

Who is this?
Sermon 224 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 23, 2024
Mark 4:35-41

I.

There are, it seems, two muses: the Muse of Inspiration, who gives us inarticulate visions and desires, and the Muse of Realization, who returns again and again to say “It is yet more difficult than you thought.” This is the muse of form. It may be then that form serves us best when it works as an obstruction, to baffle us and deflect our intended course.

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

-Wendell Berry

These are the words that framed my experience with CBF this last week. David Hull read these words, quoting Wendell Berry. He did so as he told the Governing Board about his house in Winston-Salem that sits on a lot with a stream flowing through it. Most of the stream is calm, shallow, and quiet, he said, but there is one corner where there are some rocks. One corner where the course turns a bit and the waters flow over the rocks which impede that same water. A corner where the otherwise quiet stream is loud with the splashing of movement. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

II.

This line became a theme that showed up in so many places for me... I went to late night worship on Wednesday, which was the first full day of the conference and also the national holiday, Juneteenth. So we had Late Night Worship which comes out of the black worship tradition. You see, slaves worshiped after their masters had gone to bed to avoid the punishment that would be inflicted if they were caught worshiping in white spaces. So they waited until the late night.

There in the darkness they would proclaim the liberation they found in Christ, a liberation they would never see realized in their lifetime but that they dared to proclaim anyway as prophetic resistance to the structures that kept them bound, as inspired hope for the generations yet to come. The first muse, interrupted by the second, as reality and form obstructed God’s intended course.

The Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque preached about that same liberation, bringing a word from the Exodus story about a God (our God) who is always at work lifting us up and out of the situations that we find ourselves in... up and out of the perspectives that limit our holy imaginations... up and out of trials and despair in order to lead us to the promised land. But then she was quick to remind us that none of the Hebrews featured in the Exodus from Egypt - even Moses himself - none of them lived to see the realization of the promise. The first muse, interrupted again by the second. But let us not forget that The impeded stream is the one that sings.

III.

As the gathering carried on I heard speakers both formal and informal, on the platform, in the breakout sessions, and in the hallways too, talking about our dreams, our visions, our kingdom of God inspiration - and also talking about all the impediments to their realization.

The dream seemed simple - one fellowship, one community, one family of Jesus-followers who lived in love and support and care for one another and all of our neighbors - despite our many differences.

But the list of impediments was long:

war, terror, and violence...political polarization and division, pressures from all sides to become more traditional, more creative, more progressive, more conservative, more inclusive, more definitive... pressures to stand for something and make statements about what we stand for - and yet realizing that what we stand for isn't anything that could ever be summarized by words.

It is something we have to embody

with our lives,
our communities
and our churches.

Because the thing that we stand for is the ever-expanding love of God. Which is of course a love that knows no boundary or restriction. It is a stream that cannot be impeded or dammed up, and yet there seem to be so many big rocks trying to do just that. As the stories and conversations went on, the whole experience started to feel like the storm that arose upon the disciples as they journeyed with Jesus from one side of the Galilee to the other.

IV.

After a long day of ministry, Jesus and his disciples get in a boat, "just as he was," the peculiar text states. I've often been drawn to that little phrase when dealing with this passage, as have you! One of you (won't say who) reached out to me this week to say so.

Sometimes we wonder what that means about Jesus' state of mind. Was he tired? Depleted? In need of some down time or alone time? We can all relate to that, can't we? One scholar I read this week hinted that the phrase "just as he was" might actually refer to the boat (!) not Jesus (!) as if to say the boat was there, prepped and ready to cross the sea, when Jesus and the disciples came aboard. Fun as it may be to chase those rabbits, we will have to leave them for another Sunday. Because today I want to leave that phrase safely on the pages of our Bibles and choose a different hermeneutical approach.

The same scholar that says the boat was prepped and ready points out another interesting detail in this ancient story. That the boat, when crossing from the west bank of Galilee to the eastern shore, is taking Jesus' mission from its Jewish roots into pagan territory. Jesus is bringing his good news from Jew to Gentile! It is an expansion toward radical inclusion.

And as it so often goes with this kind of expansion,
once the inspiration is articulated,
once the course is charted,

once the direction is clear,
once that first step is taken...
a storm starts brewing.

The muse of inspiration gives us inarticulate visions and desires. But the muse of realization returns again and again to say “this will be harder than you once thought.” So there, in the middle of the sea, storm clouds filled the sky, and a strong wind was picking up. The waves broke on the sides of the boat and the once confident and courageous disciples seem to break a little bit too as they shake Jesus to wake him up.

Don't you care that we are tossed about and broken over here?!! The disciples cry out waking Jesus and giving voice to a prayer that has been echoed in every generation.

Don't you care that we are struggling?
Don't you care that we are at our breaking points?
Don't you care that a storm - perhaps the perfect storm - is brewing?
Don't you care that we might not make it through this?
Don't you care about us... about me?
Don't you care, Jesus?

And if you do, then why don't you intervene?

V.

Whereas in other visits with this text those words about Jesus' condition (or the boat's readiness, depending on who you read)... In other seasons those words would demand our attention and set the tone for the sermon but this time another thing caught me.

And this time the thing that caught me, which I feel compelled to share with you, is that when the disciples shake Jesus in what seems like a desperate plea for divine intervention, divine salvation from the winds that are soon to be howling, we assume - perhaps with them, with those disciples - that since Jesus is sleeping, we assume that God is not paying attention, is not present with them in other ways.

But today, I am beginning to wonder if God hasn't already shown up in another way. Because we have read other parts of the Bible, other pieces of ancient Jewish literature which we also know as our Old Testament, and in these ancient texts we have seen how all of creation plays a part in the development of the story. Often the sea is depicted as a place of chaos and terror, but there are other stories that remind us that chaos and terror do not tell the whole story.

You see, in the beginning, when the earth was formless and void, a wind hovered over the chaos of the deep waters and began to speak goodness into being. Wind and water have met before, and in Genesis, their encounter resulted in blessing. We may also remember another story where water is held back, seemingly held by nothing but air and a prayer as the Hebrew people walk on dry ground bearing witness to a miracle made possible by a God who commands all the natural order.

And then there is a story about Jonah whose vocation is made clear as storms and wind and water and whales all conspire together to ensure that God's will is made known to Nineveh. And so given all of this... I have to wonder... as I see these same familiar elements conspiring together again... if God isn't only sleeping as Jesus rests on the boat, but if God isn't also stirring as the wind begins to pick up.

VI.

In Dr. Zina Jacque's brilliant Juneteenth sermon, she reminded us that so often when liberation comes (when deliverance comes, when freedom comes) it doesn't come easily or without challenge. That when the good news of emancipation reached the Galveston shore on June 19th, 1865 it didn't bring an end to racial oppression, hatred, and violence. The lynchings didn't stop. In fact, in many ways this good news just enraged the white slave owners and they doubled down on the terror they inflicted upon black and brown people. The good news didn't bring an end to suffering and struggle, but it did proclaim a bold and persistent, inarticulate vision.

And when the waters of the sea parted,
the people were not painlessly teleported straight to the promised land, no!
They had to summon the courage to walk through where the waters used to rage and then deal with the wilderness that waited for them on the other side. None of which had ever been done before. It wasn't easy but if freedom was going to come, they had to go through it. There was no other way about it. Isn't it possible that this storm on the sea of Galilee is another example of the mysterious interactions of wind and water that the disciples will have to go through in order to find the promise that is waiting on the other side?

Isn't it possible that the storm brewing, the one that looked like terror and chaos at first, was really the spirit of God working to create something new... something good? Because we remember the story... In the beginning... the Spirit, the Wind hovered over the face of the deep.. and chaos was transformed into blessing. As she preached the words of Doug Cole danced in my mind. Words he says to me often when we get to talking about preaching. Words I try to remember and allow to shape my own weekly proclamation. "Every Sunday," Doug says, "80 percent of the people in the pews are broken. And they come here looking for a word of comfort, a word of healing, a word of hope."

And as she preached, recounting story after story from our holy scriptures I began to wonder if at least 80 percent of our holy stories aren't different ways of telling the same story... Now I am no mathematician and I haven't done an appropriate analysis to make a case for it, but I am growing increasingly curious if there isn't a similarity between the percentage of us looking for comfort in our own storms and stories that tell us of such comfort...

Stories which, though different and peculiar and nuanced, stories which all tell the same story, which is (and I am going to end here...): Sometimes you will go through the storm, You'll feel the winds pick up from every direction, But don't be so quick to assume that God is asleep, ...Or that God does not care.

Rather, Try to gaze upon your storms with wonder and remember that sometimes God is in the boat, sometimes God is in the water, sometimes God is in the friend or neighbor... and

sometimes... God is in the wind. There are, it seems, two muses: the Muse of Inspiration, who gives us inarticulate visions and desires, and the Muse of Realization, who returns again and again to say "It is yet more difficult than you thought." [...]

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings. The impeded stream is the one that sings

Guests.