

Calming Chaos
September 16, 2012
Mark 6:45-52

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

It was the summer of 1985. I was hired to be the on-site camp intern at Camp Wa-Kon-Da-Ho in Yosemite, Kentucky. This is a Disciples of Christ camp in south central Kentucky and at that time it was a camp that was basically abandoned nine months of the year and open three months. The very first lesson I learned that summer is that before you agree to work somewhere for ten weeks check it out first! The Regional Minister that hired me gave me a little flair gun, handed me a map, and said, "Good luck!"

Part of my responsibility was to get the camp ready for campers. I was supposed to stock the canteen, get craft supplies, get organized and such. So I pulled into the driveway at camp Wa-Kon-Da-Ho and an "Absolutely No Trespassing" sign greeted me just beyond a large iron gate. I drove a little further and saw the first building – a log-cabin kind of lodge with the front porch falling off and most of the upstairs windows broken. There were three other buildings, a garage, the main dining hall, and the bath house. The cabins were in the woods just out of sight. It was, by far, the most dilapidated, pathetic excuse for a camp I had ever seen and my heart sank.

I considered getting right back in my car and leaving but the care taker pulled up beside me and welcomed me to my new summer home. He told me about the kids that came over the hill and busted up the sinks in the bathhouse. He showed me my room in the broken down log cabin. He gave me keys to the front gate and the padlocks for all the doors of the dining hall. Then he told me that he thought he had the thievery and vandalism at the camp under control. He knew all the local kids from driving a school bus, so he kindly informed them that if they failed to get permission to be on camp grounds he might just mistake them for a little bunny – at which point he pulled a 357 from under the seat of his car. He showed the gun to me so I knew he wasn't just telling stories.

It was late in the afternoon so he was ready to wrap up for the day. As he drove off and left me all alone he said, "I'll lock the gate behind me!" I was sick to my stomach and I was all alone and unarmed, except for my flair gun. One rotary dial phone on the kitchen wall with a three foot cord was my only connection to the outside world and I was terrified.

As luck would have it storm clouds moved in and as the sun gave out the night sky began to flash with lightning. So I drug the mattress from my room to the dining hall and made a bed on the

floor. For some reason all the chains and padlocks gave me a greater sense of security and given the dining hall had a bathroom I wouldn't have to go outside to the bathhouse after it got dark. So I chained myself in and hunkered down for the night. I tried to busy myself with some cleaning but mostly I was paralyzed with fear. I propped the bathroom door open, left the light on, turn the main hall lights off, and attempted to go to sleep. By then lightening was piercing the darkness with a vengeance and was then joined by its friend thunder.

The one mercury vapor light on the camp ground went out every time the lightening flashed leaving me with nothing more than a 60 watt light bulb for comfort. That is when I started seeing things. Shadowy figures lingered after each flash of lightening and I sat straight up, bug-eyed all night long in what felt like a scene from the dawn of the dead.

When I read about the disciples out on the sea my mind goes to Camp Wa-kon-da-ho. It is a dark and stormy night... Jesus is off praying somewhere and the disciples are out in a boat. The wind is so strong they have to take down the sail. They are left with oars and brute strength to get to the other side. They row and row, but to no avail. They struggle with all their might and go nowhere, for hours. Then one starts in, "Do you see that?" "What?" "That! – What is it?" It wasn't like these guys were strangers to the sea. At least four of them were seasoned fishermen. Yet the sight of a shadowy figure on the water terrifies all of them.

They are terrified... I'm guessing we all have a story or two of a moment or a day or a year we were terrified – terrified that someone we love might die – terrified that everything we have might be lost – terrified that life as you know it will never be the same – terrified of being all alone – terrified of being hurt, or robbed, or killed, or starved – terrified of climate change – terrified of limited resources – terrified of the world falling apart. We know what it is to have our hearts pound in our chests and not be able to close our eyes out of fear. We are living in the midst of a war on terror – and at times it feels as if we are losing. So we get it. We understand terrified when something is coming at us that we have never seen before. If I were in that boat I'd be crying like a baby too.

What I find odd about this story is that the disciples aren't terrified by the wind or the waves or the struggle – they are terrified by Jesus. Don't you find that curious? They'd been with the guy night and day for months and they don't even recognize him. If they were terrified by the storm this sermon would be easy – but it is Jesus that scares the heck out of them – come to think of it, Jesus scares the heck out of me.

Now don't get me wrong – I don't think Jesus walks around with a knapsack of lightning bolts to smite evildoers. My fear is that Jesus wants to change everything about me – the way I think – the way I see – the way I talk – the way I spend money – the way I treat people that annoy me – the way I live. Jesus is coming to turn everything I know on its ear. The first are last the last are first. The least are the greatest – the greatest are the least. Seek to serve not to be served. Give all you have. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Love your enemy. Turn your cheek. Forgive 70 times 7 times. That's some scary stuff.

Throughout the gospel of Mark, the writer makes the point that the disciples have a hard time understanding Jesus. They tend to get caught up in the flash and sizzle of miracles and healings

and fame – when Jesus is trying to teach them how to be disciples. They don't seem to get Jesus. They don't even recognize him when he is right in front of them. They are convinced he's going to be the tough guy that restores the kingdom of Israel – when Jesus is talking about another kingdom all together – the kingdom of God on earth. Weapons and armies won't build the kingdom of God – only love and compassion. This point seems to be lost on the disciples. Jesus, whom they fail to recognize, scares the bejeebers out of them – but then Jesus says, "Take heart, it's me, Jesus." He steps into their boat and the wind stops – all is calm.

What do you need to see? What do you need to know? What do you need to understand that Jesus is a revelation of God – that Jesus reveals how God wants us to live – that Jesus calls us to follow – that Jesus knows what he is doing?

So what is this passage about? Is it about Jesus calming our fears – or is it about the calm on the other side of our fears?

Maybe it's both.

If the sea is symbolic of chaos and fear – Jesus has mastery over it. He calms the wind, he stills the water, he walks all over it. He is powerful and present in ways that we too often fail to recognize. He calls out to us, "Take heart, it is I!"

And to those who are afraid that Jesus is going to turn their lives upside down and inside out he says the same, "Take heart, it is I!"

While I can still remember the palpitations of my heart I have no regrets about Camp Wa-kon-da-ho. God was there in ways I had to train my eyes to see.

And as for following Jesus – it still scares me – but I hear his voice – and I trust his words – this is the way – this is the truth – this is the life.

Amen.