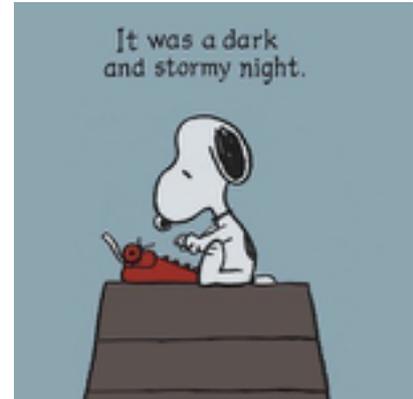


Still in the Storm

Mark 4:35-41

Cheap and trashy novels often begin something like this. 'It was a dark and stormy night. The thunderclaps were rattling the windows of the run down cottage. Rain was beating against the door. The timbers of the roof were creaking ominously, as if they were protesting against the deluge...' And so on. Given enough time alone with a computer, I'm sure we could come up with something equally appalling.

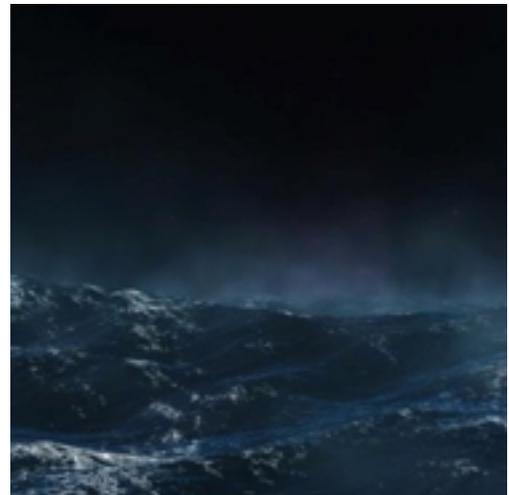


Storms are often used by writers and by movie directors to signal the approach of some misfortune. Storms are a metaphor for the difficulties and tragedies of life. People often talk about a stormy relationship. When a relationship faces breakdown, it's said to be on the rocks, like a ship driven by the waves on to the shore.

I'm not suggesting for one moment that the gospel writer Mark introduces a storm into the story of Jesus' ministry as a kind of plot development. But this storm does serve God's

purpose, so that the disciples can see exactly who it is they're following.

Jesus and his disciples sail straight into a storm, but Jesus has actually spent the whole day in a boat, not sailing, first of all, but preaching. The crowd listening to him grew so large that he had to get into a boat to avoid the crush, a floating pulpit. As the boat bobbed around, he let the crowd in on the secrets of the kingdom of God. When the day was ended, Jesus told the disciples that he wanted to sail across the lake, to the other side.

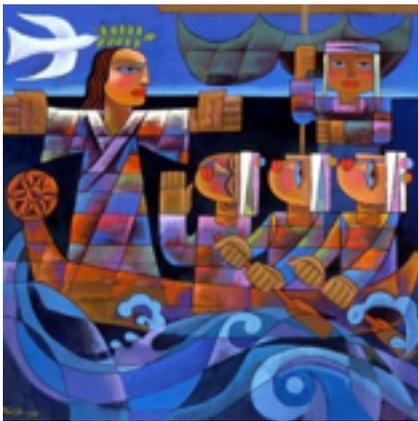
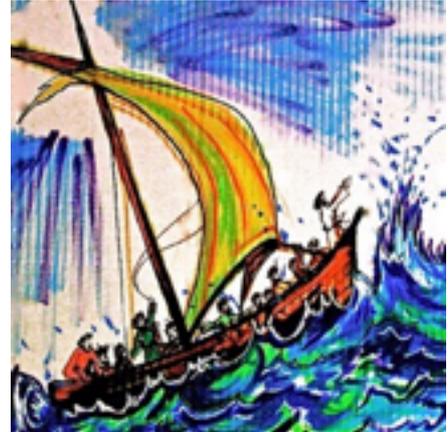


The other side wasn't just geographically distinct, but culturally too. It was Gentile territory, the kind of place that held genuine fears for the average Jew. They were on their way across the lake to a place inhabited by people quite strange to their eyes, and who would give them a stormy reception. They wouldn't have been surprised that a storm sprang up.

As they sailed across, the wind reached gale-force, the sea started to pound, and waves crashed into the boat, threatening to swamp it. A number of disciples were fisherman, and used to a bit of

rough water, but this storm really had them really worried. But what was even more worrying was Jesus' reaction. Or indeed the lack of it. There he was, head on the leather seat, oblivious to the chaos, sleeping on the job.

They woke Jesus up. Blind panic drove them. And they weren't polite about it. "Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die?" Do you really care? Are you all just talk? In the middle of the chaos, the raw fear, the howling of the wind and slapping of the waves, Jesus simply stands up and speaks. To the wind he says, "Be silent" and to the sea "Be still", literally, be muzzled. And the wind hears these words and stops, and the roiling sea becomes calm.



You might have expected some gratitude, but the disciples are still scared, not of the storm anymore, but of the one who spoke the storm to stillness. Jesus gets to the heart of the issue. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Faith is the issue. They don't yet know who they are dealing with. "Who is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him?" They have just started on the journey with Jesus. They've heard him speak with great wisdom and insight. They call him Teacher, Rabbi. But then this happens, the kind of stuff only God alone

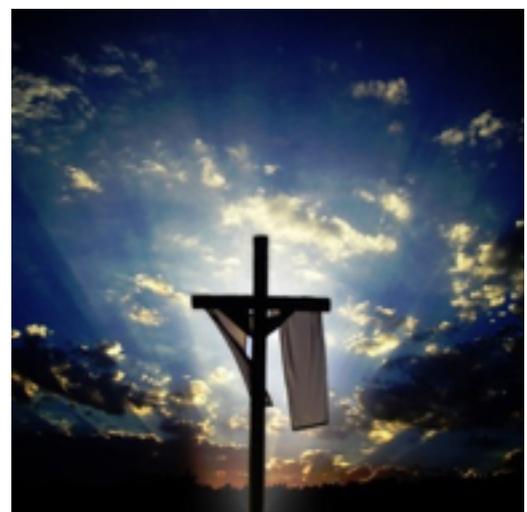
can do. "God, you rule over the surging sea, when its waves mount up, you still them." Or right back at the beginning, the story of creation: "The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...and God said..." God spoke. Things happened. Jesus spoke. Same kind of thing. The wind and the sea responded immediately. Jesus forces them to further grapple with his identity. Who is Jesus? Will they trust him?

As his gospel progresses, Mark shares with us the disciple's ongoing struggle with faith in Jesus. They can't see how he could possibly feed 5000 people. They continually misunderstand the parables and need Jesus' to give them a more detailed explanation. They argue about who is the best of the bunch. They are scared when Jesus talks about his impending death.

But what happens in the storm is one of the clearest indicators they'll get of Jesus' true identity. Despite their confusion, their lack of trust, even their anger at him, he acts to rescue them. The grace-filled God, the living, breathing God, is in the boat with them. Who can believe that?

But there's so much more to come. They'll know a harder time than this. They'll see their teacher, their Saviour hanging lifeless on a cross, having given up his life for the sake of this chaotic, sin-fractured world. Death has swallowed up his life. Who will rescue Jesus? They won't, and they can't. They've abandoned him, and so, it seems, has his Father.

But Jesus does come out of the other side of this storm of death. Death could not hold him, because he is the sinless

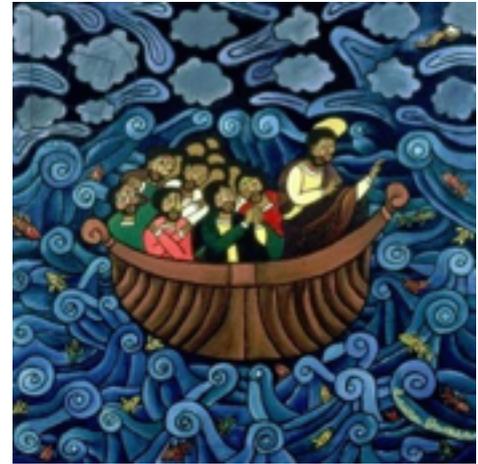


one. He drew life from his Father. Only after the resurrection does Jesus' life made a whole lot more sense. "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" the psalmist writes; words that speak of Jesus' trust in his Father, and words that are true when we place our faith in Jesus.

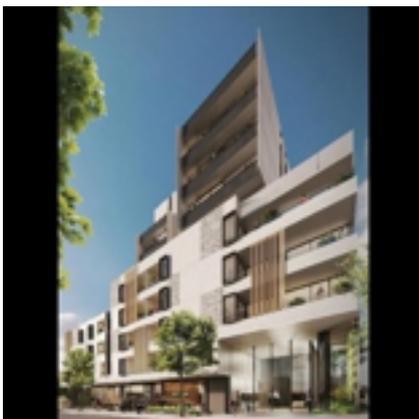
So what will Jesus do in our storms? Our lives seem to consist of alternating periods of storm and calm, stress and success, pain and pleasure. What kind of storms batter you? Is it perhaps a stormy and tempestuous relationship with someone close? Is it harsh words exchanged in anger, or the ache of a friendship broken down? Sometimes it mightn't be the ferocity of the storm but the fact it seems to go on and on, without an end in sight. Living with chronic pain, or raw emotions from some event in the past. Sometimes it's the whirlwind of busyness. We feel trapped by our work and family life, with so many commitments from which we can't extricate ourselves, and we see no way out.

Who is going to rescue us? In whom can we put our trust? The disciples grabbed the sleeping Jesus by the scruff of the neck and woke him up. Perhaps more in fear than in faith. Yet Jesus responded in grace and in power. He is Lord over all creation, and even more than that, he is the Lord of love.

The same faithful Lord responds gracefully to us, even in our lack of faith. When all hell breaks loose, and when we are stretched to breaking point, we will not find a sleeping Saviour, but a living Lord. He will not, he cannot let us sink. If Jesus wasn't in the boat that night, all hands would have been lost. If Jesus wasn't with us now, the same would be true. But he has faithfully bound himself to us, as God and man, and through our baptism into his body, and that means that we will never have to face the storms of life alone. We may rightly despair of our ability to cope, but never of Jesus' ability to save.



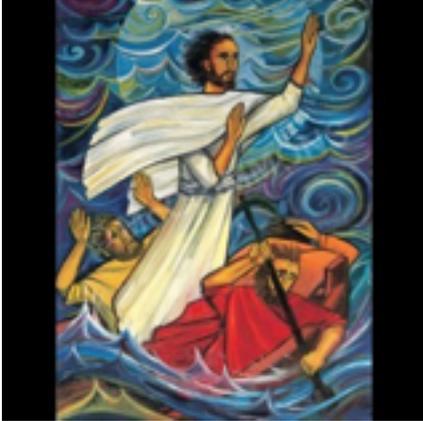
This isn't true just of each one of us personally, but also of the church. The image of the church as a boat sailing on a stormy sea has its origin in this incident. Tossed around by the pressures of society and culture, sorely tested by the power of the evil one, the church's only hope is to call to Jesus for help.



The disciples were on their way to a place that they knew very little about, and they were scared about what might happen there. Although St Paul's isn't sailing anywhere, change and chaos surround us. Every day the building across the road grows ever taller. Trucks unload pre-cast concrete panels every half an hour, and cement mixers queue up as well. There's constant noise and action.

This is really only the precursor to the bigger change: all the people who will live so close to us. This little boat of the church is about to make a big transition, from what we've been doing as a regional church for over 60 years, to becoming a church in an urban setting. There's a whole lot about this that might worry us, even frighten us. How can we connect into this new community? What will have to change in our practices and our attitudes? Are we up to the task of sharing Jesus, his life, his good news, with people who will be very different to us? How will they react to us?

Perhaps this feels something like a storm. It's certainly chaotic, uncertain and confusing. But remember this: we have the same living Lord as those first disciples. Jesus is in this boat, and he will sustain us, guide us and lead us as we call out to him for help. He wants to go the other side, which for us will mean across and along Station Street, and down Elland Ave, behind the church, to let people know of God's healing, grace, love and power through Jesus.



In your life, in the life of our congregation, in the life of the church, let your confidence rest in the faithful, storm-calming Jesus Christ, Lord of the wind and waves, Lord of the church, Lord over all. Be still with him, in the storm and the calm. Amen.