

SOS

2 Corinthians 6:1-13 and Mark 4:35-41

When I was young—about third grade, or so—my father often worked multiple jobs and irregular hours. It seemed to me that he was always either away at work or getting some much-needed sleep before heading out to another job. Looking back, it was totally logical that the household rule was never to wake him up when he was sleeping. But, to an eight-year-old who had recently received his first ever fishing pole for a birthday present, and who lived just down the street from a pond, excitement overruled logic. So, I shook him awake and pleaded for him to bring me to the park and show me how to catch fish. In case your wondering—no, that decision was not the beginning of a Hallmark father-son moment. But it was a lesson in letting sleeping Dad's lie.

I mention this story, not just because today is Father's Day, but because it reminds me of the Gospel story I just read. Jesus' seeming irritability towards the disciples in that boat on a stormy Sea of Galilee sounds something like a grouchy, sleep deprived father scolding his offspring for interrupting some well-deserved shut-eye. Not that Jesus didn't have good reasons to be bone tired enough to sleep through a raging tempest. Over the last few chapters, the Gospel writer had dropped a few hints about the exhausting pace of Jesus' ministry to that point. Mark tells us that so many people were coming to Jesus to be healed of sicknesses or to have unclean spirits exorcised from them, that he and his disciples couldn't even get a moment to themselves for grabbing a bite to eat. And just before setting out across the sea, Jesus was on the beach preaching to a crowd that grew so large he had to finish his sermon from the deck of a boat so that his voice could project far enough for all to hear. Even when he finished speaking and his disciples shoved off from shore for the other side of the Sea of Galilee seeking some much-needed peace and quiet, it says that other boats followed them.

Who wouldn't be exhausted by all that? After all, Jesus was divine, but he *was also* only human! But there is no rest for the weary, even a weary Jesus. Somewhere out on the open water, one of the sudden, unpredictable storms that the Sea of Galilee is famous for, catches them by surprise. At first, the disciples do their best to keep the boat afloat and on course, without disturbing Jesus, who is asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat.

It's not until things get hopeless, that they go to Jesus with a kind of SOS. "Jesus, Save Our Ship!" Their SOS though, seems to be lacking in any real expectation that Jesus can save them and more like resignation that they are all about to die.

But against all expectations, Jesus calms the storm then turns to them and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Not to scold them, but out of compassion for the terror that overwhelmed their limited faith.

The focus of this early episode in Jesus' ministry is on what is going on in the boat where Jesus and the disciples are. But, remember that "other boats" were following them. Those "other boats" would have been caught in the same storm. No doubt, they were raising their own SOS prayers, too.

I'm grateful that Mark doesn't let us forget that. Because, really, aren't we all in our own boats, navigating the sometimes treacherous seas that hit us without warning? Facing storms that hammer us relentlessly, making it impossible to bail the water of our boat fast enough to keep up with the waves crashing over the deck? When you or I are the ones lost at sea in our lives, our SOS prayers can seem to be as ineffective as a weak signal flare lost in the fury of the storm around us. In those times, maybe we wonder if Jesus is asleep and not hearing our cries for help.

The same question might arise in our minds as the one that the disciples posed to Jesus. "Teacher, *do you not care* that we are perishing?" Do you not care, Jesus, about the awful state of my health? Do you not care that our family is coming apart at the seams? Do you not care our financial ship is sinking and we are drowning in debt?

In all the attention the story gives to Jesus *being asleep* in the boat, it is easy to overlook the passing mention given to *where in the boat* Jesus is sleeping. He is asleep in the stern, which is the rear of the boat. Do you know what else you can find in the stern of a boat? The rudder. The small, submerged blade that steers the whole ship is where Jesus had posted himself. I find that to be a comforting image. Even when it feels like the boat we are in is in dire peril, and our prayers seem like a whisper lost in the howling gale of despair within us, it helps to recall that it is Jesus who is still in the seat of control.

Much to his shipmates' relief, Jesus finally does get up and take action to save them. He rebukes the storm. The howling winds cease their wailing; the waves abate their assault on the boat. What had been chaos becomes a dead calm. In the stillness that follows, the disciples "are filled with great awe and say to one another, 'Who then *is this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" Even though they had witnessed Jesus healing illnesses and casting out unclean spirits, they had underestimated the degree to which he could be relied on to deal with the greater chaos life sometimes sends our way.

When Jesus asked them why they were afraid and questioned their faith, he wasn't expressing irritability towards them for interrupting his nap unnecessarily. It was more like he was disappointed that when they woke him, it wasn't out of a conviction that he could save them; so much as it was because they had already abandoned hope and resigned themselves to be

doomed men. But when Jesus calmed the storm that surrounded them, he also calmed the storms of doubt within them. In the sudden stillness, maybe they heard in these words from the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm, echoes of what they had just experienced:

<sup>28</sup> Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;

<sup>29</sup> he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

<sup>30</sup> Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.

Friends, no matter what storms you may be navigating; no matter how little faith you can muster to fill your sails, believe that Jesus is still steering your boat homeward. Even if it feels like your SOS is falling on deaf ears, and that Jesus' eyes are closed to you plight, remember this assurance from another Psalm (Psalm 121):

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not *slumber*.

But, that level of confidence in Jesus' presence and power in our greatest hours of need, can be difficult to summon on demand, if we treat prayer like a life preserver hanging on the wall in case of an emergency. Like something that we only resort to during times when we are going down with the ship. It is important to build a faith in Jesus' presence and power through daily prayer habits so that we don't underestimate Jesus' power to save, the way the disciples did.

May the assurance of our Heavenly Father's steadfast love for us sustain us in whatever storms we may face. And may we bear witness to what God has done in our lives so that others of God's children may be upheld in whatever storms may surround them; and that together we may answer the question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" with this reply:

It is Christ, the Lord.

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