

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – June 24 (Proper 7)

I remember as a child my folks took me to a little circus that stopped at the small town near where I was raised. The circus was a pretty tiny affair really, but they did have a single elephant among their attractions. After the show the kids were invited to come forward and see the animals. (This was all before the hyper-concern about liability.) We were able to come up and pet the elephant, the trick ponies, and see the lion in his cage. I had grown up around farm animals so was used to cows and we even had a horse. But that elephant was big. I remember looking at his foot and realizing that it was large enough to crush me. Our horse had stepped on my foot before. That hurt, but this was a foot on a wholly different scale than that. I was afraid because of the sheer magnitude of the creature. In truth, that was a healthy fear. I could have been hurt by this thing.

Today the disciples will learn a valuable lesson amid the waves and the wind of a storm that threatens to sink their boat. By the end of the brief pericope they are far more afraid of the man who slept through the storm in the back of the boat than they were of the wind and the waves. The storm threatened them, could have sunk the boat, and killed them. The one who stilled that storm, however, held a more awesome power in his voice and in his hands. This is the one who spoke to Job out of a whirlwind, who called the wind and waves into being and who could call them once more to own and obey their creator.

The place where we sit in church is often called a nave. That comes because churches for many years were constrained by the building materials which were available. That meant that churches tended to be long and narrow, they found it very difficult to span great distances. Those long narrow churches, with their peaked roofs to shed the rains and snows of Europe looked like great overturned boats. The Latin word for boat is “navis.” People understood that in church they were gathered in a boat. Of course Jesus calming the storm was an important part of that image, and the story of Peter walking on the water was a favorite artistic motif.

Like the disciples today, I wonder if we are not sometimes too afraid of the stuff that is outside the nave, and insufficiently afraid of the one inside, apparently sleeping; but does he ever really sleep?

I had a most interesting conversation once with my colleagues many years ago. We were at a circuit gathering at one of the parishes of the circuit and the local pastor was preparing for the opening worship. He busied himself with the altar and the things for the communion service. Then, when it came time for the service, he approached the chancel and made a deep bow before he turned to us and began the service. Afterwards, I asked him why he had not bowed while preparing the altar but did in the service? Was the one who was worthy of such honor not there the whole time?

We talked a great deal at that conference about the reality of the presence of God in a holy place and what that meant. Was the place holy only in its use in worship? Was the place holy as a

symbol alone or was there a holiness which obtained all the time? Were we communicating a truth to people in worship? Or were we reflecting an objective reality with that bow?

We concluded that sometimes we have made God altogether too “chummy.” There is no threat from God for many folks. I would guess they will feel more visceral fear if they were standing next to an elephant than if they were at the altar. In one sense, that is good. God has befriended us, but I am not sure that it is always good. God is big, really big. True wisdom begins with a fear of the Lord. Not just respect, but I mean a real fear. He can squash us like an ant.

Quite often this lack of any fear of God manifests itself as cheap-jack universalism. We imagine that God is just too nice to send someone to hell. God is not a judge, he is a kindly old man who would never hurt us. In our arrogance we have even deigned to judge God for being judgmental. Fools run around the world and proclaim that no “good God” could ever send people to Hell. What do they know about goodness and holiness? They seem to think that God must conform to human standards or obey human rules. Job is the place to turn for the divine answer to those questions. Alas, it rarely proves convincing for the hardened skeptic. The conversion of such people takes something else: copious amounts of undeserved love.

But the fact that there are folks saying these things raises another question for us. Have we failed to proclaim a God who actually has teeth, who is a consuming fire and a holy God who will not tolerate evil? I wondered if we really fear God any more. Is it that we have forgotten about this fearsome God? Have we so preached the love of God that we have given a distorted picture of God? Have we defined the goodness of God as someone who has to be nice to me and other folks?

Not only have we made God into a gentle little God, I think that sometimes we have made our sins so small that we have lost the notion that God is actually being gracious to love us. But sin is far more than being naughty. It is all that is wrong with us. This ultimately cheapens Christ’s work. If his sacrifice was not necessary for our salvation, then why did he do it?

Now, I know, fear is not the end of wisdom, and I rejoice that people can sing “What a friend we have in Jesus.” It is true, but today we are reminded that the friendship of God is really a gift. This is the great challenge of Law and Gospel. The sinner needs to hear the stern Law which gives us to fear. The terrified sinner, however, which is asking whether God can love them, needs to hear that God does love the sinner, even the gross sinner. When we confuse the Law and Gospel, we get this all mixed up.

One has to wonder if this lack of any fear of God have something to do with the decline of the church in North America. It likely does, but we cannot forget that the fear and Law are there to serve the Gospel. Do we actually build the kingdom when we preach the fear of God? Of course not, the Law only tears down and destroys. It is powerless to give life or restore anything. This not easy to keep in balance. We can easily become the nutcase who is threatening lightning bolts

from heaven upon his enemies. Or we can become the milk-toast preacher of cultural accommodation for whom the idea of judgment is just too alien even to consider.

We are very afraid of things that are going on outside our churches. There are waves which are breaking against our ecclesial ship's prow. There are also things inside the church of which we are afraid as well. We have reason to be afraid of those things. The disciples were experienced fishermen on a lake they knew well. They were not landlubbers clutching the side of a boat on their first cruise. Yet, is Mark telling us that we need to keep our fears in a proper hierarchy?

What happens if our fear is misplaced? What does that look like? What is the effect of such a misplaced fear? Would this be the Law development of this sermon? As I listen to people pray to God, I often don't hear them in the presence of anyone of which they are afraid. They are speaking to someone who owes them help. God is often treated like a hospital in these prayers. You really don't think much about the hospital until you are really sick. When the ambulance comes and you are brought there to be treated. But daily, it is just the big building down the street.

Have we preached our people into seeing God this way by running to the Gospel before the Law has had its chance to work? Does a 12-15 minute sermon even allow that Law a chance to do its work?

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, in Your mercy guide the course of this world so that Your Church may joyfully serve You in godly peace and quietness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The prayer is alien to us. Most of our people are the deists whom we describe below. God is not actively working in the world in which we live. It is too evil. Drug abuse, ISIS, war, famine, floods, and more. We have science to explain why things happen. God is not really part of this, or if he is, he is a small part of this. Can we really pray this prayer honestly? Our world seems to be run by forces which have nothing to do with God: Economics, Environmental, Biological, Physical, etc. I have much more to fear from rampant epidemics like Ebola or some economic problem like inflation or recession. God has nothing to do with these things in the minds of many people, including some who sit in the pews of our churches. I am much more a product of evolutionary processes than God in this sort of thinking. But the prayer assumes something else. What does it demand of me?

We pray for almighty God's mercy to guide the world. The adjective for God is important today. Job and Mark will remind us of God's power. He has it all. Even the wind and the waves obey Jesus' voice. The chaotic seas know their limit because God has set it.

We want God to guide the course of this world. There is an implicit challenge in that for us today. Many would suggest that God has nothing to do with this world. 200 years ago it was the crude deists who wrote our constitution and thought of God like some great clock maker who

had wound up the world and now was watching the hours spin by. Today is more likely the reductive materialist who sees the cosmos only through the eyes of an empirical scientific methodology. In their view God does not guide the evolution of the species. Evolution needs no guide, it is a force unto itself. The random forces of impersonal nature, over vast expanses of time, they are sufficient. Now, mind, you, there is a whole raft of philosophical problems with that idea, but the reductive materialist is blind to those problems. It makes sense to them.

But most people are not radical materialists who reject the very existence of God. In fact study after study shows that a vast majority of Americans assert the existence of God, but the question really is which God do they believe in? A recent article which examined the beliefs of young people concluded that most of them were moralizing therapeutic deists. This meant they thought people should be nice and good to one another (moralizing) and that God wanted them to be happy (therapeutic), but God is disengaged from this world and wasn't going to do much help us be happy (deist). That part is up to us. In this sort of a theology God wants us to pursue the course of life which would result in our greatest happiness. If that was some youthful sexual exploration, as long as we were not hurting other people, and it made us happy, God was ok with that. Thus the moralizing therapeutic deist has no fear of God, he is distant. What is more, he really wants what makes me happy and having sex with this person is what I really want at the moment, so he won't be angry about it, as long as it is consensual. You can read more about this in "Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers" by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford, 2005 – reprinted 2009). There have also been a flurry of articles and responses to this book which are enlightening as well.

These are not young people who are out of the church, for the most part the respondents to the survey which made this up were young people in church. These are the young men and women who have been confirmed in our congregations. The preacher doesn't believe this, but they do. Is it any wonder that in the North West District only about 7% of our young people are attending church in and LCMS congregation when they are 25 yrs old?

We pray that the Almighty would guide this world. Of course the moralizing person agrees, but the therapeutic deist has a problem when God asks us to do something like curb our sexual impulse. After all, that is uncomfortable now, and what is more we have all heard the stories of people who have repressed sexual desires and become profoundly unhappy.

Our asking for God's guidance in this prayer is purposeful. We ask for guidance in order that the church is able to joyfully serve God in peace and quietness. That is a good thing. But it is not the peace and quietness which is a good thing of itself, it is the service. The peace and quiet might let us care better for the lost and the least and the little ones of the world, just like Jesus did. It might open doors for us to preach the good news and comfort sinners everywhere.

Of course peace and quietness might also make us complacent and lazy, figuring that the job could be done tomorrow and we have a potluck to plan for today. The poor and the lost we will always have with us. So, we can wait a bit.

What is more, this runs the other way too. Peace and quietness have a tendency to make our hearers less open to our message. A life jacket seems like such a bother when you are sitting securely in the boat. It is a “life saver” when the captain steers too closely to the reef and the boat is listing on its side.

It seems that we have often confused peace and quietness as the goal of this prayer instead of service. In service we pray for, the peace and quietness are the means to serve, and if they don't serve that end, then bring on the tumult and the storm. Anfechtung is another emotion in which we can serve too, as is fear and even pain and suffering. But in all things, let God be served.

Job 38:1-11 The response by God to Job goes on for some time – I have included several more sections here so you can get a feel for this.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

³Dress for action like a man;

I will question you, and you make it known to me.

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷when the morning stars sang together

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

⁸“Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb,

⁹when I made clouds its garment

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰and prescribed limits for it

and set bars and doors,

¹¹and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,

and here shall your proud waves be stayed’?

¹² “Have you commanded the morning since your days began,

and caused the dawn to know its place,

¹³ that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,

and the wicked be shaken out of it?

¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal,

and its features stand out like a garment.

- ¹⁵ *From the wicked their light is withheld,
and their uplifted arm is broken.*
- ¹⁶ *“Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?*
- ¹⁷ *Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?*
- ¹⁸ *Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.*
- ¹⁹ *“Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,*
- ²⁰ *that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?*
- ²¹ *You know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!*
- ²² *“Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,*
- ²³ *which I have reserved for the time of trouble,
for the day of battle and war?*
- ²⁴ *What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?*
- ²⁵ *“Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain
and a way for the thunderbolt,*
- ²⁶ *to bring rain on a land where no man is,
on the desert in which there is no man,*
- ²⁷ *to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground sprout with grass?*

Job is a most interesting book in the Old Testament. I am reminded of the old comedy with Dan Akroyd and Eddie Murphy, “Trading Places.” The whole premise of the movie is a bet by two old rich guys about nature and nurture. They impoverish their wealthy assistant and raise up a homeless man. But the movie ends the way Job wants it to end. The two men who have been jerked around by the rich guys eventually discover what has happened and take down the wealthy old coots. Happy ending. That is what Job wants to do, but it doesn’t work out that way.

How often don’t we hear people say, “When I get to heaven, I have some questions I need to ask God!” But like Job here, God is always asking us the questions. We are responsible to him; he is not responsible to us. Yet, we always get this backwards.

Portions of the text, the narrative section, appear to be old, very old, perhaps the oldest literature in the Bible. The middle portion seems, by looking at style and content, to come from

the wisdom period of Israelite literature which climaxed at the time of King Solomon. It appears to many theologians that the combined book is really an extended exploration of some of the most difficult questions which people have asked of faith and which people continue to ask.

Here is the reconstruction that many hold when it comes to this text. It is not the only way to think about this, but it does answer many of the questions. It appears that the author of the middle section reflected on a very old story which was commonly told about a man who was wealthy and virtuous. The Devil and God get into a sort of bargain in which Satan tests him, but Job does not renounce God. Because he is faithful God eventually restores to Job all that he has lost and much more. It seemed to be a pretty straight forward morality fable or folk tale from the Fertile Crescent.

The author from around the time of Solomon, and we have no idea who this was, took this little story in a totally different direction by breaking the story right in the middle and adding a lengthy poetic discourse between Job and three “friends” and one of the friend’s servants. The middle section, from which our reading today comes, really asks a question which has troubled people for a very long time. It wonders what sort of a God gets into a bet with the Devil and some poor guy like Job gets put through the wringer in order to settle some divine wager? It asks why such terrible things can happen to a righteous man like Job. Is there no justice in the world? Is God simply capricious and randomly cruel? Why does this little kid get leukemia or why is that one born with some congenital birth defect? Why does mental illness strike one person and not another? Is God fundamentally unfair? Are we really just the pawns in some cruel and capricious game that God is playing?

The bulk of the middle section of the book comprises the three “friends” trying to convince Job that he must have done something really wrong. In that it is an exploration of the connection between our guilt and our condition. But Job will hear none of it. He says that he does not deserve this and he wants to bring his case before God. The language he uses is really that of a civil court. In a sense, Job wants to sue God for a breach of contract. Job has kept the rules and this should not be happening to him.

Finally, after chapters of exploration in which Job has consistently refuted the charge that he must have done something to deserve this, God shows up. It is from this section that our reading for today is taken, in fact, these are God’s first words to Job. Remember, Job has essentially sent God a summons to appear in civil court at this point. This is a conflicted situation and it sets up the answer which the wisdom era author wants us to see. You won’t like his answers and I must admit that I do not find them satisfying, but I do find them to be true.

Job is put in his place. God is God, Job and you and I are simply creatures. We are not on the same plane with God and our questions are so much gas. He is beyond our judgment and our criticism. We were not there when the foundations of the earth were laid and we cannot claim to understand God’s ways. He is simply beyond us, so the charge of unfairness and capriciousness is simply impossible for us to make. We are too limited and God is simply too great.

In response to this Job gulps, swallows his pride, and admits that he is in over his head. He withdraws his suit against God and begs forgiveness, which God grants, and the ancient narrative story resumes. Job is restored, but now, it cannot be said that it was a restoration because Job was faithful, but it was because God simply did it, just like he did all the terrible things too. The book of Job really removes all that happens in our lives from some sort of an economy of getting even with God. We cannot do that. God is simply too big, our “even” is laughably small.

Right now all the Calvinists in our midst are saying “right on!” God is sovereign! It is true, he is, and if Job were the end of the story the Theology of Glory and the Sovereignty of God would be about where things would have to go. Some folks really do go to hell because God just wants it that way.

But of course, Job is not the end of the story, not at all. In the Gospel reading this day we will find that God, that very Creator of heaven and earth, who shut the sea behind its doors and defined its limits, that God, is in a boat tossed about on the waves of Galilee. And he is asleep, exhausted from helping the sick, the lame, the leper, the demoniac, and the blind. He has heard the sorrows of thousands and born them all, and now, this mighty God is sleepy, tired. He will rebuke the wind and the waves and they will own their master once more so he can get some rest.

We have this reading today because Christianity asserts that it is this very God of Job who is in the boat with the disciples, and that is the goal of this reading, not the sovereignty of God. While we cannot but proclaim the greatness of God, that proclamation has to serve the further message that the great God, the almighty and eternal God, took up human flesh and did a most un-godlike thing. He died. That is the goal of Christian preaching – the cross. Any Muslim can say God is Great! Indeed, they do regularly.

Psalm 124

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—

let Israel now say—

² if it had not been the LORD who was on our side

when people rose up against us,

³ then they would have swallowed us up alive,

when their anger was kindled against us;

⁴ then the flood would have swept us away,

the torrent would have gone over us;

⁵ then over us would have gone

the raging waters.

⁶ Blessed be the LORD,

who has not given us

as prey to their teeth!

⁷ We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped!

⁸ Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

If you are of a certain age, or in a parish which still uses TLH, or which uses LSB setting 3, that last verse is pretty familiar. You speak it in the rite of Confession. It is good to remember its context. Read the whole psalm and remember you spoke/sang those words in his presence just before you came to the confession of sins. I think I spoke those words almost every Sunday as a child, but no one ever showed me where they came from. The words spoke beautifully to me, but the context and the setting of them would have made worship all the richer.

The author of the psalm suggests that “we” were in grave danger, like a bird in a snare. The torrent is sweeping over us; the flood is washing us away. He evokes great fear, terror at our own destruction. The people have risen up against us. You can imagine that this might have been when Absalom’s rebellion nearly succeeded in ousting David from the kingship. “We have escaped like a bird...the snare is broken, and we have escaped!” David returned to the throne, but it was a very near thing as II Samuel tells the story. But what Christian who reads this does not think of the grave and the common affliction of all of us? The snare, the grave, the trap which grabs us all, is broken with Christ’s empty tomb. Our help is in the name of the LORD!

II Corinthians 6:1-13

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians after a bitter and difficult history with this parish. We know of at least four letters that he wrote, only two, perhaps there of which survive. (Some think that the last part of II Corinthians may incorporate part of another letter.) He made at least one “painful” visit to the church which did not go well which was followed by a “harsh” letter. The Corinthians for their part have written letters and sent delegations “from Cloe’s household.” Finally, it appears, there was some sort of a break through. Paul at last gets the resolution he needs, they come to him in contrition and seek his forgiveness. II Corinthians is written in the context of that relief.

But all may not be quite there yet. This is always a process. There is only rarely that singular moment when the gates of heaven open and the sinner knows the forgiveness in full. Most of the time we all struggle to forgive and to be forgiven.

Paul urges them that this is the day of Salvation. Forgiveness is not something you have to wait for or long for. It is today. This day is a gift from God, receive it as such. Paul describes his own ministry in those terms. He puts no obstacle in the way, quite to the contrary he runs all over the world, suffers all sorts of deprivation, is ridiculed and persecuted, because he is a servant too, a man who once was forgiven by Jesus personally on a road to Damascus. That was a hard one for Paul to take as well; it was 14 long years before Paul went on that first missionary journey. That was a long time to think about what Jesus said on the road in that flash of blinding light.

It is the last paragraph that intrigues me. The word Paul uses for “speaking freely” here is really interesting. It literally means to open wide or freely. This is the same word that gets used when a dumb man’s tongue is loosed or a deaf man’s ears are “opened” in Jesus ministry. Does Paul mean that he was a mute before and now Jesus has healed him? Is that an image we might use to describe what God has done to us too? By nature are we bean-counting, score keeping, account settling people whose tongues must be loosed by God to speak another language, the language of forgiveness which knows no scores kept, doesn’t care how many beans are in my pile or yours and which finds all accounts settled in Christ?

When he says “our heart is wide open” he also chooses an interesting word that can also mean “enlarged.” Of course for us an enlarged heart usually means a diseased organ, but in this case it seems to suggest that Paul’s heart has been made big, big enough for them. They had hurt him terribly. Paul had fled from them in anger and written a ‘harsh’ letter to them and said some things he did not want to say. But now, Paul asserts that his heart is big, enlarged by the love of God. They have a place there too.

This is then contrasted with the word he uses in verse 12 which is the word for narrowing and constricting. The word for affections is the regularly used word to describe Jesus when he feels

compassion such as in Mark 6:34 and elsewhere. This is the deep seated emotions, the “gut” feeling which so moves Jesus to his acts of charity, and which Paul is suggesting that the Corinthians have constricted. Their love is constipated, literally, and it is making them sick. If you have spent any time in ministry or simply in life you know what Paul is talking about here. I have known people who just cannot accept the fact that their misdeeds of the past have been forgiven. They always show up again in conversation, they constantly beat themselves up for what you have forgiven. In Gen 50 Joseph’s brothers come and appeal for forgiveness years after he has already forgiven them. The bible records that Joseph wept when heard his brothers begging for mercy. The mercy and love he has shown them for years has fallen on deaf ears.

Paul notes that the opening of their love is his own love to them. That is what will achieve the change, Paul now can appeal for it, he has loved them, and he begs them to release the floodgates of their love for him.

It is a very vulnerable place for Paul to be. He is begging them to love him, and it empowers them. They could spurn him. He has no way to force love, not even God does that. He simply begs.

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹ And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Is this why our parishioners all sit in the back of the church on Sunday morning? Are they back there looking for Jesus to wake him up? Is he asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat?

The Sea in ancient cultures often had a rather nasty connotation for the members of those societies. They often equated the sea with chaos and the forces of evil. The ancient word for “formless void” in Genesis 1 is the same word as the goddess of chaos in Babylon’s reckoning of the pantheon. Mark may be evoking a very primordial sort of fear here. If we are correct and his original audience, were under persecution, they were terribly afraid. We have to remember that this was a pre-enlightenment society. Even the skilled sailors were extremely superstitious.

Some have attributed the storm to the work of Satan, an attempt to kill Jesus while he was sleeping. Is the ruler of this world acting out against Jesus?

Or did Jesus send them into the teeth of this storm, did he retire to the end of the boat and fall asleep, is this all a great learning exercise in which Jesus is building the faith he wants from them by using a storm? Is this really a form of storm as a pedagogical tool? If it is, do I really want to be a student in Jesus classroom? We are back to the Job questions, are we not?

This all could be. God may in fact use anything to be a teaching tool. But there is a caveat here. These things are really only perceptible as gift/teaching/lesson in hindsight. When you are in the middle of the problem, talking about God sending the problem as a teaching tool may not be the best idea. If God is teaching me this way, I really want to drop this class! One can look back on times of trouble and pain and see the hand of God in them, but when enduring such pain, it is often harder to see. When the waves are breaking over the side of your boat, having the preacher say that this is God teaching you a lesson is not what they need to hear. What they need to hear is that the same Jesus is in the back of the boat!

When the waves are breaking over us, we will ask “Jesus, don’t you care? Where are you?” But when the waves cease we often fail to see that he has rebuked those waves, we think we have endured, or even solved the problem ourselves.

The preacher wants everyone to ask the question, but we also need to have the answer to that question. The guy in the boat, the incarnate Lord is in this boat and suffering the storms with us. He does not promise that the storms go away, but he does promise that we will not be suffering them alone. He lends me the strength which carries me through it. I would love God to make all the icky things go away, but he often says that through these things he will make me stronger and closer to himself. When we pray for patience, is it surprising that God gives us trials to build patience?

Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat. I think we often feel like God is asleep and not paying attention to the problem. When we are in the middle of the storm, we cannot see the end of this thing, but he can. When I notice Jesus napping, there is comfort even in that.

Can we honestly say that the storms might be a good thing? It led the disciples to the fear and right question.

Mark places this text immediately after the three parables we discussed last week, the three parables with the common thread of seed/word and a fear that it was not working, because we screwed it up, because the word was simply inadequate. Jesus’ and Mark’s answer to those fears was that the kingdom of God works in funny ways. The sower sows and sometimes it just doesn’t work. There is no guarantee of a success that we can see. What is more the seed grows because God makes it grow and don’t be surprised if it doesn’t look like much.

The three parables have a strong motif that the church should be out there sowing. But Mark also was writing to a persecuted people. Their fears about the Word were really also part of a much larger fear. They were being arrested, imprisoned, and martyred for their faith. They were afraid of a lot of other things too. It is to some of those fears that Mark turns our attention today.

Jesus has been teaching. If you look at the first words of chapter 4, it says that the crowds were so great that Jesus was forced into boat to teach. The scene Mark paints is that Jesus has been in this boat all day teaching. I can only imagine that he is exhausted at this point. You get the idea that Jesus is almost falling asleep at the stern of the boat and the disciples just start rowing him away from the crowd. He has literally fallen asleep at his desk, working to exhaustion. I love that little line in there that they took him, "just as he was." They did not prepare they did not think about this, they just took off.

For fishermen who spent their lives on this lake, this seems like it was not a very wise thing to do. A storm arises and the boat is in danger of sinking. These are fishermen and they are used to these boats. Presumably if they are worried there is genuine reason to be worried. We have dug up a first century fishing boat from the mud along the shore of Galilee. If the report I read about this some years ago is true, the boat had an exceptionally low gunwale, or side. This was so they could haul heavy nets over the side easier but it also made these boats prone to swamping. I remember a childhood depiction of this storm with waves towering above the boat. The truth is an eight inch wave might have swamped this boat.

Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat and the disciples come back and ask him a question that I am sure the persecuted Christians of Mark's time must also have asked. "Don't you care that we are perishing?" If the soldiers are there to arrest you, there is nothing you would like to see more than your miracle working God showing up in power and might to spank the bad guys and rescue you. It doesn't often work that way. Usually you are hauled away to prison, perhaps tortured, perhaps killed. "Jesus, don't you care that we are perishing?"

Jesus awakes and rebukes the wind and waves and they are silent. Just let that one sink in for a moment. He spoke to the wind and the waves, forces of nature, and they listened and obeyed him. We can do a lot with our technology, but we can hardly predict the weather, let alone control it. Jesus rebukes and the wind itself cowers before him.

Then he turns on the disciples and chides them for their lack of faith. "Why are they afraid?" he asks them. These are fishermen remember, he is a carpenter, they know boats, they know storms and they have probably all comforted a few grieving widows who lost their husbands in these storms. "What are you afraid of?" he asks them. Of course, having just told the wind and waves to be quiet and having them obey you, does lend a certain weight to what you say.

Why does Jesus ask this question? Why the rebuke? What could the disciples have done differently that Jesus would have approved of? They went to him. They prayed. But Jesus seems to be frustrated with them. Is he happier with the greater fear they feel at the end, or does he go back to sleep mumbling about idiot disciples as they serenely make their way back to the other side. What is he asking us? What have we done that betrays our lack of faith?

Now imagine that you are a first century persecuted Christian. Jesus has just said "What are you afraid of? Do you still have no faith?" Has he said that to me when I was afraid of the storming

soldiers and the winds of injustice that were breaking around me and threatening to swamp my life? Is this Jesus speaking directly to the persecuted community through Mark's Gospel? Is it Jesus speaking across the centuries to me? What if you are an Egyptian Christian watching ISIS behead Copts? What if you are one of the many Christian refugees in Syria and Iraq? What if you are a persecuted Christian in China or India? What if you were just diagnosed with cancer or got word that a friend has died? Is it Jesus speaking to me as my job, my family, my church, or anything else is in crisis?

The disciples' reaction is interesting. Their fear does not go away, but it is definitely redirected. They had been afraid of the wind and the waves outside the boat, now they were much more afraid of the guy who was in the boat with them. "Who is this?" they asked. Compared to the storm, he looked infinitely greater. Is the real secret to overcoming my fear of the things of this world to learn to fear the one who is in the nave, the boat with me? Should I have more respect for the contents of the chalice than contents of my bank account? Which one gets more honors from me? Where do I bow? Whom do I think will save me from the storm?

The Proverbialist and Psalmist both say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is not the end of wisdom, but it begins there with the fear of the One who is in the boat with us. He is really big. He looks small, mustard seed small, as I shake his hands in the Christian beside me in the pew, he looks ineffective as I roll into the parking lot for another committee meeting to address the budget we are not funding. It doesn't look like he does much as I notice the empty pews on Sunday and many who are not here. But he is God, and I am not. He has asked me to sow and promised that my sowing is the mechanism of his kingdom. Of whom am I afraid?

It must be remembered that this Jesus who calms the storm and thereby is identified with the terrifying God of Job 38 goes on from here to a cross where he dies. The Gospel thrives on that strange polarity, that strange paradox. If he is less than God, his death is meaningless. If he is all God but does not die, we are still in our sin. But crucified and risen we may stand in terrified awe of him and be saved in the same moment.

Law

1. There is a storm out there – it might not have thunder and lightning but my boat feels like it is swamped and going down! Maybe it is a financial storm, perhaps it is a cloudburst of familial troubles, maybe it came on the winds of diagnosis, but things are a stormin'.
2. Some storms are fast and furious, others are long and low-keyed, a blow that lasts for weeks on end. Some of these storms of life can last for years, we could almost get used to them, or at least we have learned to cope with them.
3. But storms make me afraid, and that fear makes me timid, quiet, and puts my head down so I cannot see the opportunities which lie before me.

4. Sometimes I need storms to wake me up. There is an old saying that you do not know God until God is all you got. The difficulty of the storm may be pointing to a lack of faith and trust in my own life. The disciples did not look for a storm, but they needed one.
5. With eyes on the waves and ears filled with the sound of worldly winds, I am blind to the one who apparently is napping in the back of my boat, to the quiet and strong Lord who has always been there. The eyes of my heart are on something else that something can fill me with fear.
6. Ultimately, my fear is a sign of my weakness, even absence, of faith. Unlike the disciples I don't have what it takes to be a Christian, my greatest enemy is in the boat with me, it is either the God who will judge me or it is me, who cannot even love the Jesus who has come to me, who as Paul said, cannot pry open my heart to love with His love.

Gospel

1. There is no storm greater than my Savior. He tops them all. The very forces of nature must listen to him. He has climbed into the boat with me through his incarnation, he has united himself with me.
2. He has rocked in a boat and knows how to rest in the midst of storms. The peace he offers fits all sorts, the furious squall of a car accident or the slow painful blow of a marriage that takes years to die. He hates what the storms do to me, and he is never comfortable with it. He died because of the tears I shed.
3. My heart may quake and my hands wave to and fro in anxious fretting, but he is the rock of my salvation, he is the Lord who made heaven and earth and he is our help (Psalm 124). This is not on my shoulders but his, and his voice calmly calls to me in the storm and though the nations rage and mountains fall into the sea, he calms the tumult with just his voice, even the storms that rage in my heart, he lifts my face and my heart.
4. He has come to church with us today, this almighty Creator God. He is in the chalice, in the waters of this baptism, his voice rings out in this sermon and absolution. He draws me through His Spirit to this place and these things. He takes my vision off the frightful things and lets me see his strong and gentle presence.
5. Does God send the storm? I don't know whether he sent the storm, but I know that he can use this storm to make me better, to train me, to build me up, to draw me closer to himself. I can eagerly anticipate the good he can work from any problem in my life because I know that the guy in the boat with me is bigger than the storm. It is never out of his control.
6. Jesus did not cast the foolish, faithless disciples out of that boat, any more than he casts us out today. He spent the next years with them, taught them, loved them, and though

they ran from him on the night in which he was betrayed, he restored Peter to his position of leadership and sent them all into this world to be the ambassadors of his good news. The Paul who wrote the words of our Epistle lesson was a persecutor of God's people. Peter was occasionally foolish and vain, you and I are hardly perfect but Jesus loves me and you despite all that. I cannot pry open my heart to believe and love as I ought, but he can, he does, he has.

Sermon Ideas

1. You think it's bad out there – just take a look at what's in here! (That the hearer would first fear and then love and trust the God who is in the Nave with us today.)

This sermon is really directed toward the congregation which is facing fearsome challenges and which may have so fixated on the problems that it lost sight of Jesus as the solution. This is a first commandment sermon. The law here is that we have paid more attention to the problem than to the solution: Jesus.

We often look out at the problems we face and see a lot that can make us afraid. The recent economic woes continue to afflict us and there is a whole class of people who make their money it seems writing articles for newspapers and internet sites and the like who seem bent on making us afraid. But perhaps you don't have to look the news media to find what makes you afraid, it might be as close as your spouse, the test results your doctor promised you on Monday, the international travel your child embarked upon last week, or something completely different. We can look at these things and be terrified by them and that terror does something to us. It takes our eyes off of Jesus. The disciples thought they were about to die in today's Gospel lesson. They had real problems, but little did they realize that the man who was sleeping at the back of the boat was a bigger terror than the wind or the waves. Perhaps they were just looking for some help bailing water when they woke him up, but they got God, almighty God, the Creator, the Judge, the Lord of lords. And they had just woken him from his nap. He rebuked the waves and then he rebuked them. "Have you still no faith?" And they were terrified.

The disciples tried to solve their problems themselves. They did not turn to Jesus first, but they had been frantically rowing and bailing water and only turned to him when things got so bad that the boat was swamped. Do we do this too? Can we really ask why Jesus is seemingly sleeping when we have not brought this to him? Do we only turn to God when we are really in trouble, but we don't turn to him for the whole of our lives?

But our perception of his sleepiness is more likely our failure to see what he is actually doing. He is active, he is doing much today. We think he is asleep, but that is not so. Are we just blind to this?

But I have good news to preach this day. The judge has come early, not to judge but to forgive, to help, to make you ready to stand in that judgment day. The disciples were not

ready, not as ready as you are. They had not received the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit poured out on you in baptism. That Jesus, in that Spirit, in this chalice, in this baptismal water, in the Word, that Jesus is here today. Fear him, but also love and trust in him. He has come to you just as he came to those disciples long ago. He did not cast them out of the boat as faithless wretches, but he got out of that boat when they reached the shore and he walked the dusty roads of Galilee with them. When they all betrayed and abandoned him, he never wavered from his purpose to save them and us. On Calvary he did the most un-godlike thing, he died.

He is here today because you are afraid of many things and would take that fear away. He starts by moving your fear to himself. He is God, after all, and worthy of our fear. But in his gracious word, his loving touch, the wholesome meal, his presence, we are given hope, faith, love, even joy to replace that fear.

The congregation who hears this sermon can then address the conflict in a really different way. We don't have to have it perfect right now. We can trust that God has this in his hands. We can see the neighbor not as the annoying guy who angers me, but as the one for whom Christ has died. That changes everything. That fills me with love. That means I can face the storm, the challenge, the problem with confidence, trusting and loving God. He is at my side.

2. Bring on the Storm! (That the hearer would courageously embrace the trials of life as opportunities for God to work mightily in us and through us.)

This sermon is for the parish which is in the middle of the storm or just coming out of it. The conflict has been resolved, the near death of the parochial school has been averted, the kerfuffle which blew up in the board of elders has been dealt with or is being dealt with. This sermon will seek to put these things into a perspective and allow the hearer to take a step back and see the handiwork of God in difficult things as well. The idea is that this may surprise us. We imagine that Jesus would have known about the storm, but he does not calm it before it hits, he does not hold back until it passes, he goes to the back of the boat and falls asleep and lets the storm come. He lets the disciples deal with it.

Trust God! Jesus is speaking peace to us and to the storms in our lives, in our hearts, in our families. The reality is that in storms God does really good things. Today we see God speaking to Job out of a whirlwind and gently bringing Job to the place where he needed to be that day. The disciples are following a wonderworker and perhaps thinking that they have a nice little prophet on their hands, a rabbi of unusual ability, they don't seem to get it yet that it is God in the boat with them. The storm will give Jesus an opportunity to sharpen their focus and lead them to the right question they need to ask.

Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth, the creator of the cosmos and the master of wind and wave. Our lives can sometimes feel pretty storm tossed and filled with danger and

uncertainty. Is that a bad thing, necessarily? It is never good to suffer, and yet, is it not also true that in suffering I am often brought closer to God, in the exertion is not my spiritual muscles and ligaments trained for greater service in the kingdom? We can all probably point to a day of hardship in our past which has made us more empathetic, a tough time which has given us insight and depth to weather a greater storm or perhaps help a younger person go through their day of suffering. This is Jesus in my flesh now. He is in the boat through us. I may be an old grizzled Christian, but I can put my hand on another suffering soul today and tell them, "It will be OK. God has not left you, I know because I was there once too and he was with me on that day and because I know this, I will not leave you." Even if they don't know about God, even if they are not ready to see God in this, they can see you, and you don't have to leave them, your presence may simply be the presence they really need.

This is one of the great blessings of the incarnation of Jesus. He has come into this boat with us. He is here today in word and sacrament and he is with suffering people everywhere through the loving hands and words of his people. We have encountered that, and we are that to others. Even though the world might be tumult and storm round me, I can be at peace, like Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat.

An illustration from Antiques Roadshow, England's version thereof: This fellow brings on a pocket watch, they explain all its features. It was a nice old watch. He had a bill of sale. The people who evaluated the watch looked at it and noted that the watch had belonged to T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia! It was worth much more than he had ever imagined. It had been in his house all along. He saw a watch sitting there, but it was actually an artifact of historical import.

3. Hearts opened wide by Christ (That the hearer's heart would be opened up by Christ to be loved and to love with Jesus' amazing, forgiving love. II Corinthians 6)

This sermon is for the congregation which is struggling with forgiveness and that almost always means conflict. It often manifests in a parish which is fighting about little and trivial things. The music is wrong, the youth program is not robust enough, the budget priorities are wrong, or something else. It is not easy to forgive, and sometimes it is much harder to be forgiven. We would like to cling to our sins, or at least to the nobility that we somehow should pay them all off. But that is another sort of pride, really. Paul urges the Corinthians and us to open up, take the gift, so that we can give the gift. This sermon is great for a congregation which is struggling with its internal relationships.

This sermon could also be really good for a missional situation. Christ opens our hearts wide to this community.

It is road repair season around here and some of the economic stimulus moneys are trickling down in the form of asphalt. The bridges and roads are being widened so we can

get to those destinations more quickly and efficiently. God is on a road widening project of his own, but it is another sort of road, a hearty road, a spiritual road, the road that leads from his cross through your heart into this world. Paul exhorts us to a wideness of heart, a wideness which God has created in his loving gift. Sin has narrowed our hearts and minds with mistrust, hurt, anger, and thoughts of vengeance and wrath. Our world starts getting narrower and narrower the longer that mentality controls us. Paul's people in Corinth were having a hard time with this. They had been fighting with each other and with Paul for a long time. But now the conflict had been resolved, the forgiveness spoken, but it would take time and God's effort to widen their hearts. Paul points them toward the loving work of Jesus in their lives today. He notes that it has had a powerful effect on him. He had once been a persecutor of the faith, but now is the persecuted promoter of that very same faith. His heart has been widened by Jesus. Now he urges the same widening upon the Corinthians. The nature of the spirit's work is that they could say no, they could remain narrow and stunted in their affections, or, like Paul, they and we could be transformed by the Spirit. It starts with believing that I, despite who I am, am really forgiven.

The life lived narrowly is not a life which is outside of Christ's love. We are not saying such people cannot or are not saved. Baptism still obtains. But this is a pathetic Christianity, one which bears a miserable witness to Christ. Paul's opening words about working with Christ and urging them to open their hearts are critical here. Paul recognizes that he cannot do this alone. This is a work of Christ in and through him and them. Anytime you are talking about this partnership you are really in the realm of sanctification. God participating with us. That is always messy. We stumble and fall and God loves us nonetheless. But whenever you preach sanctification you have to preach it out of justification.

4. Aweful! (OT – that the hearer would confess the greatness and the love of God for all the world to hear)

This sermon would seek to position the hearer over against the worldly views which are expressed, thus inoculating them from some of the more pernicious mis-beliefs that are out there but also fueling the true faith which trusts in God in all things.

There are a lot of misbeliefs which float around in the world around us, ideas about God which would distract us from what God has said about himself. The preacher will likely want to pick and choose from among these, rather than hitting them all.

- a. God is not real – we don't need to worry about him. Religion is a fine spiritual thing, but not a real thing. It does not speak of any true reality, but only opinions which often divide us and rarely help us.

- b. God is far away – While we may confess the reality of God, we live, speak, and plan as if he has no role or part to play in this world. God is simply an idea, not a force to be taken into account nor a person with whom we might enter into a relationship.
- c. God is evil – the problems of the world are proof of it. If there really is a God he must be responsible for the problems we see around us. He could do something but because he does not, he must want it this way. He is evil!
- d. God is indifferent – God may not be evil, but he really doesn't care that much about what we say or do. He wants us to be happy and so if we err in the pursuit of happiness, he won't hold that against us. His grace is cheap.
- e. God like us – this misbelief suggests that God is subject to our own rules and limitations. He could not know everything, he is limited. He is just as perplexed by the world around us as we are sometimes. Almost no Christians will say this, but they will live this way and by word and deed act/plan as if God does not have a clue as to what is happening.

More? There are more, perhaps we can talk about others.

The sermon will want to take one of them and connect it to the story of Job, the men in the boat, or even Paul's experience with the Corinthians. God is indeed a holy fire. He is not indifferent to sin. He is hardly limited as a human being is limited. He is present and to suggest that he is evil cannot be safe.

But the preacher will remember that the proclamation of the majesty of God is not the end of the story. This majestic, holy, powerful, eternal God has come into the flesh because we get him so wrong and live that way. He has not compromised his holiness, goodness, eternity, or majesty, but he has set them aside to take up our humanity to himself. Not that we diminish him, but that he expands and makes us larger, holy, immortal, and powerful. He is not besmirched by our lies, but he puts the truth on our tongues. We speak the real truth when we forgive the sins of another human being.