

“Who Then Is This ...”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
April 18, 2021 – 3rd Sunday of Eastertide
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Mark 4:35-41

This morning we are continuing our post-Easter exploration of Jesus’ miracles to discover if these two thousand year-old miracles still hold any relevance for us today. This morning’s text from Mark tells the story of one type of miracle for which Jesus was known, the miracles when Jesus was able to control elements of nature itself. There are a few of these miracles – this one where Jesus calms a storm at sea and another one where he walked on water to catch up to the disciples who had left earlier in a boat are the two most well-known of these types of miracles. Others center on Jesus’ seeming ability to impact the growth, or lack thereof, of plants such as when he cursed a fig tree for having no fruit when he was hungry and when he and the disciples passed by the same tree a few days later it was dead. Then there was the time Jesus turned plain old water into the best wine a group of wedding guests had ever enjoyed.

These miracles almost have the feel of parlor tricks to them. Like there must be some logical way each so-called miracle happens but we just can’t see it due to Jesus’ slight of hand. So, it’s not surprising that these are the miracles that even some biblical scholars try to explain away. Like Jesus was really walking across the water on submerged stones or logs that he already knew were just under the surface of the water. Like the fig tree was half dead anyway so Jesus didn’t really kill it with his anger. Like the wedding guests were somehow tricked into believing that plain old water was really excellent wine. The thing is, though, these so-called explanations are even crazier than the original miracles they are trying to explain away. They really leave us no closer to understanding the miracle itself than we were before the crazy explanation was offered. As we discussed last week, perhaps the real point of these miracles is not their veracity but instead the deeper understanding of God they point to. These miracles are included in the Gospels because they reveal something important about God and how we mere mortals understand and relate to God. So, today our challenge is to consider what these nature miracles of Jesus reveal to us about God.

Even more importantly, we need to figure out how these nature miracles reveal our role in God's ever evolving plan for God's Creation entrusted to our care.

Today's story from Mark about Jesus calming the storm at sea is one of my favorites because it shows so starkly how the disciples, for all their love of and devotion to Jesus, still just don't get him. Not really. This is a typical theme in Mark – that the disciples are not the brightest bulbs in the pack and really are slow to pick up on what Jesus is trying to teach them. We see this illustrated in this story perfectly as the disciples start to panic as the storm gets worse, convinced they are all going to drown and, meanwhile, Jesus is sound asleep on a cushion in the bottom of the boat. Either Jesus can sleep through anything, or the storm is not that bad. But, it was bad enough that water was coming into the boat and finally the disciples wake Jesus up saying, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" The scene which unfolds then is almost comical as a sleepy Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea saying "Peace! Be still!" And it works. The winds die down and the sea calms. Then Jesus says to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" What Jesus is really saying to them here is more like, "Really? After everything else you have seen me do, you're afraid of a little storm? A storm that wasn't even bad enough to wake me up? Really?" The disciples didn't answer Jesus' question. But they did whisper to each other, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And that is THE question of this story for Mark, because the ability to control nature – especially the sea – was a sign of divinity in the times in which Jesus and the disciples lived. So, this little escapade on the water was proof of the divinity of Jesus. Clearly, this was not an ordinary man. But who was he then? The disciples hadn't quite figured that part out yet. They were, however, in awe of what they had just seen and heard.

We, like the disciples, are still trying to figure out this whole miracle thing. We're still trying to figure out this whole Jesus thing. Who was this Jesus guy? More importantly, who is this Jesus to us today? What does this miracle story of storms being dissipated and seas calmed have to say to us here in the 21st century? Well, a lot actually, especially today on this Earth Day Sunday in our coastal New England church. We know something about storms, especially storms at sea and storms that blow into our lives

from the sea. We know something about raging winds too. We know what it is to sit inside our cozy homes and hear the storm roar like a freight train outside. We know what it is to see the damage the pounding surf does to our beloved coastline with every Nor'easter. We know what it is to lose power from a storm for days on end. We know too well that the ability to calm a storm and the raging sea with a few words really would be a miracle. And that, dear ones, is why this story is one we hear but don't really think about too deeply. We don't think about it too deeply because we already know that you can't calm a storm and the raging sea with a few words. No one can. Maybe not even Jesus. But even if he could, he's not here anyway, is he?

Well, yes and no. Jesus is not here like he was asleep in that old boat with the disciples. We can't just wake him up to rescue us whenever a storm gets scary. But does that mean he's not here at all? No. It doesn't. Jesus is always with us, as close to us as breathing. Jesus is always here to walk with us, guide us, through whatever challenges we are facing in the moment, be they storms or the Coronavirus or family problems or job loss or whatever. Jesus is here to ask of us the same questions he posed to the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" I'm here and I've got your back, Jesus told them and us. But that's not all there is to this story. Jesus is really saying so much more to us in the 21st century. Let me explain.

First we need to talk about climate change and global warming¹ and, really, what better topic for us to consider on Earth Day Sunday. These two terms – global warming and climate change – are related to each other but are not interchangeable even though some people use them as though they were. In fact, global warming refers to the scientific reality that there has been long term and continued warming of the planet. Global temperature records reveal that there has been a well-documented rise in global temperatures since the early 20th century, especially since the 1970's. The global temperatures have risen roughly 2 degrees Fahrenheit since 1880.

¹ "What's the difference between climate change and global warming?" Earth Science Communications Team at NASA'S Jet propulsion Laboratory/California Institute of Technology

This doesn't seem like a lot until you look at the documented climate change that has accompanied this global warming.

Climate change refers to the broader range of changes that are happening to the planet as a result of global warming. These include rising sea levels, shrinking mountain glaciers, accelerating ice melt at the Poles and shifts in flower/blooming times. All of these changes are causing other problems made worse by human tendencies to fix things that aren't broken, like introducing non-native species into new areas totally screwing up local ecologies and trying to improve on crop production with all sorts of artificial interventions like pesticides and genetic modifications. All of these factors, most of them human made, have led to the monumental mess our environment is today. We are, dear ones, at a moment when our boat is taking on water and we want to be able to scream at Jesus to do something about it! "Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?" we are screaming. And it feels like Jesus is still sleeping.

But he isn't. God isn't. The Holy Spirit isn't. Our miraculous three-in-one God is in fact wide awake and paying attention, waiting to see what we humans will do to fix the mess we have created. The reality is that this environmental mess IS our problem because we humans created it. Granted that the early industrialists didn't know the damage all these heavy industries would wreak on nature – but they could have guessed. The mine owners had to know that all that toxic water they were pumping out of mines had to be bad for the environment. All those solvents and chemicals pouring out of steel mills couldn't possibly be a good thing. But, gee, they were creating jobs! They were making money! They were keeping the wheels of the economy turning, faster and faster. They simply adopted a massive Scarlett O'Hara approach to the whole environmental mess they were creating – "I'll think about that tomorrow." Except tomorrow is just now arriving and the damage has already been done. So now what?

Now what? Back to our sleeping Jesus in the bottom of the boat. Why was Jesus still sleeping as the storm raged? The answer is in his questions to the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Yes, Jesus, we want to answer. Yes, we are afraid and yes, we have faith, but what about this problem? What are you going to do about? We have to strain to his answer but it's there – "Nothing, because you can fix it

yourself. You know what to do. Stop polluting the air and the water. Stop burning fossil fuels. Stop investing in toxic production methods. Stop denying this problem is real and urgent. Instead, start working on the solutions you've already begun to discern. I've already sent you the wisdom of the Original Peoples who know you must treat the earth with the knowledge that it will need to be here to support seven generations from now. I've gifted you with people with a passion for eco-justice and sustainable agriculture and reclaiming urban and suburban landscapes from artificial designs that gobble water and destroy natural native ecosystems." This is what Jesus is saying to us every time we try to rouse him from the bottom of the boat where he's sleeping and we're drowning. I've already shown you what to do to solve your problems, he says. Listen to them. Do what you need to do.

"Who then is this?" was the disciples question to each other after they witnessed Jesus control the very elements of nature – the wind and the sea. Dear ones, this is the same question we are asking except we are no longer asking it about Jesus. Instead, we are asking it of ourselves. "Who then is this ... that will show us the way forward through this nightmare problem of climate change and all its negative consequences which humankind has created for itself? Who then is this to help us save ourselves. Dear ones, it is us. We must do this and Jesus assures us we can do this. This is our faith in action, right here and right now. This we will do because we must – for our own generation and the seven generations to follow. We've already made some small steps right here at this church and we'll be out amongst them in just a few minutes. Our Pollinator Gardens are our living testimony to our faith that with God all things are possible – even calming the wind and the sea enraged by human greed and arrogance. Dear ones, Jesus is sleeping in the boat because he knows we can do this. He has faith in us, even if our faith in him waivers. So, after worship today, how about we get out of the boat and go work amongst our own miracles of nature? We've got a lot to do... Amen.