

First Friends Church, A Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
June 20, 2021
Mark 4:35-41, 2 Cor 6:1-15
“Abundant Calm”

Readings

Mark 4: 35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Message

We had a nice sail out to San Clemente Island for a long holiday weekend to meet up with friends on their boats. We got there first so we scored the most ideal spot closest to the beach in the sheltered bay and settled in for days of idyllic rest and calm. It was perfect: sun, snorkeling, and reading books lying on the deck in the shade. Saturday dinner was hosted by our friends with succulent treasure they

found in the sea. We planned to host a champagne brunch for everyone the in the morning and then take a lazy sail back together on Monday. We fell asleep to the sound of soft waves rolling onto the beach.

But instead of dawning bright and beautiful, Sunday morning brought a waking nightmare. We woke to torrential wind and rain. Initially moored in the safest place, our boat was now was in danger of being tossed on to the beach by waves crashing over the sides generated by wind blowing directly into the bay. The captain took the helm and started the motor, endeavoring to hold the boat in place while I desperately tried to pull up the anchor before our keel ran aground. The third attempt was successful, but our profound relief in finally escaping the now treacherous bay and heading out into the open ocean was short lived.

We threw our foul weather gear on over our life jackets and ran life lines on the deck. Stumbling between steering the boat and crawling along the lines, we reefed the sails and ran out a tailing sea anchor to steady the boat. We heard a distress call for a man overboard on the radio. We saw a friend's lost dingy and knew we could not retrieve it. It soon became a tiny speck tossed by the ocean.

The weather report was not good. Not only would the storm not abate, the prediction was for worse to come.

The waves crashed over our boat filling the cockpit before the drains could even begin to empty it. I went down below and grabbed a bucket to bail which was a

laughable lost cause. I grabbed some Tupperware of mystery food out of the refrigerator and threw it up into the cock pit. It would be a long day and we needed all the nourishment we could get.

Although it seemed I was below only seconds, the captain called for me to get back up on deck. When I did I witnessed a wall of water as tall as our mast crashing over us. We rolled but righted again. The captain yelled, “We’ve lost our sea anchor. Take the helm. I’m going forward to lash down the sails. They’re not helping us power through this and the waves hitting them will capsize us. If I go overboard do not try to save me. Take care of yourself and get back to the harbor.”

I grabbed the large metal steering wheel and put all my strength into keeping the boat on course, trying to hold it steady against the pounding ocean waves. I watched the captain inch his way forward and pack the sails while the wind, waves and rocking boat threw him against the life lines. The wind and rain were cruel and cold. Drenched and standing in water above my knees I was shivering, but sweat from exertion ran down my body inside my bright yellow jacket and overalls. I held on as long as I could but it was only minutes before I yelled to the captain, “I can’t hold it on course anymore.”

When he sloshed back into the cockpit and took the helm I practically collapsed. The strength in my upper body was exhausted and my legs were rubber.

It went on for hours. I do not remember the rest of the trip. And in fact, when we finally motored into the bay and entered our slip I never noticed the evening was calm; sunny, warm, gentle breeze. All our friends made it back and the person who went overboard was recovered. The only loss was the dingy. The captain would later downplay the events. He even denied his first action on returning to shore was not his usual fastidious care of the boat; washing it down and putting everything away- ship shape. Instead he grabbed the bottle of champagne and headed for the showers. But then I wanted to kiss the dock.

We all face our own windstorms and waves. What comes to mind for you? Where were you able to find calm? Perhaps you are now facing a storm. How can you be still and know God is present? Can you ask for help? How about breathing?

In the last year we experienced a lockdown to stop the spread of the virus. The isolation brought our usual activities with all the hustle and bustle, rush and packed schedules to a stop. But it was a false calm. While we came to a stop the world was still swirling around us out of our control. And added to the usual “wind and waves” were the virus, increased economic distress and hunger, education, immigration and civil rights challenges.

If we are not calm reopening will push us back into the hustle, bustle, rush and packed schedules. I am afraid we will find our pandemic isolation was the eye of the hurricane- the calm in the midst of life’s storm. In addition, there are other

people out there who experience much worse storms than we have ever or will ever know. The challenges of racism, environmental disaster, economic justice, housing and peacebuilding loom as large as any tsunami wave on the ocean.

So the query is how do we keep calm and avoid being tossed by the inevitable storms? The Gospel according to Mark advocates faith in the Teacher and his Way. Jesus said, “Peace! Be Still!” and calmed the waves. Or did he say it to calm the disciples in the midst of the waves? We know what he did and encouraged his disciples to do with the peace they found- share it in word and deed. Paul told the Corinthians in the midst of and in spite of persecution, God listens and helps all of us. He told the Christians in Rome, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we are the Lord’s... No matter what happens we are in and will still be in God.”(14:8, 9). That can bring powerful abundant calm.

On my ocean adventure I do not remember praying or thinking in the midst of it all. Instead the image on a cross stitch sampler I have been working on comes to mind. Along with a nest of tiny sparrows it says, “Dear God, watch over me, your world is so big and I am so small.”

Or in my case, “God, your ocean is so big and my boat is so small!” In retrospect, I see God’s presence in everything we did and all that happened. I see God in the calm action that brought us all home.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians in chaos and doubt. “As we work together with Christ we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.” And “...our heart is wide open to you... open wide your hearts also.” He urges them to work together, hold on to what he has told them is true, and to accept support. As we go forward again now into uncharted waters that will inevitably have wind and waves I am thinking about queries to help me stay in God’s calm, peace, be still.

First, “Is it necessary to my life /our ministry?” In the midst of the chaos we will be wading into, I want to focus, be clear and avoid being distracted, keeping things simple and true, (let the dingy go and eat food from Tupperware). Second, “How is it spreading God’s love to others?” Taking action to care for others with others (working together to get keep the boat moving and us safe) distracts me from self-centered worries (like how could I possibly get this boat home alone?!) And third, “How will I work with others on this?” Partnering, encouraging, learning and growing relationships and community of support will get us all back to the harbor safely, or maybe even treat us all to a warm, sunny sail.