

Summer B-7, 6-20-2021, Mk 4:35-41, Ps 107:1-3, 23-32
WPC, Living into the Questions: Jesus asleep in the back of the boat

1. Children. There's a lot of water around, do you like being out on the water? Floating on an inner tube is kind of fun. Do you all go out in boats very much? What kind? Water is a lot of fun, but sometimes it can be scary. Have you ever been out on the water when the waves start to get really high? My story when we were under the bow in the old boat.
2. Take a look at the cover of the bulletin. Are they having fun? Pretty scary situation. Jesus is in the center and his friends are around him. They are half sunk already. The water is pouring in. It looked like the boat was going to sink. Jesus helped them through it and they made it safe back home. Jesus was with them in a scary situation. And he can help us too.
3. Our scripture this morning is the famous stilling of the storm. At this point in the story, Jesus has been teaching large crowds of his own people, the Jewish people, on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. In our reading, he says let's go for a boat ride to the other side of the Sea, the eastern side. That's sounds like a fun thing, but really it's a scary thing, for two reasons. First, because sometimes the water gets really rough out in the middle. Fishermen on Galilee generally kept close to the shore, because that's where the fish were and it's safer. Sometimes, the wind can suddenly blow down from the Golan Heights and the sea can kick up at a moment's notice. The second scary thing is that the east of the lake is land of the Gerasenes, Gentiles, non-Jewish. It's a strange place full of strange people and who knows what might happen? If

you read on into chapter 5, past our passage, their worst fears are realized. But that's getting ahead of our story.

4. Scripture
5. Jesus stills this raging storm. The boat was just about ready to be swamped and sink to the bottom of the sea. But Jesus saves them. That's great for them. How about us? What can this possibly mean for us?
6. A basic Christian belief is that God is with us. It's in our call to worship. *As the storms of life are raging/ Lord we know that you are with us.* As we come into scary situations, like standing in front of people, we say a prayer. God is with us.
7. I believe that, but it raises lots of questions. I was glad to hear in last week's sermon that we believe in asking questions here at Westminster, because I have lots of them.
8. How often do we go through horrible times in our lives, and it's not at all like this picture, side by side with Jesus confronting the storm together. Instead, it seems like Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat, while the waves are crashing all around. And so often, unlike the scripture, we try to roust him, and he just won't wake up.
9. Where is God during those times?
10. It's one of the great questions of our faith. Where was Jesus in the Holocaust when 6 M people died, most of them Jewish? Where was Jesus in all of the other holocausts before and since? That's just one example. Where is God in all of the trouble that we experience in this world? Is God asleep on the back seat of the boat? Is God dead, as some might say?
11. We begin every service by saying *the Lord be with you (and also with you)*. That's church talk, and I don't quite

understand the grammar: is it a prayer? a wish? a description of reality? (You English majors straighten me out.) As I interpret it, it's a prayer invoking God's presence, and a reminder that God is here with us, now and always.

12. What is this presence of God that we invoke?
13. I used to be a part of the Pentecostal movement. Pentecostals feel their religion so the presence of God is a big thing for them. Presbyterians think their religion. There's a big difference between thinking your religion and feeling it. When you go to worship in a Pentecostal church, there will be a lot of emotion.
14. While I appreciate that, it left me really confused because if God's presence is based on a feeling, there are plenty of times I'm out in the cold. Feelings are unpredictable. We don't all feel alike. Those of us who are more reserved should not feel like our way of feeling is not as valid as those are more demonstrative.
15. Since then, I have transitioned to more of a thinking faith. But I'm not sure that the question of God's presence can be solved any better by thinking about it.
16. The ultimate answer is found in Moses when he asked God, *who are you. What is your name?* God said, *my name is YHWH*, which means *I am who I am*, or, *I will who I will be*. That's God's name, Yahweh, or Jehovah. It also describes God, but God's presence remains a big mystery.
17. So you can see that I'm kind of conflicted about this whole topic of God's presence. I was glad to hear Patrick's sermon last week when he said there are some questions we don't know the answer to. We have to live our way into the answer. We can't bear it just yet. The

question about God's presence is one of those. I don't understand it.

18. My friend Scott has helped me with a way to live into the question of God's presence. He said, look for sacred moments. This has been a revelation.
19. These days, instead of looking for a feeling, or an intellectual understanding, I look for sacred moments. God will be who God will be. Look for signs of that. It could be something small, something bite-sized. Someday, maybe I will get to the point where I see God in all and all in God, like the great mystics. I know that in my head, but my heart can't see it yet. In the meantime, I start out small. Look for sacred moments.
20. What has been a sacred moment to me? You know I have to get around to talking about Annette, my wife who died just this February. I always tell people when someone dies that the distance between heaven and earth becomes narrow. Watch for places where heaven breaks through that barrier.
21. Lots of times, people see sacred moments in coincidences that happen around the time of death. I've heard all kinds of stories. People feel a presence, maybe not of God, but the presence of the deceased. One woman said that for months afterwards, she would sometimes walk into a room and smell cigarette smoke. She knew that her father had been there because he was a smoker.
22. In my case, it took me a while, about a month. I started writing a journal to help me through it. As I wrote, one day, the sacredness of it just struck me like a ton of bricks.
23. Annette died at home. She was not in hospice. We had an ordinary bed for her. The last day she wasn't talking. She said *it's too hard to talk*. Her brain was shutting down.

She was conscious, she was aware. I don't know how much she was processing. She wasn't talking.

24. The last night, I pulled up the recliner alongside the twin bed and slept next to her. At 3 am, all of sudden she is able to talk and she says *help me, help me*. Annette what can I do? *Pray for me*. So, I pray for her. Are you in pain? Do you need some pain killer? *Yes*, she said. I give her some pain killer. We help her get more comfortable and go back to sleep. Four hours later, she took her last breath. She was a foot away from me. Since it's not a hospital bed, there were no bars between us. I was holding her arm.

25. How many people can say that, especially during Covid? It was a sacred time, if ever there was one. To sleep by her side, one last time, praying for her, holding her, relieving her pain. This is sacred stuff. To put a bookend on all the times we slept together, prayed, wished the best for each other, relieved each other's pain, served each other. Thinking about it now, I would almost call it sacramental, a grace filled moment.

26. People ask me, *Larry how are you doing?* A bomb went off in my life. I'm sad, I'm wounded, I lost part of myself. But I'm glad to be alive. I walk in the woods with my dog. She leaps over logs chasing squirrels with such joy. I smell the woods growing, and I'm grateful and joyful. I'm still here and it's a good life. It's spring in NY. I didn't know if I would survive, because part of me didn't, but it looks like I have another chapter in front of me, even though it is tough to imagine what it will look like.

27. God's presence experienced in sacred moments.

28. What about the Holocaust? There were sacred moments during the Holocaust too. Read the accounts. Read Elie

Wiesel's *Night*. Even in that dark night, his spirituality sustained him.

29. God's presence is one of those questions that you have to live into. It will always be a question. I will never have the complete answer. I will always be living my way into it. Even if Jesus himself tried to explain it to me, I probably would not understand it then, either. As Paul said, *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

30. He's talking about heaven when we will see the Lord. It's only then that we will know the answers to all things.

31. Look for the sacred. Look for the sacred.

Lord, we come to you in prayer believing that you are present with us, that you hear our prayers, that you are a compassionate God and that are here with us. Help us to see sacred moments and to recognize your presence because you are all and you are in all.

Lord, in boldness we bring to you our prayers.

Westminstergram

In his message last week, Patrick celebrated the asking of questions. I was happy to hear that, because I have lots.

We begin every service by saying *the Lord be with you (and also with you)*. As I interpret it, this is a prayer invoking God's presence, and a reminder that God is here with us, now and always.

God's presence. What is it? How do we discern God in our midst? That has always been mystifying to me. I don't understand it. If you tried to explain it to me, I probably would not understand it then, either. It's a mystery, yet we talk about it all the time.

I think it's one of those questions you have to live into, as we discussed last week. Lately, I've been living my way into some sort of an answer, though it will always be a question.

Come on Sunday, and we'll talk about it.