

# Rocking and Rolling with Jesus

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,  
at the eleven o'clock service, June 24, 2012.  
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Mark 4:35-41.*

On Friday afternoon I sat by the window and watched storm clouds roar across the city sky. There were intermittent breaks, suggesting that it was over, only to be followed by another round of wind and rain. At one point during one of the quiet moments, I walked out on the terrace—I was downtown—and noticed that the cloud coming from the west was darker than the new World Trade Center tower. It was hard to distinguish the dark outline of this new wonderful building, now New York's tallest, and the angry cloud engulfing it. It was awesome.

Storms are raw and uncontrollable, defiantly unresponsive to our neat rules of order. And they are always bigger than life in that they remind us, even if subconsciously, of how little agency we truly have over not only the weather, but also the economy, our children, and indeed our lives in general. In that way, storms are for us archetypal. Even to this day in our very secular world when weather triumphs as it always ultimately does, people of all faiths reference the plight of Job, poor old Job upon whom so many calamities fell. Just a moment ago we heard a passage from that book which purports to set us as humans in the right perspective to God.

It is not a warm passage. After Job's three "friends" support him with nothing but *schadenfreude*, he finally loses it and curses the day he was born. And who could blame him? No comfort from God; but in a whirlwind, Job hears God say, "Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" In a more current translation, God says to Job, "Man up, Job, you are getting on my nerves." Generally speaking, I have to admit that this is not my favorite image of God; and for the record, as provocative and ambitious as the book of Job is, we need to remember that this is an ancient story which attempts to make some sense of the presence of hardship in our lives—far from the last word, inspired or otherwise, ever written about the subject.

There is little doubt, though, that Job's view of the universe and God was present in the heart and mind of the narrator of the Gospel of Mark. In some ways this story of Jesus' calming of the sea is an attempt to address the same issue. What happens to us—it is as though Mark ponders—when life blows up? What can we expect or hope from God? Are we helped or are we taught a lesson about who is in charge?

This underlying question, "Where is God in the middle of a storm," is the question of faith. Should it be? I don't know. Should the principal question instead be, "What, O Lord, can I do to make the world a better place?" Maybe, but I don't know about "shoulds." All I know for sure is that at the heart of each of us is this question: Where are you God, when the sky is falling? And the disciples awoke him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Afternoon thunderstorms on the Sea of Galilee are common and ferocious. It is likely that a situation like this one arose with Jesus aboard more than once. There are a number of times when the narrative tells that at the end of a long day of healing and preaching, Jesus repaired to another place, a quieter, gentler place away from the demands of the crowd. Having spent their entire lives fishing in the calm of early mornings, these disciples no doubt knew better than to negotiate this sea late in the day. It was, in fact, a big sea by little boat standards, 64 square miles; but when Jesus wanted them to go, faithfully even if often fearfully, they went, learning again as we all do that storms come when they come.

But this is much, much more than simply a story about a stormy trip late one day in the ministry of Jesus. With great emotional clarity Mark's use of this story reflects the pervasive anxiety gripping the people of Israel shortly after 70 CE. The Temple had just been destroyed, changing life forever for the Jews. A sea change of seismic proportion had occurred in their long uneasy life as occupied people, and for now the demon, the dragon, appeared to be winning. It is hardly surprising that Mark chose an exorcism as Jesus' first public miracle in

his gospel. As Jesus taught in the synagogue (note the importance of the setting, a part of the temple system), a man possessed began to heckle him: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus’ response to the unclean spirit, which represented more than one troubled man, was not far from his words to the raging sea, “Be silent.” A storm was indeed blowing across the land, and it was far more significant than the symbol used in this story, being tossed about in some rough weather on the Sea of Galilee. In the apocalyptic era of this writing, Mark’s readers knew that their way of life was at stake, and the question in every heart was “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?”

And for us as well, somewhat surprisingly, this is a big story about life; and how we hear it is crucial, I believe, to our spiritual health. If we sentimentalize it, attempting to understand it as a promise of smooth waters during the rough patches of life, we will be disappointed. The point of this story is not—it cannot be—that we can count on Jesus to save us from every disaster. Neither the depth of our faith nor the efficacy of our praying will save us from the tossing seas. And furthermore, on occasion nothing can save us from capsizing or even perishing. That is the truth of life, and God’s presence in our lives does not remove us from life but allows us to live it. How we accommodate that admission in our faith determines our spiritual maturity. I believe that, although I make no claims of being there myself, of having reached full peace with it myself.

Mark’s story becomes a defining myth for us by which to live our lives once we admit that faith does not rely on magic but on presence. When we call upon God to show up or in the words of the story to “wake up,” God will indeed do so; in fact our calling out is the acknowledgement that God is already there. As people of faith, we get no passes; like everyone else we struggle with life, we are often afraid. We worry about the minutia of our lives and about those we love the most—are we healthy and prosperous, do we have meaning and purpose, are we happy for God’s sake? And then we worry about the huge global issues as well—what will happen between Syria and Turkey, is Egypt reversing all the hope of last year’s revolution, how deeply in trouble is the European Union, and what of our own banks being downgraded? Is our political system hopelessly locked in bitterness and polarity? And on and on.

We worry; of course we do—and often for very good reasons. But this is the lesson of this story about the boat in rough waters: we do not live as people of utter despair. We live as people of hope because Jesus woke up and said, “Peace, be still.” For every instance of despair, we can find an occasion of hope, evidences of God’s wakeful presence in our lives. Hope is all around: In a criminal trial this week justice prevailed when victims were believed; a bus full of faithful but defiantly unrepentant nuns traveling around the country, visiting shelters, pantries, and other sites that care for the country’s poor and disenfranchised shouted hope this week; and even in our corner of the world, when people like us gather to pray and worship without certainty but with hope made stronger by praying together, we know that even the greatest storm cannot separate us from the mystery and presence of God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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