

“AWAKEN YOUR FAITH”

Mark 4:35-41; told in Luke 8:22-25

Laity Sunday, October 18, 2020

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Unthinkable HEADLINES EVERY DAY- ONE AFFRONT AFTER THE NEXT. Every day a bombardment of horror: worldwide pandemic, wild fires ravaging the west, rising seas and floods, 23 storms, 15 hurricanes, killer hornet bees, looting, riots, white supremacists seeking to kidnap a governor and overthrow a state government, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, hate speech, division, lies, unemployment, economic collapse, death. Every day. They come at us all day long through our tvs, radios, computers, phones. They consume our dinner table conversation. They alienate us from one another. They divide families and friends and isolate us further. Chaos, division. Anxiety. Depression. Sleeplessness. Is anyone not feeling distress? We are in a dark storm, wind raging, trying not to perish and we naturally ask, “God, where are you??” Our faith is tested.

We heard in our scripture lesson this morning the seemingly simple story of the wind and sea calmed. The Gospels of Mark and Luke both tell the story of the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee with Jesus when a storm hits. The disciples, the most faithful followers of Christ, were traveling at the end of the day with Jesus across the Sea to continue to spread the word of the Kingdom of God. Many of them were fishermen familiar with the waters. Jesus, exhausted from his work that day, fell asleep in the rear of the boat. The disciples were no strangers to storms on the seas, wind or peril -literally or metaphorically. They worked on the water. They followed a radical. They lived in treacherous times. Jesus created tension by his teachings and association with outcasts. So it’s safe to say the disciples didn’t scare easily; this clearly *then* was not a usual storm.

Can you see the disciples bailing out the wooden boat in the dark, the wind whipping, throwing them about? Can you see them furiously filling buckets and throwing them overboard only to be slammed by another wave. Can you see the sail tearing, the mast bending to the wind? Can you feel the fear? I can only imagine that they were screaming directions to one another, likely fighting under the stress—that’s not helping, go in that direction, don’t do that, where is John? Where is Matthew? Take down the sail! Grab the oars! Why aren’t they helping? I told you we shouldn’t have left this late, I knew this would happen! Why did we listen to him, he who sleeps in the back of the boat? Where is he? Is God going to let us die?

Can you see it? Can you hear it? Panic. Division. Fear.

As the story goes, the disciples had to wake Jesus from sleep in the stern of the boat wondering if he had abandoned them or left them to die. “Teacher do you not care if we perish?” they asked. I know recently I have cried out to God. “Where are you??? Do you not care that hate is winning? Are you punishing us with disease and fire? Are you giving up on us?” I imagine the loved ones of over a million people worldwide who have died from COVID-19 have asked this

question. I imagine the sick, alone in hospital beds gasping for breath, ask this question. I think George Floyd may have asked this question when he cried out for his mother. I bet victims of domestic abuse asked this question while being quarantined in violence. I imagine families separated at the border and children caged cry out this question. I'm sure people of color often ask, "ARE YOU ASLEEP LORD?" Our boats are filling up with water and it seems we're frantically bailing them out in vain-- the waves keep crashing in, and we fear we may perish. We feel helpless. We see the dream of equality evaporating before us. We see decency perishing. We see civility and humanity drowning. We see loved ones dying. We feel division.

We fear. We doubt.

And like the disciples, we question our God. "Do you not care if we perish?" In a storm, even the strongest—the most faithful-- doubt. It is in the chaos that our humanity is revealed--our fears, our weaknesses, our limitations—and our faith is most tested. In this darkness, in the fierce wind and ravaging storm—faith is hard. And it is normal to doubt, but we must not lose faith.

What I was most struck by in this simple passage was the very odd fact that the disciples **had to wake Jesus in the boat in the ravaging storm.** Yet this point is clearly made: they woke him in the stern. The disciples had to actively call on Jesus to save and sustain them. I believe they symbolically had to awaken their faith, and when they did Jesus rebuked the wind. "Peace! Be still!" and the wind ceased and there was a great calm. Jesus questioned them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (REPEAT) The question teaches us that Faith is the opposite of Fear.

I believe the story of the wind and calm teaches that we must actively awaken our faith and trust in an all-powerful God rather than live in fear. In our country and other parts of the world, our Christian ideals are being publicly mocked, beaten down, and drown out by the drum of hate, exclusion, and division. We are turning on each other falling prey to the partisan storm of us versus them. We don't recognize each other; we've created foes of one another threatening our very existence. Rather than fear, we, as Christians are called in the storm to awaken our faith. We are called to love—to CHOOSE love regardless of the circumstances. For as Maya Angelou aptly said, "we are far more alike my friends than we are different".

I won't lie. It's not easy to love each other when we see our circumstances so differently, when we cannot abide by what people choose to overlook or choose to accept. It is not always easy to nurture those relationships and not turn away. But Jesus teaches us to lean into the tension. Lean in with love. As Christians we know this: we must fight back against hate with love, not more hate. We must fight back against intolerance with understanding-- division with inclusion. We must fight against impatience with patience, and we must lean in with kindness, not anger. And when we do, I believe, God works through us to get us safely to shore.

As a criminal defense lawyer, I meet people at a crossroads in their lives. I meet them often because they've taken a wrong turn, sometimes through no fault of their own, sometimes through addiction, sometimes because of malice. But sometimes I meet them when they are wrongfully

accused. These are the hardest cases to handle—the ones where the responsibility of their defense is the most burdensome. It is the burden of having someone's life in your hands. While I thankfully do not believe any of my clients have been wrongfully convicted, I have had the humbling experience of meeting many men who have. What struck me about these men, even those released from death row after decades behind bars, was their gratitude and faith. If ever one could lose faith it would be there -in the dank cinderblocks filled with noise and obtrusive light, in the humiliation, degradation and loss of dignity, in the cages where they were left to rot disconnected from family and friends, disenfranchised from society. How did they not lose their faith? How did they maintain hope in the face of such adversity and injustice? How did they not hate?

James Calvin Tillman served 18.5 years in CT before being exonerated. Shortly after his release James spoke at a dinner I attended of his story of not losing faith. 18 years behind bars had chastened, but not broken, his spirit. Instead of being filled with resentment and rage, he emerged a man of great faith, eager to inspire others.ⁱ

The victim in his case had been raped and robbed leaving a bar in downtown Hartford. She was the only witness. Police asked her to flip through a series of mug shots and see if she recognized her attacker. She pointed to Tillman's picture. On that evidence, an all-white jury convicted Tillman and sentenced him to 45 years in prison. Years later, when the actual rapist was found through DNA evidence, a judge remarked that the only thing Tillman was guilty of was an uncanny resemblance to the actual perpetrator.ⁱⁱ

Tillman admits that anger almost got the best of him during his first years of incarceration. Embittered by the betrayal of the justice system, he felt consumed by the fundamental unfairness of his situation. As the years went by, Tillman never wavered in maintaining his innocence. He said, "It was hard, but I had to believe that one day, I would be free. But as the years went by, I started to wonder." His hope faded as one appeal after another was thrown out of court leaving him confined to a no-man's land where status, suspicion, and retribution rule everyday life. "You had to be on guard constantly," he remembered. "These are dangerous people, unpredictable."ⁱⁱⁱ He was living in fear in the night storm.

But as weeks, months, and years ground by, he chose forgiveness and faith. Tillman studied the Bible, and gave himself — and his bitterness — to Christ. He was particularly inspired by the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob who was sold into servitude by his brothers and ultimately released from prison as an advisor to the pharaoh. He took comfort in the book of Job, who in the Bible was tormented but nonetheless held his faith in God. Tillman drew inspiration from that story and began to serve a different purpose within the walls of the prison.^{iv} In the storm, Tillman awakened his faith, choosing faith over fear.

To other inmates Tillman represented the possibility of reform and hope. Tillman possessed the fearlessness and self-assurance of a man who knew he was saved. He had chosen love.

Tillman told of an occasion when a fellow inmate — a huge and violent man — approached him and said “I’ve been watching you”. The words were menacing, but the inmate explained, “I’ve been watching how you carry yourself in here,” confiding that he respected Tillman’s faith and composure and wanted to emulate him.^v Inside, Tillman cared for other inmates feeding them food from his cell in exchange for a verse of scripture they were to learn. He ministered to them calming the wind. Peace! Be still!

In answering the question of how he survived, Tillman said, “I know God was with me. I would do it all again if that’s what it took to get to Christ. Sometimes you have to go through something in your life to help bring about changes in other people’s lives.”^{vi} And like the disciples, we are filled with awe asking, “WHO THEN IS THIS that even wind and sea obey him?

Wrestling with one’s faith is integral to our humanity. We are called, particularly when it is hard, to awaken our faith, to LOVE, for this is how God works through us to calm the storm. From hardship and doubt we grow; sometimes it is what it takes to get us to Christ. As depressing and frightening as they may be, recent headlines beckon us to remember Jesus’ commandments to love our God and love our neighbor as ourselves as so well illustrated in the words for children this morning. They challenge us to have FAITH, not fear. God has not abandoned us; God simply reminds us that in the storm we are called to awaken ourselves to love. And if we do, God will get us to the other side.

Amen

Benediction:

GO FORTH PEOPLE OF GOD AND AWAKEN YOUR FAITH! FEAR NOT! GOD IS WITH US. GOD GRANT US THE COURAGE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND WE TOO SHALL WEATHER THE STORM.

Amen and Amen.

ⁱ Citing “Living With Conviction: The James Tillman Story” by Matt Engelhardt, Goodwin College, published in the Goodwin College News.

ⁱⁱ Id.

ⁱⁱⁱ Id.

^{iv} Id.

^v Id.

^{vi} Id.