

Faith and Troubled Waters

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Mark 4:35-41

This week I have been participating in an online preaching seminar. “It’s about time,” or, “what took you so long,” you might be thinking to yourself. Nevertheless, it’s been exceedingly helpful.

One of the workshops has focused on the concept of “place.” Place, in this case, means a number of things. The physical place, to be sure, the community, the neighborhood. The architecture. All matter, and affect both the preaching and the hearing of a sermon. Simply stated, you could take the same sermon and have it be met with widely and wildly divergent experiences. At 8855 Germantown Avenue or 20 blocks south of here or 40 blocks. At an ornate Gothic sanctuary or a simple rural one.

But “place” is more than physical space. We know that. Cultural, emotional, spiritual. The same sermon will be heard much differently by a 25-year-old vs. a 55-year-old vs. an 85-year-old, just as your 25-year-old self would hear it differently from your 55- or 85-year-old self.

All of this may be dancing between the patently self-obvious and the ridiculous over-thinking, but maybe not. Place – physical place – and place – spiritual and emotional and cultural place – matters. Context matters. And trying to sort out the individual contexts, what each of us, you and I, bring to the church party, and communal context, what we share, matters. How can we identify common ground and be mindful of it without flattening our individual experiences into a big mushy mess?

The most obvious shared context – in this moment, in this place – is the coronavirus. We have been in this moment, this event, together, for 15 months or so. We have experienced shortages of toilet paper, worn masks, learned Zoom (more or less), worked or learned or taught or stayed at home, watched “The Queen’s Gambit,” awaited news about the vaccine. We have shared all of these things.

Yet each of us has had unique experiences within this shared season, responses that have been as individual as a snowflake. Depending on our home situation, we could cope with greater ease or heightened difficulty. Depending on where we fall on the introvert/extrovert scale, we welcomed enforced isolation, or not. And even now, our responses vary. While none of us want this thing to continue forever, we are emerging, re-entering, differently, some with abandon, some with caution, some with anxiety. Place matters. Context matters.

As an aside, one of the best gifts we can give to one another right now is that reminder – that while we are all living in this shared moment, we are all experiencing it differently. So please extend grace. We have been navigating a deadly virus, and we have radically adjusted our life patterns. It makes all kinds of sense that we would be coming out of it in different ways, and not at all consistently. I've spoken to many of you about your first trip to the Giant, or a ballgame, or a restaurant. You welcome it, but are unsure at the same time, to varying levels. Extend grace to others and be gentle with yourself as you deal with all of this.

Place matters. Context matters. It is June 20, one day after June 19, called Juneteenth, commemorating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the Confederate states, long after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. It is now a national holiday, that has been celebrated in various ways in various places in the Black community since 1866. Until very recently, I bet, very few of us could remember learning much about it in school. Our opportunity now is to learn, and to find that balancing point between embracing and appropriation. That same opportunity presents itself as we consider another moment, less celebratory, that I, at least, didn't learn much about in school, the massacre of hundreds of Black Americans in Tulsa, 100 years and a few weeks ago. When we talk about place – physical place and emotional and cultural and spiritual place, all of this is added to the mix.

It is Pride Month. Again, how do we celebrate with our friends and siblings in the LGBTQ community without watering down the impact. Certainly, progress has been made, in church and society. But just a week ago we marked the five-year anniversary of the horrific shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. I remember a service we held in Rochester the next night, where a friend and colleague read – with great solemnity and heartache – 49 names. 49. How do we celebrate, and mark, rightly?

Already car companies are running ads in solidarity with Pride month and Juneteenth, which means already we run the risk of losing the point. We, who understand that place – physical and spiritual – matters, need to know the history and tell the story, that by understanding “place” better, we may respond more faithfully.

And each of us has our own sense of place that we are navigating and negotiating. Fathers’ Day is one of them. A series of proms and commencements is another, if my Facebook feed is any indication, each moment representing so many moments.

Into this place, this space, and into each of our places, this extraordinary story enters, or, rather, these places, these spaces, connect with this extraordinary story.

I was conversing with my siblings this week. We were a big musical family and each of us had a box of 45’s. Some of you will remember those. Round things, with holes in the middle, out of which music magically played when you dropped something called a needle onto it. At any rate, one of the singles we had was by a Canadian group called Ocean. It was a terrible song, or more charitably, a song that reflected the moment – the early 1970’s. At the same time, it made it to number two in the pop charts. Perhaps you remember it. I will not sing it. “Put your hand in the hand of the man who stilled the water; put your hand in the hand of the man who calmed the sea...” If that song stays in your head the rest of this day, blame Jesus and not me.

It is an extraordinary story, and I invited us into thinking about place – physical and spiritual – because that matters as we enter this story.

Take your bulletin home and read it again this afternoon. Think about the plot, the characters, the setting. Jesus and his followers go out on a boat. Imagine that water. A great storm arose, a great storm. I am not a boat person. Some of you are, and you can distinguish between a little hiccup and a great storm. Waves were beating on the boat, which was taking in water and in peril of capsizing.

And in a great moment of great moments, we learn that while the disciples are freaking out, Jesus is asleep. It would be funny if it weren’t so surreal. Amid the crashing waves and shouting sailors, he is asleep. They wake him up and accuse him of not caring that they might die, which is odd if you think about it but also an indication that they differentiated Jesus from them in some way already and, by waking him up, thought he could do something about the impending tragedy.

They wake him up. Rather than dealing with them, he first deals with the storm itself. He rebukes the wind. Rebukes it. A dead calm follows, an interesting turn of biblical phrase. Having rebuked the wind, he turns to his followers. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

It is often said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear, and that seems to be the case here. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Still no faith, that is, after seeing and hearing and witnessing miracles and healings and profound teachings. Still...no faith.

And we are told that “they were filled with great awe,” which was true. But the original language at this point really says something to the effect that they were filled with massive fear, and terror. That is, they are more fearful of who this Jesus is and what he does and what he represents than a deadly storm. They remain afraid after the man had stilled the water and calmed the sea.

Why? What is the great power that he just demonstrated? Or was it the deep insight he had into their lives, their faith, their story, their “place?” Scott Hoezee writes that “We are not told the disciples were filled with wonder. We are not told they asked this question trembling with joy or anticipation. We are not told that they asked one another this question with excitement rising in their voices. No, we’re told they were ‘terrified...’”

David Lose asks us to consider: “after 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.”

Meda Stamper writes that “It is not inappropriate to fear the Lord. If we have the slightest idea of his glory, it is appropriate but also, in a sense, irrelevant. What seems to matter is what we do in spite of or because of that awe.”

Read this story and read it again. So much is going on. There is the notion of getting in the boat with Jesus in the first place, that leap of faith. That’s important to remember – the disciples for all their flaws and fears, got in the boat with him. We have done the same. Remember that. Our faith may be interlaced with fear, but it is something.

Stamper writes: “Leaving the crowd behind and following Jesus does not guarantee us, as individuals or as a church, a storm-free life, and we...may sometimes find ourselves crying out, ‘Wake up! Do you not care?’”

That is to say, there will be times of smooth sailing *and* very rough waters, Pride *and* Pulse, Juneteenth *and* Tulsa, a global pandemic *and* a time to emerge from it, or our own particular places of celebration *and* struggle. And we seek the faith, and the trust, to get in the boat, to wake Jesus up when the waters are at their most fearful – to do so not because it’s easy, but because of that same faith and trust.

Jesus does not extract us from the boat. Once those waters are calmed, other storms will follow. That will always be the case for “place.” And truth be told, to follow this one, to get in his boat, should terrify us just a little, even as those same fears are met with peace, are met with grace, are met with love. Amen.