa Claus in the sky who I can forget until I have a problem. And then I call upon God to fix things for me only when there's trouble. I thought about it, and I thought that can't be what the message of this story is.

As I was thinking about it, I thought, "*You know, Christian people refer to ourselves as the Body of Christ.*"

When you arrived today you saw our mission statement on the billboard out front. By the way, that big sign outside was an Eagle Scout project. The ramp you came up out front was an Eagle Scout project. The pavilion where we're going to eat lunch out back was an Eagle Scout project. So thank you again!

But what we understand ourselves to be about here as the Church - this congregation - is a place to welcome everybody to give a body, to participate in the Body, to en flesh, to make tangible and real the love of God that Jesus understood and shared with others - the same love that his best friends understood when he was with them, and that made things better for them.

I don't think we need to make Jesus into a special person apart from the fact that he was completely devoted to one simple message that he got from God - that he was made and loved by God and therefore he believed absolutely everybody else in the world was made by and loved by God in the very same way.

So then I started to look at the image of the boat as the world of the Church. There are other boats that float around the world of the Church, are there not? This is a much bigger world than the world we see or occupy ourselves and by ourselves. But the Church might bring calmness to the sea. And the Church might quiet the storms if the Body of Christ, which is made up of you and me, got off of our fat cushions and spoke to the friends who are looking to us for help and spoke the words of God's love and peace.

Could it be that this story is about you and me as the Church - asleep at the wheel? Could it be that this story is really for us to imagine how the early Church looked to Jesus for help and how in the world we occupy and the ships in which we float in the middle of a dark and dangerous sea, that the world looks to us as the Body of Christ for a calming and assuring word of God's love for us and all people.

You know that the storm stopped, the sea calmed, the wind stopped blowing - but they were still in deep waters. Well, what made a difference for them? They knew that God was alive and physically present with them, doing for them what they needed, not what Jesus needed - because the only thing that Jesus really needed was to share with people the love of God and to assure each and every last one of us - whoever we are, wherever we come from - that we are loved by God. And that's what we call good news for all people everywhere.

Now as faithful people we understand that that doesn't mean if you're nice you get a reward. Scouts are trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, brave, clean, thrifty, and reverent. In the epistle lesson that was read today, we understand that being a Christian and maybe being a Boy Scout - doing all those things that don't come with a reward attached - the reward is *being*, the joy is *being* a Boy Scout. Not that somebody thanks you for it but that you learn these things when you do them because it's what you believe. It's the same thing with the Church. Our good deeds don't earn us God's love. We do good deeds because we know God loves us. There's a huge difference in that - because sometimes doing good deeds costs us something - afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights.

Knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit - sometimes all of this stuff comes with difficulty. People may not understand us if we stand up to the bully in school and say, "*I don't care what you think about this person. That's God's child just as I am and so are you.*"

It's not going to make us popular, but it is going to make the world safer, happier, the seas quieter, the wind less treacherous, and life a little more joyful.

Boys, you live in a world where national leaders give you wrong messages. I saw the message on a jacket this week that I could not believe, worn by the First Lady of the United States, which said, "*I really don't care.*" **I do.** So do you. We care because we're Christians. You care because you're Boy Scouts and Christians or Jews or whatever. We do. And at the end of that quotation was a question: "*Do you?*"

Darn well better believe we do. That's why we go to the back of the boat to call on God to come and help us, and that's why we choose to care and live differently from others even if it costs us something because we know that God is, in fact, love. And you guys got it right!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.