

"CALM DOWN!"

Mark 4:35-41

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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*"Before panic united us, boredom did."* This is how Chaney Kwak begins his book, *THE PASSENGER: HOW A TRAVEL WRITER LEARNED TO LOVE CRUISES AND OTHER LIES FROM A SINKING SHIP*. This slim book is his account of what happened on a cruise that was like many others, until it wasn't. Chaney, a 40 year-old travel writer, was aboard the *Viking Sky*, with 914 other passengers and 458 crew members. They had been sailing along the coast of Norway for more than a week, alternating between placid fjords and the open sea, looking for the Northern Lights and visiting the small towns and villages along the way. Kwak noted that the Victory Cruise company advertises heavily on PBS and most of his fellow passengers were white-haired retirees, some with serious health and mobility issues.

Around noon on March 23, 2019, they entered Hustadvika, an eleven mile stretch of coastline known as a tricky shipping lane. *THE ADMIRALTY SAILING DIRECTIONS- the 75 volume* navigation reference for merchant mariners warns sailors of this *"notoriously dangerous region"* especially when a storm is brewing.

And a storm **was** brewing.

*Chaney writes, "1:58 p.m. As the cruise ship almost tips over, the horizon that once bisected my lovely balcony door rises like a theater curtain and disappears. Now the sea is the stage. I tumble off my bed onto the floor and roll like a stuntman. For now the ship has yet to fully flop, though it feels like we're getting pretty close. Lucky us, the modern ocean liner is an engineering marvel equipped with technologies ensuring that it always stays upright. We've been rolling dangerously during a nasty storm but recover and list upright after each pounding wave threatens to capsize us. People's screams pierce my cabin walls, louder at times than the clanging of the broken kitchen equipment above. Water glasses fling themselves against my cabin door as if possessed." (1)*

Soon enough the electricity goes out.

Kwak will soon learn that the *Viking Sky* has suffered complete engine failure- of all four of its engines -and begins drifting helplessly toward the rocky shoreline.

At 2 p.m. the captain issues a Mayday call. And so begins a 27 hour ordeal hunkered down with hundreds of terrified passengers in a floundering ship battered by 60 foot waves and 87 mile per hour winds.

I heard the author interviewed on NPR this week and immediately thought of our scripture text for this morning. (I love when the Holy Spirit makes such connections!) I imagine that the passengers on that cruise ship had a lot in common with those water-soaked disciples in the swamped boat with Jesus. When you are sitting ducks in a storm-tossed sea, fear and terror would be my go-to emotions.

So I don't think we can fault the disciples for their fear. Although, several of them were experienced fishermen, weren't they? So, what made this trip different from past storms they had weathered in their own fishing boats? Maybe they would have known enough to "read" the weather in the growing storm clouds and refuse to put out to sea in the dark of night in the first place. As usual, Mark's Gospel is about more than what meets the eye. Let's take a look at what was happening before they ended up in that sinking boat with a sleeping Jesus.

From the very beginning of this Gospel, Mark claims that the life and actions of Jesus of Nazareth proclaim the inbreaking of the reign of God in human life. In Jesus, the reign of God has come near, about as near as it possibly can. Mark spends the rest of his Gospel showing us just how real the inbreaking of God is. He includes no sweet birth stories but jumps right away in chapter one to the baptism of the adult Jesus followed by his temptations in the wilderness and the calling of the first disciples.

We are off and running as Jesus heals and teaches in Galilee. It isn't long before the religious authorities are complaining about him and the behavior of his disciples who, illegally, plucked heads of grain to eat on the sabbath.

Everywhere Jesus goes, the crowds continue to grow and in chapter three Mark records, "a multitude by the seaside." Jesus finally appoints all twelve of his disciples. By the beginning of chapter four, he is teaching another large crowd by the seaside. The crowd is so big that he gets into a boat floating in the water and sits there to teach. He teaches the people in parables and then privately gives the disciples the code to interpret them.

It has been a long and busy day. Finally, as night falls, Jesus says, "Let's go across to the other side." Now, that may not sound like a big deal to us, but it was for the disciples because they knew what was on the "other side." It was the land of the Gerasenes, Gentiles, outsiders, who were considered dangerous.

This was foreign territory to the Jewish disciples. But what are you gonna do? Jesus said, "Let's go." So they went. Jesus promptly settled down onto a cushion in the very back of the boat and fell asleep.

Before long, a storm blew up and hit them in all its fury. The Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Gennesaret, is a large, shallow body of water. Pigeon Pass in the mountains west of the Lake forms a funnel for the strong winds blowing in from the Mediterranean. Because of this, the Lake is prone to sudden violent storms with dangerously high winds. We know this must have been a heck of a storm if it scared even these seasoned fishermen.

And scare them it did. They ran back to where Jesus was sound asleep and cried out, "Don't you care that we are going to die?" Perhaps they were being a bit dramatic. After all, they were well-versed in their scriptures and although the sea represents chaos in those sacred texts, they also knew of the numerous times that God rescued God's people from the chaos of the sea.

God parted the sea so the formerly enslaved Hebrew people could walk to freedom from Egypt. You can hardly turn a page in the book of Psalms without reading about salvation in the seas.

*(Ps 107: 23-29) "Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, God's wondrous works in the deep. For God commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God brought them out from their distress; God made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. "*

I feel seasick just reading that Psalm! Those folks who wrote the Psalms knew how dangerous the waters could be and they trusted their lives to God.

But let's give the disciples a break here. They had not been traveling with Jesus for very long before this event occurred. They were still learning who he was and trying to figure what that meant for them and for the world. So, they cried out and Jesus woke up. The verb translated, "woke up" conveys the image of Jesus standing up tall on the stern of the boat in direct confrontation with the raging sea. Mark tells us that he hushed the storm with these words, "Peace! Be still!"

I wonder though, if Jesus was speaking to not only the storm, but also to the disciples. Who really needed to calm down here? Jesus turns to them and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And then, to one another, the disciples said, "Who is this guy?"

They don't ask, "How did he do that?" They ask, "Who is he?" And Mark demonstrates again the power of God embodied in Jesus- not with a sermon or a long explanation, but with a act of saving.

Jesus doesn't ask them, "What are you afraid of?" He doesn't say, "There is nothing to be afraid of." He knows that there is a very good reason for them to be afraid. What he says is, "I am right here- how can you still be afraid?"

Jesus knew that the terror of that storm would not be the last scary thing the disciples would face. He was trying to help them build the foundation of faith that would provide stability and security whenever they were in a vulnerable position- in or out of a boat- with or without his physical presence.

I wonder what they were more afraid of- that terrible storm, or standing in that boat face to face with the full power of the presence of the living God?

It is important, as always, to remember who Mark was writing for- who was going to hear this good news about Jesus? Mark's church was living in a very shaky boat- in the shadow of a traumatic war between the Jews and the Romans. (You can guess who won that one.) They watched their beloved city destroyed by the Romans; their precious, holy temple reduced to rubble. How in the world could you proclaim any good news in the midst of such terror and grief?

The storm and that long night seemed unending to the survivors who were left with nothing. So, Mark tells a story that affirms that even in the dark of night, with the winds whipping the waves up over their fragile boat, the word and presence of the risen Christ will save them. Mark tells them that even in the middle of such a perilous journey on a dangerous sea of chaos, God is with them. They are not alone.

Although the people on the *Viking Sky* knew they were not alone, the weather was so bad that no one could get close enough to help them. A tugboat called the *Vivax*, with an intrepid crew of four, rode the dangerous waves by their side through the night trying to get close enough to catch their tow line. An oil tanker, a cargo ship, and a supply ship tried to get close enough to help but finally sailed away to save themselves. A freighter called, *Hagland Captain*, loaded with heavy timber answered the distress call and came near hoping to assist the crippled cruise ship. As the freighter attempts to fight the storm its engines stall. Kwak writes, "*At 4,599 tons of deadweight, the Hagland Captain can weigh more than ten Boeing 747s. Without propulsion, however, it is spun and tossed like a balsawood plane in a tornado. Minutes after 7:00, it suffers the same fate as the Viking Sky. All is dark. The engines are dead. The ship lists helplessly, unleashing a torrent of timber from the deck into the sea like a burst bag of toothpicks.*" (2)

The ship's captain, Nils Christiansen, radios his own Mayday call.

While this is happening, rescue helicopters have been dispatched to the scene and are lifting the most vulnerable cruise ship passengers, one at a time in a basket sling, into

the sky on a windblown cable that slowly tows them up to the relative safety of the helicopter. Courageous rescuers stand on the wet, shifting deck and repeat this procedure hundreds of times as the helicopters ferry their passengers, twenty at a time, to shore and then return to hover above the ship in the wind and the rain, awaiting more evacuees.

As the nearby freighter begins to capsize, the nine crew members are ordered to jump into the sea. Kwak writes, *"Imagine having to choose between staying on a capsizing ship and jumping into the ocean- between risking it all and risking it all. The only way out is through the water that surrounds them. One by one they jump, holding on to the hope that they'll keep their heads above water long enough for a rescuer to fish them out."*

(3) Spoiler alert—they do- in the middle of the night.

Finally, after 27 hours of terror, three of the *Viking Sky's* engines are back up and running and by 8:00 a.m., two tugboats begin towing the crippled cruise ship into harbor. Through the night, six helicopters have made thirty trips to evacuate over 450 people, sending 16 to the hospital with only three serious injuries. No one has died.

It is past 5 p.m. when they are finally allowed off the ship in the small town of Molde. Then it is one more night on the ship and they fly home the next day.

They find out later the rather simple reason the engines of this multi-million dollar, state of the art ship, failed- low oil pressure. When the waves tossed the ship from side to side, the sloshing oil failed to reach the pumps. When this happens, the engines are designed to automatically shut down to avoid a fire. Although no fewer than 18 low oil alarms went off, they were apparently ignored.

Of the final night on the ship, Kwak writes, *"My story is but one of many here. We will all go our separate ways and tell very different tales. Some of us will dig our heels deeper and become more of who we used to be; some of us will be forever changed by our long night at sea."* (4)

I am certain the disciples were changed by their terrifying night in that boat. How could they not have been?

During the early months of the pandemic, I often heard people say, "We are all in the same boat," referring to the fact that people all over the world were living in quarantine in fear of an unseen virus. But it soon became clear that even though we were all experiencing the same storm, we were not all in the same boat. Some were riding high and safe in magnificent, impenetrable warships while others barely held on to their disintegrating rubber rafts. The differences in our boats were based, of course, on race, nationality, economic status, ethnicity, and gender; with people of color, and those on the bottom rung of the income ladder hanging on for dear life.

The same storm but not the same boat. And this storm called Covid revealed, once again, in glaring death numbers, how our nation's history of racism and white supremacy has forced so many out of our boat altogether.

We still have work to do.

And once this pandemic has run its course and we are back to relatively smooth sailing, I wonder how many of us will dig our heels deeper and become more of who used to be; and which of us will be forever changed by our long night at sea?

Amen.

End Notes:

- THE PASSENGER: HOW A TRAVEL WRITER LEARNED TO LOVE CRUISES AND OTHER LIES FROM A SINKING SHIP, Chaney Kwak, Godine Books, 2021. P. 7
- Kwak, p. 32.
- P. 33.