

Mark 4:35-41 **"In Fear and Trembling"** Rev. Susan Schubert

I was twenty-four years old and certain that I was going to die. The day had started on a high note. As newlyweds living on the near North Side of Chicago, a block from Lake Michigan; the Lake was a source of endless fascination for us. So, when a group of colleagues from our mental health group invited us on a sail-boating picnic on the South Shore, I was thrilled.

When we arrived at the beach, some went out immediately on the sailboats. I chose to swim. I'm a strong swimmer and enjoyed the cool water in contrast to the overbearing heat and humidity on the beach. I swam a good way out from shore without thinking. It wasn't until I paused to look back at the shore that I was suddenly afraid. The people on the beach appeared to be less than a inch high and those sailboats weren't all that much taller. I wouldn't say that I panicked, but I certainly became aware that I could die out there. If I could barely see their whole bodies, my head above the water was invisible to them.

I began to swim strongly towards the shore when the waves began to come up. I shouted at the sailboats, but the wind carried my voice away. My mother had been a lifeguard and had taught me what to do when tired. Swim hard and push ahead for five strokes and then rest, head down, holding my breath, legs and arms dangling like a jellyfish resting. Then do it all over again. I made my peace asking for God's help, knowing that this was the best I could do. You know I made it because I am here to tell you, but it wasn't until I lay on that beach, totally spent and shaking, that fear enveloped me. Fear and trembling. That's the closest I have ever come. I later learned that the lake often has a strong undertow which can pull everything out to the center as well as down under. Praise God that there was no undertow that day!

How about you? I doubt any of you have gotten yourselves into such an idiotic and terrifying situation, but perhaps some of you have. All I know is that it was by the grace of God that I have lived to tell about it.

Today's lessons provide us with a series of situations in which the human response is set as a strong contrast against the unknown, or "the mystery of the universe." Isn't that our context at every moment? The everyday, mundane, human responses to the situations in which we find ourselves are always alongside the unknown. But it is only when the stakes are high and we are afraid -that we are suddenly confronted with our need for forces greater than ourselves.

Job had to be reminded by God that his understanding is not anything like God's. The Lord asks him, "who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" How many times do we humans blabber a bunch of nonsense as if it were wisdom? We tend to do this when we are overwhelmed. We speak what we believe to be reasonable when we run out of human options...as if we understand what is really happening. We fail to see and much less to understand God's order of the universe.

The reading from Psalm 107 describes the human predicament as a group of men going down to the sea in ships, plying their trade, in other words, doing what they know how to do: fishing. It's ordinary life yet shown against a backdrop of deep waters, the wonders of the deep. Yahweh spoke and a stormy wind arose which tossed the high waves of the sea until they mounted up to the heavens and fell back to the depths. We are told that their hearts melted because of their peril. They reeled and staggered like drunkards. They were at their wit's end. "They cried to the

Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.” When they recognized their lack of control, they cried out the Lord. And “he brought them to the harbor they were bound for.”

As if this episode from the Old Testament were not enough, and apparently it wasn't, because we hear a very similar story today in Mark's Gospel. It's evening and Jesus is with his disciples in a small boat on the Sea of Galilee. “Let us go across to the other side,” he says. And they and some other boats continue, leaving the crowds behind. A great windstorm arose while Jesus was sleeping on a cushion in the stern of the boat. Imagine this! The waves were beating into the boat so that the boat was being swamped and Jesus is sleeping through it!

Of course they are terrified! They woke him up, “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 still afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Ah yes, we people of faith are simultaneously people of doubt. When you doubt, you are still a person of faith. Perhaps this is yet another way in which God demonstrates to us just how far we are from perfection. “Your thoughts,” Yahweh says, are not my thoughts. Your ways are not my ways.” And once again we are invited to consider the contrast between who God is and who we are.

If you think about it for a moment; you will realize how ludicrous it is that we continually attempt to use logic and reason to understand how to live our lives. There is a whole universe out there filled with wonder and mystery. You and I now see “but through a glass darkly.” A time will come when we will meet Jesus face-to-face. That time is known not to us, but only to God,. We, like those ancient sailors and Jesus' own disciples have moments of absolute terror and doubt as we are buffeted by the sudden storms of this life. It is then that we need to be reminded of the calm that Jesus speaks into being. Just a whisper and all is still. “Be still and know that I am God.”

Ah yes. Learn to take those moments and allow yourself to be reminded of the awe the disciples felt when all was still. Do you know that the meaning of the word “fear” in the Old Testament is also translated as “awe.” We are told that the disciples were filled with awe. Yes, they had doubted and they would again. Yet Jesus never abandoned them. Instead, he filled them with awe. Mystery, it's just as necessary to our lives as logic and reason. It's a taste of the other side. No matter what storms you encounter, Jesus will be beside you. One of the most formative books I read in my adolescence was “Are You Walking With Me, Jesus.” by Malcolm Boyd. It helped me when I felt abandoned to know that I was not alone. No matter what comes your way, remember that Jesus will accompany YOU, like those early sailors and his disciples, to “the Harbor you are bound for.” Of that you may be certain. Amen.