

Hurricane Season

June 15, 2014

Mark 4:35-41

We are now about two weeks into official hurricane season. Isn't that great news? Summer thunderstorms complete with lightning are all over the place, wildfire risk is always there, and this year we are being warned about particularly nasty ticks. We can't even relax about being early in hurricane season; remember Tropical Storm Debby, which happened in late June 2012? If you are looking for a place to live with no natural disaster potential, you are in the wrong place. At least we don't have earthquakes

The emphasis right now is on preparedness – doing all the things we need to do to be ready when a storm hits. There are a lot of items on the checklist – an evacuation plan, stocking up on supplies like water and canned foods and batteries in case the power is out for a while, securing all the loose stuff around the house, arranging for a generator – stuff like that. We have seen what hurricanes and tropical storms can do and we would really be foolish not to be prepared.

We do all this preparation because we know from experience that storms can affect us here. Our hope is that when a storm comes, the plan will kick in, and we will know what to do. That is important, because the reality of life is that there are storms.

This story we are going to read from the Gospel of Mark is about a storm, with Jesus and the disciples on a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

READ Mark 4:35-41

These were not weekend sailors. At least 4 of the disciples were experienced fishermen. They had no doubt been through storms before, and likely knew of other fishermen who had died on the Sea. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded on the north end by steep cliffs and mountains. Winds rushing down those slopes can stir up sudden storms, sometimes making waves 30 feet high. Galilee might look like a big lake instead of a sea on the maps, but under circumstances like this, it might as well have been the Pacific Ocean. The Gospel of Mark is thought to be largely based on the recollections of Peter – one of those experienced fishermen. This was no ordinary storm.

This is not the main thing I want to get out of this lesson this morning, but one thing I think is worth noting is the fear of the disciples. It is easy for us to see why they would have been afraid of the storm – even the experienced fishermen. But we see fear in them twice in this story – the first time as they faced the storm, and at the end of the story when Jesus has calmed the storm. The translation we read from says in verse 41: “They were terrified...” when they saw that Jesus had such power and authority that the wind and the waves would obey him. They had never seen the wind and waves obey anybody. They were prepared by their experience with the sea for the possibility of death in a storm; that had happened before, and they had seen the power of the sea. But here was something entirely new – a person who could tell the wind to stop blowing! The language of the story here suggests that the disciples were more frightened by Jesus than they were by the storm – a reaction to the fact that everything about Jesus was outside of their prior experience. The Gospel lesson here does not take us through the resolution of their questions. For the most part, their questions about who Jesus really was remained unresolved until after the Resurrection. But this image of Jesus standing up in the boat and the wind and waves obeying His command was one that must have generated a lot of discussion among them as they tried to work through who Jesus really was. They may have been afraid, but they did not leave. They may not have understood everything, but they understood enough to know that they needed Jesus, and needed to follow Him. That’s some good stuff for us right there. We don’t understand everything about Jesus either, and some of what God does still scares us, but when we experience God, we know enough to know that we need Him, and we need to follow Him.

What I would like to concentrate on here is the storm, and the connection of the storm to us.

We can easily apply the lessons about this storm to the variety of storms we experience in this life. Storms come at us at all different levels, including the storms faced by the church and the storms we face as individuals.

The church is battered by secular culture from without and erosion from within. The world out there beats against the church with waves that challenge our Christian

ethic, that question the historical basis for our faith, that seek to remove our influence from all parts of public life. We face the reality that Christianity is not the dominant influence in this culture, if it ever really was. Inside the church, we face pressure to be conformed to the world, to get sidetracked into societal issues that have nothing to do with our mission to make disciples, to make our message more glamorous and less confrontational, to be more entertaining, all at the expense of the truth of the Gospel.

We would quickly run out of fingers trying to tick off examples of our personal storms – illness, family crisis, financial pressures, desire for more things, feelings of isolation, doubt, fear – the list could go on.

The question is not whether we will experience storms. Storms are inevitable, just like hurricanes in Florida. It is not a matter of “if”, but “when” and “how hard”. The questions are how we will prepare, and how we will respond. There is nothing in any of these teachings that says that people in right relationship with God will never experience a storm. These teachings are about being prepared and holding firmly to God.

Preparation for a hurricane is not all that complicated. You can find a list of hurricane preparedness items on a grocery bag.

Preparation – spiritual preparation – for all the other storms is not all that complicated either. Jesus gave us a whole bunch of instructions on this point, but two of his parables stick out.

The first is at Matthew 7:24, where He tells the story of a two builders - one who built his house on a rock, and one who built his house on sand. The storms came, the winds blew, and the rains beat against the two houses. The one built on sand was destroyed, but the one built on the rock stood firm. The preparation here was in the foundation. The house with the right foundation held. Spiritual preparation starts with the foundation as well. The spiritual house that is built on the rock of the Word of God can take the storm. This is not a foundation that we inherit or that we acquire by soaking it up by sitting in church – this is a foundation that is built by hearing and reading and studying and meditating on the Word of God as revealed to us in Scripture, in worship, and in prayer. It is not a foundation that we stumble upon by accident or chance – it is a

foundation that is made available to all of us by the grace of God, with a spot reserved there for us to stake our claim in and start building on.

The second is the parable of the bridesmaids in Matthew 25, where some of the bridesmaids had oil for their lamps and were ready when the bridegroom came. The others had no oil and had to go looking for a convenience store in the middle of the night to buy some. By the time they got the oil, the party was over. The preparation here was in stocking up on supplies. You start with the foundation, but you still have to build on it. Spiritual preparation starts with a foundation on the Word of God, stocked through the continuing experience of the presence of God in worship and study and prayer. The right building, stocked with the right stuff, can handle the storm.

The important thing about preparation is that when the storm hits, it is too late to start getting prepared. If I took a poll, I suspect I would find that many of us have not gathered up the water and batteries and sardines and crackers that we would need in a storm. We haven't at our house. What will it take for us to get serious about preparation for a storm? Struggling through one unprepared? Watching someone else get washed away?

What about our spiritual preparation? Are we putting that off, too? The kind of storms that spiritual preparation gets us ready for are not announced days ahead of time by the National Weather Service. We may have some time to gather up the bread and peanut butter before a hurricane, but like the storm on the Sea of Galilee, hard things in life can come with no warning. Spiritual preparation cannot start too soon, and the shelves can never be too full.

The passage from Mark shows us two extreme reactions to the storm. The disciples woke Jesus, not to ask Him for help in dealing with the storm, but to make sure He knew they were all about to drown. They accused Him of not caring about what was happening to them because He was not panicking with them. That is an all-too-common reaction of unprepared people when a storm strikes – throw your hands in the air and blame God.

The other extreme in the storm is Jesus, taking a nap in the back of the boat. He was experiencing the same storm as the others, yet He faced it with the confidence of total faith in God. They are times in our lives where trusting God means that we can take naps in a stormy boat.

Finally, we need to take a step back and look not just at the storm, but at the reason for the trip. Jesus and the disciples were going to the other side of the Sea of Galilee – to the Gentile side – to continue His ministry. The storm was rough, but it was moving them along. When Jesus quieted the storm, it became completely calm. No wind is not necessarily good news for people in a sailboat. The rest of their trip would have been truly hard work, rowing the boat.

They were in the process of doing something that was important to Jesus' ministry – delivering the message to people who were different from themselves – and whether they got there through a storm or by hard labor, they were going to get there. The work of the church and the work of Christians – making disciples and turning the world to Christ – will be supported by the action of God, but there will be difficulty and hard work along the way. We have to be prepared for the storms and for the calm – prepared with a foundation on the Word of God, shelves stocked by His grace, and faith in His continuing presence with us, even in the worst of the storm.

It's hurricane season. Are you ready?