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 Ordinary Time/Proper 7
 Year B
 Mark 4:35-41

Who Then is This?

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

In February 2020, just six weeks prior to Covid-19 bringing all tourism in Israel to a screeching halt, I was sitting quietly in the recently constructed (DUKE in ALTUM) Duc in Altum Church built on the site of the ancient city of Magdela, the purported home of Mary Magdelene. “Duc in Altum” is Latin for “into the deep” and the church derives its name from Luke 5:4, where Jesus instructs Peter to put out his nets in the deep water¹, an analogy he will later associate with catching people instead of fish. Next to the Church are the remains of a 1st century synagogue, and the Church itself is well-known for its artistic tribute to the women of the Bible. A stunning centerpiece of the structure, however, is the Boat Chapel and it was in the back pew of this chapel that I watched the Mass being celebrated from a boat-shaped altar.

The Boat Chapel contains perhaps the only altar in the world constructed in the shape of a boat. Designed to commemorate Jesus’ teaching from a boat on the Sea of Galilee, the altar is roughly 20 ft long and constructed of polished wood in a shape similar to the boat on our bulletin cover. At the far right end of the boat altar is a tall wooden mast with a cross beam and a linen draping, evoking the image of a cross. Behind the altar is a huge glass semicircle window that overlooks the Sea of Galilee, and the chapel itself has a rounded circle roof imitating the hull of a boat, similar to the construction we have here at Trinity on the Hill.

As you might guess, my experience in this beautiful setting was deeply moving. I could easily imagine Jesus in a boat similar to the altar boat, being gently rocked by the rippling waters of the sea visible to me through the semicircle window. I could see him preaching to those gathered on the shore, speaking in parables and sharing teachings with his disciples. It is a peaceful image found several times in our gospels. Jesus the patient teacher, healer, comforter. We like this Jesus, don’t we? The Jesus we call our friend and brother. The Jesus who takes a towel and washes his followers’ feet. The Jesus who tells his disciples in John’s gospel, “do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”² And there is absolutely nothing wrong with this picture of Jesus, but if it is the ONLY image that comes to mind when we speak of the second person of the Trinity, then we have falsely domesticated God.

Because that isn’t the depiction of Jesus in a boat today, is it? The Jesus in our passage from Mark’s gospel is both perplexing and terrifying. Somehow, he convinces seasoned fishermen to journey across the unpredictable Sea of Galilee at night. There is a puzzling air of urgency. Jesus, who has just spent hours patiently explaining parables to his disciples – which we read

¹ Luke 5:4 (NRSV)

² John 14:27

about last week - now inexplicitly wants to “go across to the other side,” the predominantly non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples agree to take him into their boat, Mark tells us, “just as he was,” a curious phrase evoking an image of Jesus who has neither stopped to pack his bag nor paused to bathe. And then, once in the boat, the agenda-driven Jesus promptly falls asleep! Meanwhile, the winds are picking up, the waves are getting bigger, and the disciples, perhaps no longer enamored with their status as the “in crowd,” begin to panic. They begin to doubt. They begin to wonder if following Jesus was a bad idea. “Don’t you care, Jesus?” “Don’t you care about us?” Their panicked questioning is legitimate, I think. The man who cured diseases, exorcised demons, and spoke convincingly of a new kingdom now lay asleep in a boat with his followers about to be swallowed up by the sea.

We often center this passage on the disciples - their fears, their insecurities and lack of faith. We think of our own doubts about Jesus and hear the encouraging message that even when God seems “asleep” or absent, Jesus will always calm the storms in our lives. And possibly the writer of Mark intended his first century listeners, brutally persecuted for their faith, to experience this story in the same encouraging way. While this *is* one takeaway message, the entirety of Mark’s gospel indicates this passage is intended to be much more: more radical, more challenging: a risky affirmation of exactly who the Son of God is. “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” It is no wonder the disciples were afraid. If you only can remember one thing from this sermon, I want you to remember this: the story of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee is first and foremost about the power, the invincibility, of *the resurrected Christ*. The scene of the sleeping Jesus rising from slumber to conquer the ferocity of the wind and the waves, to tame the forces of nature that first century Palestinians considered demonic, to rebuke the seas in the same way he rebuked unclean spirits, this scene, this Jesus, should fill us, as it did the disciples, with awe because Jesus has just demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion that God cannot be defeated and should not be domesticated. At the end of his ministry, Jesus will again demonstrate his power when he rises from the slumber of the tomb to the glory of the resurrection.

What does this mean for us, followers of an untamed and undomesticated God? Do we prefer to follow only the gentle and comforting Jesus, remaining safely anchored near shore? A boat was an ancient Christian symbol for the Church, symbolic of being tossed on a sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution. We retain this symbolism today – if you are here in person, you are seated in the “nave” of the church – the Latin word for “ship”. The simple act of showing up today, in person or online, means you have boarded the boat. You have made a choice to hear about the Jesus who rose up to conquer the winds and the waves . . . and death. Are you willing now to venture to sea with him, not knowing what storms may arise? Today marks a new beginning in many ways here at Trinity on the Hill, a new interim, new ministry, coffee hour! and, praise God, the return of congregational singing (later at the 10:30 service). It would be incredibly easy to get comfortable again in this nave, wouldn’t it? Mark’s gospel challenges us to leave the security of the shoreline, to grow into a more mature faith, to be ready to “go across to the other side,” wherever that may be, to refuse to be content with calm seas and safe harbors. What might that look like for you? What might that look like for Trinity on the Hill? Give us faith, dear Lord, that Christ may be awakened in all of us. Amen.