

“Peace! Be Still!”

Sermon by The Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris to the annual Diocesan Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, November 2001, Boston.

“Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to the disciples, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’”

How many times recently have you said or heard someone say, “I don’t feel like watching the news. It’s all bad anyhow?” In the midst of uncertainty and swift transition, in the midst of personal and institutional upheaval, and amid the “fightings within and fears without” that separate peoples, races, and nations, we desperately need to hear a little good news. And this passage from the fourth chapter of Mark’s Gospel, which relates how Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, is exactly that: good news.

Who among us, having been on a boat when a squall came up, having flown on a plane through extreme turbulence, or having lived through a tornado, hurricane, or even a violent thunderstorm, can fail to be moved by this account of the terror-stricken disciples, convinced that at any moment their boat would capsize and they would be swept away into the sea. And who could fail to be moved by the image of Jesus standing up in that frail vessel and speaking to the storm: “‘Peace! Be still.’ Then the winds ceased, and there was a dead calm.”

This story has inspired beautiful paintings of Jesus in the prow of the boat, his arms outstretched as he commands the angry waters and the raging wind to cease, be still. It has inspired hymn writers to fashion into poetry and gospel song their awe and wonder at the power of the Son of God. And through their poetry and music, we can feel God’s power to rule and order not only the unruly wills and affections of sinners, but the universe as well.

We all know people who, with much zeal, try to explain the so-called “nature miracles,” this and other stories that immediately follow in Mark’s Gospel: Jesus’ casting out the mob of demons from the tormented man and driving them into a herd of swine; his healing the woman who had been severely hemorrhaging for twelve years; the raising of Jairus’s daughter from the dead. People try to explain these miracles using naturalistic theories or rationalistic methods. They seek to probe the coincidences, the circumstances, and the probabilities of the situation.

Bible commentary tells us we should leave these stories where they stand. I would add further that picking them apart makes them more a burden on our faith in the presence and power of God than a support to it. It is unfortunate that some people’s faith has become so weak and so watered down that they have to rationalize and explain away the power of God as manifested in Jesus, the Christ. There are some people who try to give you scientific explanations of how that storm ceased. We need a return to and renewal of that old-fashioned faith in which the miracles were not quite as stupendous to those who experienced or reported them as they often seem to us today.

Some time ago I spent several hours visiting with about 125 men in the recovery unit of a county jail. At one point they began to sing hymns, and one of them was Andre Crouch’s gospel song: “Take me back, dear Lord to the place where I first received you. Take me back to the place where I first believed.” Well might that be *our* song: Take me back. Take me back to childlike trust; take me back to a lively

faith; take me back to eager hope. That song echoes an even older song of supplication: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)

For early Christians, miracles did not contravene any natural law. They were the natural law to those who believed in Jesus Christ. Again, Bible commentary and historians remind us, “for them, the importance was not so much in the miracle itself, but in what the miracle reiterated about the presence, the power, and the saving purpose of God.”

But we can understand the disciples out there on the sea. They were in a state of panic. They cried out to Jesus like frightened children. Don't you care that we are about to die? How can you lie there asleep?

They were trying to communicate their distress and their fear to Jesus. What they did not understand, and what many today do not understand, is that although we may panic in times of stress and distress, God does not share our panic.

That sense of panic that gripped the disciples out there on the Sea of Galilee is pervasive in our church and in our society today. When people panic, they tend to act desperately and unreasonably. Nations panic and go to war. Then they try to get God to sanction their actions as “holy.” In panic, people choose up sides in controversies and take irrational stands. Entire groups of people are singled out. They become targets of hatred, contempt, and oppression because of their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or economic status. Few, if any, say, “Come, let us reason together.”

In every phase of our lives panic gets acted out. We fail to wait for that still small voice of calm, the voice Elijah heard when, in panic, he fled for his life, escaping to the caves of the wilderness. Elijah did not hear the voice of God in the fury of wind, earthquake, or fire. He heard it in a whisper.

We have put our hope in secular solutions to situations of human distress. Seldom are these solutions fashioned in an atmosphere of calm reason or quiet trust. We act as though secular solutions and temporal remedies are the only resources available to us. We need to wait on God. We need to center down, be still, and know that God is God and that God does all things well.

The bottom line for us is that we are all in the same boat, and if we panic, we could capsize. If we recognize that, we can confront danger, adversity, and tribulation of any kind. We can know that if we trust in him, Jesus can calm the storms of our lives. But we must call on him as did the disciples.

If Christ is at the center of our lives, we don't have to rush into irrational action that often leads to impractical solutions. “Peace! Be still!” These can be our watchwords as we wait for the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

Often as we sail over the tempestuous sea of life, our world is in storm on a personal, national, and global level. But not only is Christ on the ship, Christ is in command—even when he seems to be asleep. “He who keeps watch over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:3) And what a comfort lies in the simple thought: “His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.”

Jesus hears us when we call, but he refuses to jump when we push the panic button. We are afraid to rely on that presence and that saving power. In our haste and our anxiety, we tend to rely on what we can see, count, touch, and feel. We forget that such things will pass away. We need, in the words of the old hymn, to “build our hopes on things eternal and hold to God's unchanging hand.”

Yes, we may come in panic like those fearful disciples in the boat saying:

*Master, the tempest is raging,
The billows are tossing high,
The sky is o'er shadowed with blackness,
No shelter, nor haven is nigh.
Carest thou not that we perish?
How can'st thou lie asleep,
When each moment so madly is threatening
A grave in the angry deep?*

But it is in faith that we hear and trust the response:

*The winds and the waves shall obey
my will: Peace! Be still!
Whether the wrath of a storm-tossed sea,
Or demons, or men, or whatever it be,
No water can swallow the ship where lies
The master of ocean and earth and skies,
They all shall sweetly obey my will:
Peace! Peace! Be still.
("Peace! Be Still!" Mary Ann Baker)*