

Mark 4: 35-41 "Faith and Friend through any Storm" June 20, 2021
Father's Day 2021

About 10 years ago around Fathers' Day, our family was given an inexpressible, priceless gift of a medical report for Rodney, my husband: he was pronounced cancer-free after a 6 month siege of surgery, radiation and chemo treatments for tonsil cancer. The cancer had been found in the fall, but doctors and treatments were not ready til January. By then it had spread to some lymph nodes. Then we began the dark journey through the valley of the shadow of death. But we did not fear, because God and others quickly showed up alongside, to let us know we were not going through this storm alone: staff and volunteers took over much of my work, and brought meals to our home; hospital colleagues of Rodney gave up paid vacation time for Rodney to not lose income while he could not work; groceries were brought in, and family and friends helped care for Jeff while I was at the hospital with Rodney. We were wrapped in prayer shawls and in tangible signs of love and countless prayers. We were blessed in the storm, and have been blessed since that storm. We made it through in such good shape, because God and our neighbors carried us through.

How about you? What storms have you been through, and who carried you? All of us have been through the pandemic storm this past year, and many of us were carried through some aspects, and many of us helped carry others through some aspects. I was recently at the Geneva Chamber's lunch with the mayor, and had the opportunity to ask him if they knew how many folks had been helped with rent subsidies, food, counselling through the pandemic. He had reported 50 deaths in Geneva, but overall, 800 deaths in Kane County. He told our group that the food pantries in our area saw an incredible surge in grocery assistance requested, and many families and businesses were carried through with rent assistance. We know that the Tricity Family Counselling services saw a surge in need as well, developing a wait list for counselors through and since the pandemic. Some of us had other storms arrive during the pandemic, with other illnesses in their family, deaths, children's school crises, job loss or changes, and then on top of it all, loss of in-person worship! With church staff and leaders working hard to adapt and be creative in finding other ways to stay connected and in worship and in ministry, we pray you felt God's presence and care through

the pandemic. We all know it hasn't been the same, and many times felt like not enough, but we hope that you knew and felt that you were held in our prayers and in God's hands... Thanks be to God, here we are on the other side, able to be back together again, and ready to launch new opportunities for ministry and mission with our new senior pastor this fall! - And, we have just celebrated a wonderful VBS and next Sunday we will commission our ASP teams for a week of service in Kentucky in July.

In the midst of storms like these, we are challenged, as were these disciples, to ask for, look for, and find God's help as we are caught up in the fears and tears of the moment. Luckily, Jesus shows us God understands that panic! "Don't you care we are drowning," sob the disciples. It is a very human response. But God also urges us to trust, and believe in God's presence and ability to calm us and the storms of our lives, and not abandon us. Jesus is in our boat, available to help when we call and ask. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Jesus asks them. He has been healing, teaching, and performing exorcisms with them for some time now. We can trust and believe in Jesus to be in front of and behind us, below us and above us, to care for us. His care may not always come when we expect it, or take the form we expect, but if we trust, ask, watch and pray, God's presence will be revealed to us, as we keep our hearts, minds, and hands open.

For example, the Gospels tell us that the man beaten and left on the side of the road was helped by a Samaritan! The Roman centurion's son was healed by a word from Jesus...the lost son returned home in disgrace and was restored into the family...children show us how to see God's kingdom...women anoint Christ as king and are first to recognize him resurrected...foreigners request healing by Jesus and recognize his power.

God can be trusted to bless our faith and be our friend through any storm: we have but to ask and he is ever more ready to hear than we are to pray! And when all else fails, he still is God. These things we acknowledge in our prayers at funerals, but they are also trusted truths we can count on any day, and through any crisis or storm. Some of you may know Charles Tindley's hymn, which enumerates some of the crises we traverse: "When the storms of life are raging, when the wind is tossing me like ship out on the sea, stand by me; in the midst of tribulation when hosts of hell assail...stand by me; in the midst of faults and

failures...when my friends misunderstand, stand by me... In all of life's crises and challenges, we can call upon and trust that God and Jesus will show up!

Today's lesson of Jesus' calming the storm, and calming the disciples, is told by early disciples to remind them that they can trust Jesus to be with them, and as it is recounted by Mark to encourage later disciples – his churches and ours, that God can be trusted to help us through the storms of our days as well. This is the kind of care our fathers and mothers try to offer us as well: to love one another as Jesus loves us!

Some of you know that the logo symbol chosen for the World Council of Churches, formed during World War II, was a ship with the cross as mast. This symbol, and anchor crosses, back to this story of Jesus calming the sea and the disciples, our anchor that keeps us safe in harbor storms, and the ship who carries us safely through stormy seas. It also harkens back to God carrying Noah and his family and earth's creatures through the flood on the ark.

As a congregation, we are navigating our way back to in person ministry and mission, and, changing ship captains in the midst of that. It is a time of opportunity and possibilities! We have a few new staff, with new skills, and new vision for helping us to reach new families, new people with our ministries and mission. We have an opportunity to polish up tried and true ministries, and to try on new ways of doing ministry and mission that might reach friends and neighbors who are open to church post-pandemic. How can we help our friends and neighbors find hope and help after the stresses of pandemic challenges? So many have barely kept their jobs, homes, marriages and children intact through the stresses of sheltering at home. What would Jesus do to help them? What would Jesus want us to do to offer them help, hope, and new life? How can we come alongside parents with love and healing, and offer them the fruits of the Spirit that faith give us? How can we model living the fruits of the Spirit (you know, love joy peace, patience, kindness gentleness generosity and self control) as friends and neighbors in ways that are life-giving and hope-filled?

What partnerships we can forge with agencies, organizations, and community groups that are helping children, youth and families most in need, at risk, coming out of the pandemic? The mayor is forming a Diversity and Equity Task force to learn how Geneva can be more supportive and collaborative with persons of

different racial and economic and sexual orientation groups. I am so excited to live in a city working to bring people together – and so happy to be part of a denomination that in many ways works to be collaborative with its diverse congregations in global ministries. We have opportunities to partner with churches in Chicago reaching diverse populations, and to be partners with churches in Bolivia and Kenya, with mission outreach in the Dominican Republic, and with communities in Appalachia. Our own Carolyn Sprawka, with ours' and others' support, has accomplished miracles at Hesed through the Pandemic.

God is ready to carry us, and help us through the storms of life...to bring us through the storm to new ministry opportunities on the other side. The disciples in the boat with Jesus weathered the storm, and landed on the shore on the other side to accomplish their first Gentile mission with the man Legion. God is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, when we believe and say yes.

Let us climb in with Jesus, with our church, and see what shores we can visit, and what new ministry we can accomplish with love and trust, patience and courage. May God bless us with his Holy Spirit to have faith, hope and love, and especially the greatest of these, love enough to care for all our neighbors, and all of creation. In Jesus' name, Amen!

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