

Sunday, June 23, 2024
2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41
“Jesus Calms a Storm”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

There is a cute little book that was written several years ago titled, “Who moved my cheese?” Do you remember that book? “Who moved my cheese” is a “story about change that takes place in a Maze where four amusing characters look for ‘cheese’ – cheese being a metaphor for what we want to have in life, whether it is a job, a relationship, money, freedom, health, recognition, [or] spiritual peace . . . We pursue our cheese because we believe it makes us happy. If we get it, we often become attached to it. And if we lose it, or it’s taken away, it can be traumatic. The ‘maze’ in the story represents where you spend time looking for what you want, [your cheese]. It can be the organization you work in, the community you live in, or the relationships you have in your life.” (1)

In this story, when the little people in the maze named “Hem” and Haw,” first discover their “cheese,” they feel confident and safe and secure. Each day they would go to their “cheese” place and stay there, enjoying every bite. But they refused to notice small changes happening all around them. And one day when they arrived at their cheese, it was gone – and they thought, “Who moved my cheese?” when in fact it had simply all been eaten. And they experience many of the normal emotions most of us go through when change occurs, at first, they are astonished, then anxious, then angry, and then deeply afraid. In the end, while one little person, Haw, does finally adjust to change, we are left wondering about Hem. Hmm.

Now, beneath this cute story about little mice and little humans running through a maze each day, is a very interesting and thought-provoking message about change. Change, it’s happening, it’s happening all around us! It’s something many of us think we are pretty good at adjusting to when it happens, but truth be told, not many of us really like change. In fact, I’ll bet if we were really honest with ourselves, many of us, not all of us but many of us, would admit we hate change and fear it too. Face it, we would rather stay as we are, we like our familiar ways of being, living, even though things are changing all around us.

Today’s story from the Gospel of Mark is all about change and how the disciples were beginning to adjust to their ever-changing lives in following Jesus, when a huge change occurs. So there are three parts to this story. There is the boat ride, there is the torrential downpour and Jesus’ calming of the wind and the storm, and there is the ending where there is dead calm.

So first the boat ride. At first glance this would appear to be a simple story about Jesus trying to get the disciples from one side of the lake to the other. However, what Jesus is really asking these little fishermen to do was to leave the familiar territory of Capernaum where they were simple followers of Christ and go to the strange and foreign land of Gerasene. This little boat ride is by no means an easy trip because Jesus is actually moving these followers from being simple fishermen to being his disciples. He is preparing them to welcome a kingdom so very different from the one they’d either expected or wanted.

As one pastor writes, “The change they are facing is real, and hard, and inevitable, and all of this becomes crystal clear as they realize the one who is asking them to change, has mastery over the wind and sea and is, indeed, the Holy One of God.” (2) It leaves me thinking, so what if before getting into the boat, the disciples had said to Jesus, “sure we’ll go with you to the other

side in this boat, but we've been thinking, what if there is a storm"? They would never have gotten into the boat because there were always storms on the Sea of Galilee and when least expected. Or what if the disciples had said to Jesus, "sure we'll go with you to the other side, but first tell us what's on the other side?" If they had asked that, they never would have gotten into the boat because what ended up happening in the country of Gerasene? Just look up the next story in the Gospel of Mark. It is the story of a demon possessed person who lives in a cemetery, whom Jesus will heal by sending the person's demons into a herd of two thousand pigs. And then all those pigs run down a steep cliff and into the sea. If you knew that was going to happen right as you got out of the boat, would you go? Nobody would. So, maybe the hardest thing about all this is getting into the boat. Just getting in, knowing it will not be easy, not knowing what is on the other side.

And that is what it is like to be a Christian in today's world, to exist as a church in today's world. We are in the boat, folks, and we are already experiencing a little wind of change around here. Are you in for the ride of your life?

Next is the torrential downpour. When we enter into times of great change, it can feel like a storm – possibly even a great windstorm that leaves us very frightened like the disciples. For those of you helping out next week at our Vacation Bible Camp, this story is day Three. And the emphasis that day for the children attending is when we feel the storms of life surrounding us, like in this story, we need to trust that it is Jesus who can calm the storms of our lives, who is always with us to bring us peace of mind and peace of heart. And at times in our lives we will feel like these disciples, afraid, full of uncertainty and doubt. And we feel like that, we might sink into life's troubles. And it's pretty great to know we have a friend in Jesus who can bring us a sense of peace and be our comfort, guide and friend. "God is a friend we can trust" is our theme for Day three and "Thanks God" is our main song this week. Let's sing it – oh wait, that's tomorrow!

But there's more to this story than Jesus simply calming the storm. Helping us face our fears, our doubts, and giving us peace of mind and heart. Notice the words here, Jesus rebukes the wind and silences the storm: Be Still! Be at Peace! He yells out. These are exorcism words, these are fierce words. This isn't just "calm down wind." Because here's what happens. As one pastor writes, "When Jesus stills the seas and wind with his voice, after the disciples recognize that even the elements of nature obey their teacher, and after all that was once terrifying has been banished, the disciples experience another kind of fear altogether: the fear of being in the presence of the living God." (3)

We all know change. But what we are talking about here is more than the normal changes that can still rattle us, that can still cause us to have fear and trembling. Especially as disciples, especially as a church in today's world. This is not the kind of change we anticipate or plan for, like the coming of a new pastor, we all knew that was coming and you are pretty much prepared, maybe a little anxious but much more grateful and excited and full of wonder. Am I right?

This is even more than the kind of change that I have been talking about over the last 18 months which the church must go through, which is unexpected and can seem like a storm, maybe even seem life-threatening. No, I mean the kind of change that happens when we are encountered by the living God and realize that life will never be the same again. When you realize you have experienced a miracle, a God-given miracle. And those miracles do happen

even today. Those moments where we feel the immense yet intimate love of God. The problem we have is like that maze, the changes we normally see, are not those wow miracles, a quick windstorm calmed by God where we know we are in the presence of the holy one. Our miracle, our new way of being, is slowly happening. And so we need to really look for the changes all around us. And the question for us is where is God encountering us and calling all of you to the other side of the lake, to change to a new and different imagination about what it means to be a people of faith in this community, in this time in history, at this moment?

As one pastor writes, "The promise of this text is not just that Jesus is with [us]. Notice that Jesus does not say "You go over to the other side", but "let US go over to the other side." Jesus was there all along, no matter what Jesus was doing, whether that be preaching about parables or sleeping on a pillow. Of course, the reality for the disciples and for us, is that the other side is not all that rosy. It has its own set of challenges – the disciples have to see Jesus differently, themselves differently. It means living into a new reality. And that takes some getting used to. Because when your location changes so does your perspective and other's perspective of you. Perhaps the act of faith is not just the trust that Jesus will still the storm. The act of faith is getting into the boat." (4)

You are in that boat of change, a lot of change and from what I have heard since I have been here these last 18 months, not many of you like change – me included. If you only knew the changes happening in my life right now, leaving this position for one, not knowing what is next. Oh and did I mention my son is engaged, and I'm going to be a grandparent, and that's not the half of it! We could compare notes about getting into that boat of change. So how do you adjust to change – in your family, your career, your community, your faith, this church? How do you adjust when it feels like life has "moved your cheese"? It's all about reading the "Handwriting on the Wall".

According to the Biblical story of King Belshazzar of Babylon, during one of his elaborate banquets, he looked up and witnessed the fingers of a hand actually writing words in Aramaic on his palace wall. He then called in all of his wise counselors, but none of them could interpret the meaning, until the prophet Daniel arrived.

Daniel told the king that the words on the wall translated into these words, "unless you change your evil ways, God will soon destroy you and your people". That is why the phrase, notice the "handwriting on the wall" has meant, change cannot be avoided and usually there are signs all around you, so look for them or there could be disaster.

So, how do we adjust to change and see the handwriting on the wall? In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul starts by writing, do not take God's grace in vain. Realize the comfort, the work, the light, the salvation which is very real even in the face of such hardship and change. Life is full of hardships, afflictions, calamities. But what is most important is how we react to those hardships, afflictions, calamities. How we look for God's guidance and Jesus' patience like handwriting on the wall. And concentrate on the Holy Spirit in our lives which helps us create patience and kindness and all those other gifts of the spirit, Christ's love, truthful speech, the power of God within us.

And when we do, as the disciples stood there in awe of the presence of God right there in front of them, there is dead calm. On the other side of all those changes is peace. Notice that no disciple in this passage is named, all cross together, all cry out in fear together, all stare in wonder and awe in the presence of God together. We too need to realize we have been in this

boat of change together. And you all need to remember no matter how different you think you are from one another; you need to hold on to one another because it's quite a ride you are on.

At the end of the story, "Who moved my cheese" it is Haw that begins to learn how to change, by first beginning to laugh at himself, which explains his name, "haw, haw". After he gains the courage to explore the maze once again to search for new cheese, he begins to write things on the wall of the maze hoping that Hem will someday explore and read the "handwriting on the wall". He wrote: "we need to embrace change and be ready for it if we can" -and- "we need to let go and trust what will lay ahead" -and- "we need to keep life very simple, not overanalyze it, but be ready to move with the cheese because it's inevitable, they will move it".

In this ever-changing world, we do need the traditions, the holiness, and the familiarity of our sacred place, the church. That is why when there are major changes happening in our lives, most of us go to our church for comfort and support. For the church is a place that is familiar and constant, it is the place filled with a community of people who care for one another, who build their faith, hope, and love for one another and this world. It's where we can find peace. But whether we like it or not, we are also in that boat and more changes are yet to come.

So maybe as we bravely ride in this boat, are tossed by the winds of change, maybe if we can learn from Haw's example, to not over-analyze and keep a strong sense of humor, and learn by Paul's word to us, to look for God's word of comfort and Jesus' presence of support. If we do that, maybe we can see the miracles happening all around us, the handwriting on the wall, and be astonished and accepting through each and every change, be courageous and open, trusting and embracing, watchful and amused, as we move through this maze called life, in this place called God's Kingdom. Wide open your hearts people of God! Wide open your hearts. Amen.

(1) Johnson, Dr. Spencer. Who Moved My Cheese? p. 14

(2) Lose, The Rev. David Lose. "On Miracles and Change". 6/15/2015.

(3) *ibid.*

(4) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. "The Other Side" www.workingpreacher.org 6/14/2015.