

Stormy Seas

Mark 4:35-41

I periodically return to the Lebanese-American theologian, Alexander Shaia, who uses his Middle-Eastern culture and heritage to give a different insight into the Gospels. Shaia suggests the reason we have four Gospels (not one that fits the different versions neatly together, and not the many more Gospels that could have been included) is because together they take us on a complete journey.

This journey starts with Matthew, which poses the question of how do we face change? The next step in the journey is the most difficult: how do we move through suffering. Regardless of which geographical context forms the background to this Gospel, there was certainly a degree of suffering and pain – physical, emotional, and spiritual – that was experienced by its first audience. Shaia sums up this path by using the image of crossing the stormy sea.

It is not surprising that in Hebrew there is no differentiation between a “sea” and “lake.” There are only a few major bodies of water in the area, so the same word is used for all of them: yam. In Hebrew writings, yam “represented deep anxiety and even death...” Throughout the Gospel, the author uses water to represent the inner landscape of frightened and uncharted territory.

And so, in today's Gospel reading we found the disciples crossing one of these large bodies of water at night. Let's face it. Nighttime is not exactly the best time to be sailing on a boat. Unless there was a reasonably full moon, it would have been almost completely dark. Add to this, the boats were small – only a few metres in length; hardly bigger than the surf-cats that you may have seen on our river here.



Imagine then the connections between this story and the lives of the first audience. Regardless of whether there is any specific event that sits behind this anecdote, it is a highly symbolic story. As with the disciples in the boat, the first audience were facing a stormy sea, though not a literal one. The challenges of life were such that the disciples cry “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” could have been their cry too. Like the disciples, the people to whom this story were written felt

their lives were in danger as their community were persecuted by those with power, and those colluding with the powerful. The fear and anxiety represented by the waters threatened to swamp the small boat of safety that was the early Christian community. Indeed, if the legend of this being written in Rome around the time of Nero's persecution has any historical basis, then the threat was that all who were in the boat would be drowned with little chance of getting to safety.

Imagine being in that boat – both the boat in the story and the metaphorical boat in the first hearers' context – as it is thrown around by the stormy sea. Wouldn't you also be



afraid? It was terror and chaos. Imagine the Disciples desperately trying to bail out the water only to watch the boat refill faster than they could throw the water out. Imagine them looking at Jesus, who slept on regardless of the noise of frightened people and a raging storm. Imagine them shaking him awake and crying out "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Imagine too, the first audience crying that same prayer as they saw their families and friends being slaughtered for their faith. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus, as we hear in the story, tells the waves to be stilled and they respond. It is a time to talk with the disciples about faith. In response to their difficulties, the disciples expect Jesus to intervene. Although they later question who he is that even the wind and the waves obey him, they figured he could do something about this storm, otherwise why wake him? They had already seen divine intervention in healing miracles, now they needed the same divine intervention for their personal safety. In the repeated crossing of the sea, Jesus gets to the point where he is exasperated and wonders if the disciples have learnt anything at all.

This message in the storm is not just for the disciples. We see here an image of the disciples who still had an understanding of a God who would rescue them and prevent them from experiencing suffering. But God does not work like that. It would be so nice if life was fair. It would be wonderful if we knew that doing the right thing meant that we would not have to suffer. However, we know all too well this is not the case. Our faith, our lifestyle, even our choices cannot prevent us from experiencing suffering. The question is not have we got enough faith to ask the right person to stop the storm for us, but rather do we have the resilience we need to face up to suffering in our lives.

Alexander Shaia writes

Uncertainty, depression, and anxiety run rampant along this second path. We teeter on the cliffside edge of chaos. But we must jump off that cliff. Like Jesus's followers, we are called to step out in our faith and make a fearful journey through the conflict of opposites for the sake of our souls. Like the disciples, our frightened hearts call out: "Fix it! Fix me! Show me the strength I was promised. Use that strength on my behalf – please, please!" ... We pray that someone – or something – will arrive to dispel the fear in our hearts and subdue our panic.

How do we respond to this path, this path of fear, anxiety, and suffering? Do we respond with fear or demands for a miracle to relieve us from the threat? Or can we find an inner calm – peace, be still.

The story of the crossing of the stormy sea also reminds us of the importance of community. The disciples are not alone as they face their fears. Neither were the first audience of this Gospel. Neither are we. Yes, the community can shape how we react as individuals. It can be very hard to not panic when the people around us are doing just that. Can we identify that calm centre represented by Christ in this story while the people around us are afraid?

And what does our "stormy sea" look like for us today? That will be different for each person. As we face changes as a community and a congregation, how will you find that still centre that allows you to ride out the stormy sea?