

“Living With What We Cannot Control”

Psalm 46:1-3,7

Mark 4:35-5:20

Hebrews 11:1

Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton
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Now, I don't know about you, but the older I get, the more it strikes me how much COURAGE it takes to live life. The longer I live and the more I deal with people who are dealing with life, the more I am struck by the BRAVERY of those who have to deal with the circumstances life sends their way. I don't know! Maybe it's been the stories about people watching the lives go up in flames in the wildfires that have struck Texas lately...or those who watched as everything they own got swept away in the flooding in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and Vermont when Hurricane Irene swept up the east coast. Maybe its been hearing about those in our own community who are having to struggle...STRUGGLE...each and every day to make ends meet, pay their bills, put food on their table and keep a roof over their heads. Maybe it's the knowledge of those right here in our own church family who are facing problems...illnesses...trouble with their kids...breakdown of their marriages...diagnoses of diseases with words they hoped they'd never have to hear. I don't know!

But WHATEVER it is, the longer I live, the more I've become convinced that it's simply NOT EASY being human, now IS it? Or, as someone said to me the other day, "*Living AIN'T for sissies!*" You know it...and I know it. And anyone who has live more than a few years of life knows it too – making our way through life as a human being takes a LOT of courage...PRIMARILY, I think, because there is so MUCH in life that is simply BEYOND our control.

Now, I don't know how it is with you, but I used to live under the illusion that I am the master of my own destiny and the captain of my own ship! In other words, I lived under the illusion that I can control what happens in my life. I can control what direction my life goes. I can control WHAT I will do and WHEN I will do it and WHERE I will do it. In other words, I am in control of what happens in life. And I think A LOT of us operate under that illusion.

We grow up and as we grow, we learn to make our own decisions. Where decided where to go to college...or where to go to work. We decide who our friends will be and who it is that we will marry. We make choices about what we like and don't like in life...whether we go this direction or that...whether to have hamburger or chicken or fish for dinner...whether to have two children or three...whether to go to bed after the 11 o'clock news up stay up all night. We decide for OURSELVES who we are going to be and what we're going to do and how we're going to get there. We take our vitamins, work out three times a week at the gym, walk six laps at the track. We space our children two years apart...work for thirty five or forty years and then retire. We decide to buy a two story house in the nice part of town – 4 bedrooms, 2 ½ baths, a two-car garage with a Chem-lawn treated yard to make sure no weeds ever disturb our peaceful surroundings. We help with our kids school projects, coach their Little League teams, attend their school programs and go to the football games under the Friday night lights and watch the band perform. And in the midst of all of that, we settle down to live happily ever after!

And nine times out to ten, it works! Amazingly, IT WORKS! Or at least it works often enough to convince us that it's true: that if we just DO THE RIGHT THINGS, then everything will turn out ALL RIGHT...further convincing us that we human beings really ARE in control of our lives!

Until, that is, something happens. We get laid off from our job. The income evaporates. The stock market tanks...AGAIN! The doctor finds a suspicious spot on our X-ray. Our child gets arrested for alcohol...or drugs...or heaven forbid, something worse. A spouse, who said they'd always be there leaves us to always be there for another. A mother...a father...a husband...a wife...a child dies and our lives suddenly become a topsy-turvy roller-coaster careening out of control. In a split second, it sometimes seems, everything changes. One moment we're comfortably and safely in control of our lives...in command

of our journey...and the next moment we're being carried along on a flood of circumstances over which we have NO CONTROL. It's simply part and parcel of our human condition. There are things in life we simply CAN NOT control.

"I just feel like my life is totally spinning out of control," she said to me as she sat on the sofa in my office with tears streaming down her cheeks. *I feel like my life has gone to hell in a handcart overnight.*" To her, of course, it was the first time she had dared to speak the words. But for me, I've heard it said over and over again, in one way or another, by people who are experiencing the trials and tribulations...the headaches and heartaches of life. What's more, I've spoken the words MYSELF as well. And for a person like me who likes to BE in control...who borders on being a CONTROL FREAK...being OUT of control is a very UNCOMFORTABLE place to be – not only uncomfortable, but downright SCARY...FRIGHTENING...DEMORALIZING. Which is precisely what happened in our scripture passage this morning.

Jesus and his disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee after a day of preaching and teaching. The disciples are doing what they know how to do best...which is sail a boat across the Sea of Galilee. The sea, of course, is calm and smooth and everything is under control...so much so that Jesus decides to curl up in the back of the boat with his head on a pillow and catch a few moments of precious sleep.

But suddenly, a heaven storm blows down out of hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee and that normally calm and placid Sea turns into a rolling, frothing cauldron of chaos. Lightning explodes overhead in the darkened sky. Thunder booms, splitting the disciples ears. Rain cascades in blinding sheets of stinging pain. And huge, eight foot waves come crashing on the bow of the boat, threatening to swamp the vessel as if it were nothing more than a bug floating on the seas of eternity.

The disciples, to be sure, are TERRIFIED. Able-bodied, experienced fishermen though they may be, they have suddenly come up against a situation that is simply BEYOND their control. And they're demoralized, crying out in fear, *"Jesus... Savior... don't you CARE that we're all about to DIE?"*

Meanwhile, back in the back of the storm-tossed boat, Jesus sleeps soundly, his head still resting on the pillow. When Jesus hears the disciples cry however, he wakes up and says, *"Peace! Be STILL!"* And immediately, the storm STOPS...just like that!

But here's a question for you. Who was it that Jesus was talking to when he said, *"Peace! Be STILL!"* Was it to the storm of wind and waves that was raging AROUND the disciples, over which they had no control? Or was it the storm of fear and panic that was raging WITHIN the disciples, over which Jesus seems to say they DO have control? The text, of course, tells us that Jesus was talking to the storm...to the wind and waves, which immediately obeyed. But I think it also gives a BETTER indication of who Jesus was REALLY talking to when he goes on to say to the disciples: *"Why are you AFRAID? Have you NO FAITH? Peace... Be Still!"*

Right after that story, of course, Mark tells ANOTHER story about life spinning out of control. This time, however, it's not a storm of wind and waves...but a storm of *"unclean spirits"* they called it then...*"mental illness"* we would call it today...that took control of the man's life and left him living "out of control." Living in a cemetery, the man spent his days and nights wandering among the tombs, hollering and screaming and cutting himself with stones. He's naked and dirty...bruised and scarred around his ankles and wrists from the shackles that have been used to try and control him. But NO ONE is able to control him. His life is simply OUT OF CONTROL. And there's fear...LOTS of fear. EVERYBODY was afraid of him...until, that is, Jesus show us. *"Come OUT of him,"* Jesus said to the unclean spirits. And (snap) just like that, control is regained and fear is overcome.

Ah...well...it wasn't quite "just like that" now WAS it? Instead, Jesus sent the unclean spirits into a herd of pigs who suddenly rushed down the side of the hill and into the sea where they all drown. And when the people all heard about it...when they got wind of what Jesus had done...they didn't all come out to cheer and shout and praise the Lord. Oh no! Instead, they asked Jesus...they BEGGED Jesus according to Matthew's account...to LEAVE their area...*"because they were AFRAID!"* AFRAID of what they could not control...namely JESUS.

But hadn't Jesus already told his disciples NOT to be afraid...to have FAITH instead? To have faith in WHAT, though? That's the question. To have faith that our cries for help will be heard? To have faith that our prayers will all get answered? To have faith that everything will all turn out right in the end? To have faith that we'll always get what we ask of the Lord? Is THAT what we're supposed to have faith in? I

mean, after all, the Bible seems to say just that, DOESN'T it...that things ALWAYS work out for people who have faith, right? People call on Jesus and they get what they want, RIGHT? The storm stops...the demons depart...the healing comes. The lame walk...the blind see...the deaf hear. And everyone sings the praises of the Lord, RIGHT?

Only, it doesn't always HAPPEN that way, now does it? You know it and I know it. Because, in the SAME way that we are not ultimately in control of our lives...NEITHER are we in control of God. And just because we cry out...just because we fall at Jesus' feet...just because pray and ask for help, healing, wholeness and hope...that DOESN'T mean that things will ALWAYS turn out the way we want, now DOES it?

And yet, knowing all of that, I STILL remember that Jesus said, "*Peace! Be still! Don't be afraid! Have faith!*" So again, my question is: Have faith in what? Have faith in WHAT?

But Jesus doesn't SAY, does he? At least not here. At least not in this scripture passage. He doesn't give us a nice, easy, 1-2-3-4-5 list of things to believe and have faith in. But he clearly seems to indicate that BELIEF is preferable to FEAR! When we human beings discover we are NOT always in control of what happens in life...we can FEAR...OR we can have FAITH. We can panic and cry out that we're about to drown...OR we can hold on tight and ride out the storm...knowing there's a very special SOMEONE in the back of the boat with us. We can despair the storms that are raging in our lives...or we can trust that the Lord is aware of those storms, and, at the proper time will step in to help. We can be AFRAID...or we can HAVE FAITH. We can DOUBT...or we can BELIEVE!

Now, I can't be sure of course, but judging from my own life, I don't think there are many of us who BELIEVE 100% of the time. And I don't think there are many of us who escape being AFRAID every now and then, either. I know myself how both FAITH and FEAR live side by side within me...constantly struggling to get the upper hand. Sometimes FAITH wins out and I can stand tall. Other times FEAR takes over and I quake and quiver and cry out in terror. But then, I think Jesus KNOWS that about me...and about YOU...and about us ALL. And ultimately, I think that is why, when life seems to go spinning out of control...when the storms rage and the demons attack...when sickness or sorrow or heartache or even death cast their ugly, menacing shadows across our pathways...Jesus says the same thing to US that he said to the wind and the waves...and ultimately to the DISCIPLES as well. "*Peace! Be Still! Don't doubt! Have faith!*"

Have faith that Jesus is there WITH us...not necessarily to take it all away. He never promises us that! But there to give us the comfort and the strength and ultimately the FAITH we need to make the THROUGH the storms until the calm returns and order is restored.

Oh, it does INDEED take a lot of COURAGE to be human. But if Jesus was...and IS...who he says he is – and I firmly believe that he IS – then that courage is, I'm convinced, well grounded. Believing in him will NOT, of course, ALWAYS put us in control...or ALWAYS get us what we want...or even ALWAYS save us from all harm. It WON'T! And to try to claim otherwise is to make liars not only out of ourselves, but out of Jesus as well. And I seriously don't think we want to do that.

But believing in him WILL always...ALWAYS...help us overcome our fear of living...AND of dying...so that we may face WHATEVER life brings our way with our heads held high and our eyes firmly fixed upon him who is with us always...ALWAYS...even to the end of time.

To Him be ALL glory...honor...majesty...and praise...both now and forever more! Amen...and AMEN!

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