

Sermon Title: When Faith Is Hard to Come By

Sermon Text: Mark 4:35-41, Psalm 9:1-11

Sermon Date: October 8, 2017 for Binkley Baptist Church

Preacher: Rev. Peg Nowling Williams

MESSAGE

Once again, we are coping with the events of the past week. More violence. Horrific, unspeakable violence. Isn't it hard to wrap your mind around the idea that someone could do such a thing as open fire on a large group of people with the intention of doing harm? Yet, here we are.

We have heard many people calling for thoughts and prayers for the families of the dead, for healing for the wounded and traumatized, and thanksgiving for the many brave souls who risked their own lives to help others. Thoughts and prayers. I say that often myself and yet faith requires more than thoughts and prayers, I think. Faith also requires action, especially when faith is hard to come by.

A colleague has said, "I have the feeling that the first third of my ministry was all about trying to explain God, and the second third was about trying to get everybody to follow God, and I'm wondering if I'm in a third stage which is about simply trusting God."

Hopefully I'm in that stage of simply trusting too.

I like to visualize scripture as I read it. For me, it is part meditation, part experience. I invite you to share the experience with me. Get comfortable. Rest your hands loosely in your lap. Close your eyes and listen to the scripture. Visualize what is happening. See the disciples and Jesus. Watch the waves rock the boat. Be present in their moment. Think about where you are on the continuum of trusting God.

READ HERE:

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Pause for a moment and think about what you experienced during the reading....

The only real experience I've had like this in a boat was at our American Baptist Conference at Green Lake, WI many years ago. I went out on a pontoon boat with friends...on a day when we were urged not to go. The water was rough but we went anyway. Our two hour rental turned into over three hours because the current was so rough we couldn't get back. We weren't in any real danger though. We joked. Gave the pilot a hard time. We sang songs like the theme song to Gilligan's Island....*three*

hour tour, and “Nearer My God to Thee”.....what the band played on the Titanic as it was sinking. Stuff like that. And we made it back safely. That is my only experience at the waves and the rocky boat.

When I put myself in the story I can use that to imagine what it must have been like. Fear was present. Fear of dying. And whether we have truly experienced the rocky boat in perilous seas, we understand fear, don't we?

We have all been afraid. Afraid of what happens after graduation. Afraid of starting a new job. Afraid of losing a job. Afraid of losing a loved one to death. Afraid of a loved one leaving us. Afraid of being sick. Afraid of dying. Afraid of going to a concert. Afraid for a child, a sibling, a parent, a friend. I have a young friend who was once afraid of turning six.

Fear of disapproval, rejection, failure.

If we were having a bible study, I'd ask you to share what fears you felt while putting yourself in the story. You don't have to be in a boat in a rocky sea to understand. We understand fear. And if we are honest we understand it when faith is hard to come by. I have never doubted God's presence. I've never considered being an atheist or agnostic for that matter. I know God exists and that Jesus loves me.

My struggle is about HOW God works in our lives. Not does God work in my life, but just how does that happen? Over 66 years of living, four years of seminary, 25 years of pastoral experience and I still don't really know the answer to that question.

But I, like the disciples, know that God does.

I know the disciples know that because they woke Jesus up. They didn't wake him up simply to be afraid with them. They woke him up expecting that he would do something. Maybe we didn't get all the words uttered that day. Maybe they said, “Jesus, wake up and do something! Save us!”

At least I think that is what I would say. And have said. Over and over. How many times have I said, “Jesus, do something!”

I said it when my son accidentally drank eye drops and was in the hospital as a toddler. I said it when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life; what to be when I grew up. I'm still asking.

I said it when my second marriage was falling apart.

I said it when my children were in pain from broken hearts and when my grandson almost died at five months old from croup.

I said it when things were rough in the church I served.

I said it when my friend's second husband was dying of the same cancer than claimed her first husband.

I said it when my mother was so confused we wondered if Alzheimer was claiming her. I cannot tell you how many times I've said, “Jesus, do something.”

So, in this confessional sermon, I will admit that I have been angry with God when my prayers weren't answered the way I had wanted. My dad didn't agree with me, but I think God is fine with that. It means there is a relationship between us. It means I care. It means I feel that God loves me enough to let me be angry.

But as William Sloan Coffin said, “God loves us just as we are, but too much to let us stay that way.”

That is it. My relationship with God; your relationship with God is based on honesty, love and trust. Knowing this means that I can have conversations with God, owning what I think and feel, because I know God can handle it.

You see, the disciple who spoke to Jesus didn't quietly say, "Excuse me, sir, would you like to wake up to see this terrific storm that is going on? We might die so this would be your last chance."

No, I think they yelled at him. Tired, angry, frustrated, and terrified of dying, they yelled at him.

"Jesus, do something!"

Each of us has times in our lives when faith is hard to come by. Not because we don't believe, but in some respects, because we believe a lot.

My atheist daughter doesn't think about calling on God when sickness hits. She has no expectation that God will act one way or the other.

My agnostic friend says he doesn't know what to believe, and he struggles with it. Pray? Don't pray? What should he do? What does he have to lose? What if he pray and nothing happens? Then what?

I have a great t-shirt back in NC. On the front it says: DON'T GO TO CHURCH. The back says BE THE CHURCH.

When I walk down the street I like to watch the double-takes I get. I'm sure they are looking at the back, although contrary to my children, I do not have eyes in the back of my head.

I don't wear it for the non-believers out there. I wear it for the church-goers. I wear it to encourage the church-goers to stop and think about what it means to BE THE CHURCH, as opposed to GOING TO CHURCH.

There are a lot of people, inside and outside the church, dealing with fear, and they all need to know that they are not alone. They need the assurance that having fear isn't sinful. They need to know they can share their fear with others who understand. They need to know that people inside the church are, in many ways, the same as people outside the church. We spend Sunday mornings differently AND we know God is walking with us in our fear.

In the summer of 2011, I wore this shirt in Mt. Olive, NC. We were there for a family reunion and went to the Southern Belle Restaurant for breakfast where we could both eat for \$10. It is no longer there and I still grieve the loss.

The waitress, while taking my order, asked if I wanted "crust or no crust" on my biscuit. Always one who loves the crusty part of life, I said, "Crust!" to which she immediately said, "Then you are going to have to turn around so I can see the back of that shirt!" It was clear that I was not going to get crust if she didn't like my shirt!

Thankfully she liked the shirt and I got the crust. Better than that, she "got" the shirt.

Being the church gets down in the trenches of life. *Being the church* holds the hands of the confused, the scared, the lonely, the hungry, the homeless, the sick and the dying and those who just graduated or are taking off for a new job.

Being the church means sharing our way with those who find faith hard to come by.

Being the church answers the question asked by the disciples of Jesus – "Don't you care that we are perishing?" with a resounding YES.

Our friend, the Rev. Dr. Kate Jacobs, just recently posted this on Facebook: "Church is not just a spaceship you enter so you and your loved ones will fly away to heaven and escape hell. It is about being called to create a world of justice and peace here and now that is God's original dream, about building heaven on earth where every nation, language, tribe and people gather at a table here and now to receive the blessings of life abundant and eternal."

When Jesus calmed the sea, the disciples were amazed. If we open our eyes and our hearts, he will amaze us too.

Amen.