

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”

St. Mark 4:35

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I invite you to go with me on a small journey. It’s a journey that begins in a garden. Jesus is there with just a few of his friends. It’s the moment that he’s been preparing for all his life. Maybe, in one way, it is the very moment for which he was born. And now that he has come to this critical moment; this moment of crisis, he is struggling. He’s struggling with what he knows must come the very next day: the beating and whipping; the taunting and mocking; and pain beyond imagination. He knows that this must come; and as much as he has been preparing for this very moment all his life, now that he is here, he’s not quite sure that he can do it. And in this moment, he turns to the words of others; words written centuries before he was born; words written on his heart that speak to the crisis of body and soul that he now faces:

My soul is vexed within me...

I will say unto God my rock, ‘Why hast thou forgotten me?

While I go thus heavily, while the enemy oppresseth me?

My tears have been my food day and night...

While all day long they say unto me, ‘Where is now thy God?’¹

But now we must leave the garden.

And we will walk across the valley that separates it from the City of Jerusalem.

It is just a short walk in time; but it is an eternity for the one who knows what is coming. It is now the afternoon of the next day; and all those things that Jesus knew would come to pass have come to pass. And after having been taunted and mocked; and beaten and whipped; he has been nailed to a cross. And in this moment of anguish and pain, he again turns to the words that others have written; words written centuries before he was born; words that speak to the crisis of body and soul that he now endures; words which have been long written on his heart:

Eloi! Eloi! Lama sabachthani?

My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?²

It is hard to witness such things, but if we are willing to linger at this place, we will hear him speak once more. But these words are different. They contain none of the power and sorrow and grief of the words spoken in the garden; or the words cried out in anguish from the cross. Maybe now he has no strength left. Now that the anguish is soon to be over. Having cried out, now he speaks in a quieter voice. But once again he turns to words written by others; words written on his heart: *Into thy hands I commend my spirit.*

Has God gone off on vacation? I mean, we’ve been at this COVID thing for two years now and sometimes it seems that we’re no closer to the end than we were before. I think we are; but sometimes I’m not so sure. And in the midst of all of the unrelenting news that has occupied our thoughts and prayers for almost two years now, it seems natural to wonder whether or not God has just checked out on us. That’s he’s gone off for a mid-winter holiday. After all – who’d blame him. It’s been pretty bitter lately; and we’re having another winter storm this weekend. So, is God off lying on a nice warm beach somewhere? Sipping something cool and refreshing. Reading some of the books he

¹ Psalm 42

² Psalm 22

never has time to read when he's on the job. Is he just napping at the side of the pool? Or, in the images of this week's Gospel, is he asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat? As the winds and waves of this seemingly endless storm assail us, has God gone off on vacation? And, if so, are we right in feeling in our hearts the words that the disciples throw accusingly at Jesus in this week's Gospel, once they've roused him from his sleep: "Do you not care!"

At first glance this week's Gospel reading fits perfectly into our theme for the Season of Epiphany. Jesus manifests divine power over the very forces that humanity cannot control; he stills the powerful forces of nature – of wind and wave. It is a definitive Epiphany story. But this week's Gospel also speaks about the disciples; about their faith, or lack of faith. So, in that way, this week's reading is just as much about the disciples as it is about Jesus; and, by extension, just as much about us as it is about him. And at the heart of this week's Gospel is the question of fear and faith: the faith that, apparently, the disciples lack as they try to wake Jesus from his rest; and the fear they face when they think that they're about to drown.

There is an easy temptation to think that the solution to all of life's problems is just to have more faith; as if we could go to the grocery store and pick up another bundle; maybe by the kilogram in the produce department or by the case over in canned goods. And there is the equally tempting assumption that when bad things happen it's because we don't have enough faith; as if faith were a kind of antibiotic. Or a vaccine.

But faith isn't so much a commodity that we that can buy or a pill we that can take as it is a way of life that we can live. Faith is getting up each morning and living each day with love and courage even when you don't feel like it. Faith is caring for your kids and your grand kids even when you wonder whether or not you can make a difference. Faith is trying each day to make the world around you just a little bit better when the news tells you that someone else somewhere in the world, or somewhere in your neighbourhood, has decided that day to inflict their anger and their despair on others. Faith is just moving outward when your instinct is just to crawl inward and leave the rest of life to itself. This is God's gift. This is faith. We don't create it; we can't buy it; we can only accept it. And it can be frustrating to hear struggling people made to feel even more despairing when they're told that if only they had more faith they could get whatever they want, as if it's a kind of magic.

In this week's Gospel Jesus and his disciples are also on a journey. As the evening comes; as the darkness begins to fall, they get into a small boat and head out across the Sea of Galilee; to go to the other side. For some, it is a journey that they've countless times before. But along the way the disciples undergo another journey; the journey from fear to awe; from despair to hope. Having faced the threat of drowning; and having witnessed the power of Christ to calm the uncalmable; they make the immense journey from terror to awe; from fear to faith. The line between these two words is risky and thin. But in between stands the gift and power of God's love. In between lies Jesus Christ.

Sometimes Christ calms the storms of our lives. That's true. But sometimes he lets the storms rage, and he calms us instead. And faith is trusting Christ to know which of these two things is the right thing to do. And along the way, there is perhaps just one thing that we can do to help grow in this faith. We can make sure that we're always in the boat with Christ; that we're doing the small everyday things to build our relationship with Him; taking the time to close our ears to the world and open our hearts to the Word.