

“Motion Sickness”  
Mark 4:35-41

One of my favorite children’s songs is “Row Row Row Your Boat” because it describes this happiness in life that we all long for. It describes a life that is more or less tranquil and happy. It is a great fantasy about life because, and I can speak from experience, if life is like being in a boat, it is not an easy ride. Most of the time on this boat of life, we are being tossed around from one side to the other. In fact, most of life feels like motion sickness. Even on a personal level, we struggle with our own inner demons. I find this prayer to be quite comforting: “Dear Lord, so far today, God, I’ve done all right. I haven’t gossiped, I haven’t lost my temper, I haven’t been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish or self-indulgent. I’m really glad about that! But in a few minutes, God, I’m going to get out of bed, and from then on I’ll probably need a lot more help.” Amen. If we are alive, we are always faced with challenges.

An appropriate image of life is that of the experience of the disciples in the boat with Jesus as they were in the lake, the Sea of Galilee when a windstorm threatened their lives. It is important to understand the great symbolism of this story in order to fully appreciate its message. The sea in the old Jewish tradition was a place of danger. In Genesis and other near Eastern creation stories, the sea represented chaos. In Roman times the sea came to be viewed as the domain of Rome’s power. Rome’s ships ensured domination. The one who held power over the sea ruled. For the Galilean fishers who followed Jesus, the boat was their home and place of work. The boat in time came to be a symbol for Christian community. So, with this story we see the early disciples’ struggle with the imperial power of Rome and their lives being dominated by that rule.

This story is one of two remarkable stories in Mark about the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee in fierce storms (4:35-41; 6:45-53). Because they are such dramatic stories, they draw attention to an intriguing series of cycles that Mark has subtly woven into his story of Jesus’ ministry. The cycles are parallel events in two different regions. The first cycle is in a Jewish area with the Israelites then with a crossing to the Gentile territory. The term “Gentiles” is used in the Bible to describe those who are outside of the Jewish faith. In chapter 1, as he begins his ministry in Israel, Jesus performs an exorcism of a demon in the synagogue. The same happens in chapter 5 once Jesus goes to the Gentile territory, he is also faced with a demon and performs an exorcism. This extremely powerful demonic spirit announces himself as “Legion”, the name for the primary unit of the Roman army – a fighting unit of about 6,000 soldiers. The second cycle begins with Jesus crossing back in chapter 6 to the Jewish territory. Here, Jesus conducts a number of significant and highly symbolic healings. Jesus concludes this phase of his ministry by feeding 5,000 men. The disciples then take sail again from Israelite territory, crossing the Sea of Galilee to a destination on the Gentile side of that lake. And once again, they run into a major storm – but this time, without Jesus in the boat. They are overcome with fear. But this time, Jesus comes walking to them on the water, calms the sea once again, joins them in the boat and they sail to Gentile territory (6:45-52). Now the ministry Jesus had conducted in Jewish Galilee is replicated in Gentile territory. He undertakes a ministry of healing and teaching the Gentiles (6:53-56). Jesus’ ministry among the Gentiles then concludes with the miraculous feeding of 4,000 people (8:1-10).

The parallelism in this double cycle is remarkable! It gives a strong message about the importance of this crossing of the Sea of Galilee. The two worlds of the Jews and Gentiles were separated by the lake. Yet, they were also joined by the lake through the Roman rule and oppression. Jesus was connecting the two worlds and opening up both worlds to the kingdom of

God which transcended the rule of Rome and the divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, every time Jesus and his disciples crossed to the other side, there was great resistance, a great storm was brewing. This kind of ministry and change brought tremendous resistance and fear. This was especially important to hear for the early Christians, the community of Mark's Gospel because they lived in a world of resistance and rejection. They were being rejected by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem and they were being persecuted by Rome.

Thus, the message for us today is to remember that the Church – the people of God called into being by Jesus – is on a mission in whatever situation God has placed it. We are not taken out of the world and its troubles. Our ministry does not happen on a nice little boat that we can row gently down the stream. Our boat is in the middle of the systems of domination in our world. The storms of life are always beating our boat. Our safety does not come from being outside the boat on one side or the other. Our safety comes through our trust in the presence of Christ on the boat with us. The disciples struggled with this, but Jesus knew this deep kind of trust. There they were and Jesus was asleep. They were taking in water and felt that they were going to die and the amazing part is of course that Jesus was asleep. They wondered how he could have slept while they struggled so much. It is easy to sleep in a boat while going gently down the stream, but with a storm beating the boat, how could one find such peace? It is easy to have faith and to act kindly when things are going well in life, but what if we feel threatened? How can we stay calm when we are groping for life? In the Hebrew Bible, sleep is often used as an image of trust in God (e.g., Psalms 3:5; 4:8). What Mark wants to communicate to the reader is the utter trust Jesus had in God. He knew that he was at one and loved by God (cf. John 15:1-27). And therefore, he could be at peace in even the most threatening and frightening situation. He totally trusted in God for his deliverance. When the waves of life are high and hard-hitting, how do we find this trust?

The British Navy has a strange custom. If there is a sudden disaster aboard ship, the "still" is blown. Now this particular still is not a place where whiskey is made, but it's a whistle that calls the crew to a moment of silence in a time of crisis. When the still is blown, people aboard know that it means, "Prepare to do the wise thing." Observers of this system note that the moment of calm has helped avert many a catastrophe. It has prevented many scatterbrained actions. What if we claimed the power and authority to slow the response? What if we took stock of our situation a bit more before we acted? With the disciples, we might recognize that our situation is not as desperate as it seems; and if, saints forbid, it is that desperate—it can still be handled better by a calm, Christ-centered approach. Frederick Buechner, Christian theologian, author and novelist, says, "We have within us, each one of us, so much more power than we ever spend, such misers of miracles are we, such pinch-penny guardians of grace."

In her book, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault tells this story about the Russian Orthodox archbishop Anthony Bloom... "A young man came to him for spiritual consultation, angry and distressed because he couldn't make any sense out of his Christianity. The dogma and theology seemed like so much bunk, and the creeds frequently made him furious. He yearned for a life of faith, but it all seemed like a huge wall without handholds. What did Father Anthony suggest? The archbishop listened intently and then made a rather surprising suggestion: that the young man simply go home and make one hundred full prostrations a day for a month. Now in Orthodox practice a full prostration is not a simple bob-and-curtsey, as genuflection tends to be in the West. One goes flat out on the floor, face down, with arms outstretched; holds the position for at least a good long in-and-out breath; and then slowly rises to one's feet. The young man, puzzled but intrigued, carried out Father Anthony's program diligently. When he returned a month later, his eyes were glowing with faith, and the creeds no longer made him angry. The reason, as the archbishop knew full well, is that through

the deep rhythmic gestures of bowing and emptying himself, the man came to understand something that could not be found by the mind. It lived in his body. In connecting with his body, he reconnected with the wellsprings of his faith.”

Life offers us many opportunities for motion sickness! Whether it is in our personal lives, or in the conditions of our world, we are often faced with a storm. We can choose to play it safe and never cross to the other side to join the mission of Christ. We can choose to dwell in our hurt feelings and never find healing in our relationships. We can give up on peacemaking and justice ministries because the world seems so corrupt and hopeless. Yet, we can also find the courage to claim our center. We can practice every day the kind of faith that help anchor our lives in the love of God that even in the midst of the worst storm, we are never off balance or sea sick.

A young father was struggling the day of his wife's funeral, trying to put his son to bed. Both were numb with sorrow. The little boy asked, "Daddy, where is Mommy?" He tried to answer the question, but the little boy kept asking, "Where is Mommy? When is she coming back?" After a lot of attempts to satisfy his son, the father picked up the little boy and put him in his own bed. Finally, the little boy reached out his hand through the darkness and placed it on his father's face, asking, "Daddy, is your face toward me?" Given assurance, he said, "If your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep." The father lay beside the young son and prayed, "O God, the way is dark and I do not see my way through right now, but if your face is toward me, somehow I think I can make it." The boat is always being rocked, but God is always with us in the boat and there is no storm in life that can take that away from us. Amen.