

Jesus had been in the boat all day.

He got in it that morning, in order to better address the crowds that had gathered along the sea of Galilee. He taught them all day in parables that were hard to understand, even for those who were given the explanation. Mostly he talked about seeds. Seed that gets scattered and tends to die in bad soil. Seed that grows in mystery. Tiny seeds that take over the whole garden. Seeds that represented the Kingdom of God.

But if you were among those listening closely, if you had ears to hear, then you might have picked up something a little startling in those parables. Not everyone was meant to understand them. In fact, they were meant to be misunderstood by most. But it sounded like some people -- Jesus's true followers -- they would get special treatment. The secrets of the kingdom would be open to them. You could feel pretty special at the end of the day if you counted yourself among those who were listening.

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And when the final parable was done, when it was getting dark, when it should have been time for dinner, Jesus said: "Let's go across to the other side."

And those who had ears to hear, listened. They got into the boats with him. Against their better judgment. They were fishermen and they knew that at night it is especially dangerous to cross the sea of Galilee, which is prone to sudden storms. But still they got in their boats with Jesus, who promptly fell asleep.

And then the storm began.

Now let's stop a moment and ask: why would Jesus sleep so soundly in a boat that is being pummeled by waves and swamped with water? Perhaps it was because he was human and exhausted after a day of preaching. I get that. Perhaps it was because he was God and perfectly at rest even in the violent throes of creation -- the master of the seas.

Perhaps he was reserving his strength for what was to come.

But whatever it is, it makes for this great moment in the Gospels. The storm is crashing, and waves are filling up the boats, and the disciples, who know all about how the sea works, are convinced they're going to die. And that seems like a pretty strange reward for being the ones who have been given the secret of the kingdom of God. And there is Jesus, on a cushion in the stern, fast asleep.

So they wake him up. Because really, no one should be allowed to sleep through their death at sea. And they're angry. They accuse him: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

And Jesus wakes up. He rebukes the sea for its violence, and it calms down. And he rebukes his disciples for their fear and their lack of faith, and they calm down.

If we just talk about the storm at sea as it appears in our Gospel today, it can look like a nice story about the anxiety that accompanies discipleship, how Jesus calms our worries when we are afraid. It can seem like a story about how Jesus always travels with us and even when it seems like he's distant or asleep, all we have to do is call upon his name and he will wake up and make everything better. Yes, we should all have more faith, but Jesus understands how scared we get.

But I don't think this is a story about calming a storm. I think it's a story about crossing a border.¹ And it's essential to know what is on one shore and what is on the other, in order to understand what the disciples got into when they got into the boat with Jesus.

The Sea of Galilee is a huge freshwater lake that separates the Jewish region of the Galilee on one side from the gentile region of the Decapolis on the other side.²

And in between, the fishing was good. Four of Jesus' followers came from the region. And Jesus did much of his teaching, preaching and miracles there. This is

¹ See Matt Skinner's discussion of border crossings in his Commentary on Mark 4:35-41 2018 on the Working Preacher Website: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-4>

² http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t120/e0274?_hi=0&_pos=2

the water he walked on. This is where his disciples hauled in that miraculous catch of fish.³

Now when they get into the boat with Jesus and make their way across, they are heading for Genesaret. If we read on in Mark's gospel, we find that waiting for them there is a monster straight out of a Greek myth, a man so wild and so strong that chains can't hold him. Possessed by a Demon that is as powerful as 6000 Roman soldiers; so it calls itself Legion. The demon is so cruel that it throws the man's body about, so that he is cut and bruised by the sharp rocks that he climbs among. His fellow townspeople are terrified of him, so he is forced to live among tombs near herds of swine. Everything about this situation says to this boatload of Jesus followers: do not get out of the boat – gentiles, graveyards, swine, demons – unclean, unclean, unclean, very, very scary.

But this is where Jesus is heading, with some urgency, such that he doesn't even stop after a day's preaching to take a break. He'll sleep on the way, during a storm of, well, biblical proportions.

Now what if Jesus does not quiet the storm just to calm his disciples down? What if he rebukes the storm because it is slowing him down? And what if he rebukes his disciples for their fear and their lack of faith because they are doing the same thing?

They have been given the secret to the Kingdom of God, and in this boat in this storm, on the way to heal this man, they are living into what that means. God knows no borders. God obeys no empire. God recognizes no political differences among his peoples. In Jesus, God has been messing with old boundaries between gentile and Jew, between life and death, between illness and wellness, the clean and the unclean.

Those who have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God do not get some sort of special knowledge or understanding, some gnosis, or privileged information that lets them in while others stay out. Rather they get a seat on a welcome wagon. Fears, doubts, misunderstandings – all of those come for the ride. But they're not allowed to get in the way, to slow down God's work.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Galilee

Perhaps this is how the writer of the Gospel of Mark saw his community – as Christians filled with doubts and questions and grave fears about their life and death, just as Jesus’ followers did. But perhaps he also saw them as people who, despite all those limitations, were still called by Jesus to be active witnesses to his love for the world – no matter the fear or the cost.

This is an important story for us today because we are navigating a really frightening time. Nationally we have become obsessed with strengthening borders and closing them – especially those lines that dehumanize, victimize, and violate everything that Jesus has taught us about love, about his Kingdom. We are closing our physical borders. But we are also reinforcing old borders that limit access to medical care for women with dangerous or unwanted pregnancies, to LGBTQIA people for health care and equal protection under the law, to people of color for equal opportunity and reparations of past abuses. You know what I mean.

And it is possible to let our fear keep us from accompanying Jesus across those borders.

When Jesus and his disciples make it to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and encounter the raving man who is plagued by a Legion of demons, what does Jesus do? Does he bind him when ordinary chains can’t hold him? Slay him with a rock in a sling? No, he casts out the demons by God’s own authority. He frees the man. And with him, his whole community. And he leaves them to tell that story throughout the gentile world.

Then Jesus’ followers get back in their boats and return to Galilee where we’ll take up their story next week. They are still scratching their heads. Still unsure of whom they are in the boat with.

Who is this man that even the wind and the sea obey him?

More importantly, who are we that we do not?