

June 21, 2009

**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Mark 4: 35-41

All Saints' Episcopal Church

*The Rev'd John F. Herring*

In our Gospel today, we have a famous passage. The disciples are with Jesus, who is asleep in the boat. The wind and waters are raging. The disciples lose their nerve and wake Jesus up. Jesus calms the sea and rebukes them. So, yes we are reminded of the divine in Jesus, for who else can calm the wind and sea? But, there is something remarkable about the disciples in this passage. They have been traveling with Jesus and have seen him heal many and even exorcise a demon; yet at this point, they are still not completely aware of the peace that Jesus brings. Because they have their own agenda, they are not fully aware of the saving presence in Jesus Christ. You can sense their amazement in this passage.

We are not exactly a seafaring people. We live in Atlanta Ga., a landlocked city. The only nautical adventures I have had around here are trip on a pontoon boat in Lake Lanier and "shooting the hooch" a couple of times, some years ago.

But, we do have our moments of rough seas. We run into difficult life circumstances. Our lives are stressed-out; we overwork ourselves; we struggle in our relationships with each other; we struggle in our ability to see our real self worth, our real value in God's eyes. Perhaps it is because we forget, often, that God in Christ is with us, is in our boat, waiting for us to turn to him. We prefer to go it alone and our seas get rough.

I just returned from a pilgrimage to Ecuador. We had 11 teenagers and 5 adults, including myself. Naturally, I spent time sizing up our pilgrims, trying to get a sense of their character, their traits, their strengths and weaknesses.

Some of the things I noticed were not surprising. Our teens have mountains of schoolwork, to which we add mountains of activities, in the form of athletics, various clubs, volunteer opportunities, employment responsibilities, camps, and other extracurricular activities. All of these add up. Our teens have a full life. They are achievement oriented, pushing themselves to be greater, to compete, to get into their college of choice and make their mark in the world. Their current array of activities is different from ours, but our teens are the same as we. They are stressed-out, their relationships suffer, they get confused, their confidence

suffers and they struggle to see their true self worth in God's eyes. This is not a critique of parents. Our teens are a reflection of all of us, our community. We are all part of this system; we all feed the system; it is the American way, if not the western way.

We spend so much time trying to manage our lives and the lives of others that we forget to plug into the saving presence of God in Christ. We do not know how God will respond to our needs, because we spend little time inviting God into our space. We don't recognize the work of God in our lives, because we spend little time with our creator. Is it any wonder that when we have rough seas, when things seem unmanageable, when everything seems to be working against us, we lack faith? In our times of need, we are not always confident that God can calm our seas, beat back the wind, bring us peace. We forget God's saving presence.

On our pilgrimage to Ecuador, we pilgrims saw many things. We were on mountaintops, looking out at the valley below, sometimes rural, sometimes urban, and across to mountains in the distance, with clouds whisking over them. We straddled the equator at middle of the world, with one foot on each side the northern and the southern hemisphere while standing within a massive, if slightly tacky sundial. We saw grass covered pyramids engineered by pre-Incan cultures and we walked in reconstructed homes of the pre-Christian indigenous people. We stood in a Roman Catholic Church that was built in the baroque style. Every inch of the church was covered with some type of design, pattern or artwork. The entire interior was covered with patterns in gold-leaf from the floor up to and including the ceiling. You might not see so much gold in fort Knox. We climbed hundreds of feet up the clock tower of the Basilica of the National Vote, while a congregation celebrated the first communion of many young Ecuadorians in the nave below. From the tower of the Basilica, we looked out at the city with all of its urban complexity, its poverty and its beauty unfolding before us. We volunteered at the Episcopal Cathedral, a simple church with lots of natural lighting, dark wooden pews, large, beautiful stained glass windows and some of the warmest people we have ever encountered in the entire body of Christ. Yet, all of these excursions would have been exercises in busyness, if we did not take time out for God, if we did not engage in spiritual work.

In the early stages of our pilgrimage, we were staying at a hacienda just outside of Cayembe in the Ecuadorian countryside. This plantation is over 450 years old. The thick white walls, dark stained wood floors, and Spanish tile roofs all ooze character. The Hacienda has a small simple chapel, which is the oldest structure there and small Church which now operates as a simple museum. The Hacienda has a large amount of farmland with horses and mules. Inside the walls of the Hacienda, there is a large courtyard, covered with cobblestone, with an old fountain in the middle. We gathered there our first day and listened to one of our chaperons give a meditation on poverty, based on the words of Henri Nouwen. The pilgrims listened to that meditation and were asked to go reflect and journal for a half hour, each pilgrim, on his or her own, in silence. Everyone spread out, some in the courtyard, some out in the fields, others up the tower of the church,

others on benches, or boulders, or on stone flooring, on grass. In every nook and cranny of the Hacienda our pilgrims reflected and wrote in silence.

Afterwards, we gathered together to take on the day and one of our pilgrims remarked, "That was great, are we going to do that again?" "Yes" was the reply. Every day. So each day we gathered to reflect and then journal individually the daytime. Each evening we gathered to meet and have reflective discussions as a group, exploring how God might be working in each of us. Each evening we would conclude with compline, a simple evening prayer service found in the BCP. Throughout these intentional gatherings, one could begin to see God at work. Our pilgrims really began to unplug from the busyness of their lives and allowed God to stir within them. Confidence grew in some. Happiness grew in others. Compassion stirred in some. Justice became an issue for others. Still others reflected on community and friendship. Our community within this community grew stronger and by the end of our pilgrimage, there was a sense of peace present among our pilgrims that did not exist before.

On our final reflections on our last evening in Quito, our pilgrims said things they would not have said before. "I feel closer to God now. I can see that God is giving me confidence I did not have before," one pilgrim remarked.

"I can see how God has worked with different people and different cultures, God brings blessings to all" said another.

"I can see God's work in my life now and that God wants a better life for me," another remarked.

This remarkable discussion continued for some time. This was not the same group as before. Our pilgrims were touched by God in different and meaningful ways and I was reminded of how God can calm the waters, bringing peace to us. I was reminded of the saving presence of God in Christ, Christ, who was in the boat with the disciples, Christ who is with us now, if we will only take time out to seek and notice Christ.

Yet, while I and the other chaperons marveled at God's work in our Young Adults, we were given a final jolt by the following words. "I am afraid," the pilgrim said. "I don't want to go back to falling into the same pattern in Atlanta. I wish we could keep this going."

This pilgrim acknowledged a sad reality; we could not stay unplugged from Atlanta much longer. We would be swept back into the tide of the rough Atlanta sea of busyness, achievements, deadlines, pressures and activities.

That is a reality. But one of our leaders that night was quick to point out, rightfully so, we do not have to go back to that way. We can continue to create space for God in our lives. We can continue to pray, reflect and grow. We do not have to plug into Atlanta in the same way we have in the past.

Ecuador provides a unique context for reflection, indeed. But, pilgrimage happens in our hearts. In the midst of our stormy lives, we can make space for God in Christ. Christ is with us, waiting for us, waiting to calm our seas. Christ is telling us, "Do not be afraid. Have faith. I am with you"

Now is the time. We have the Gospel each Sunday. We are about to receive the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ and meditate on the work of Christ in us. Now is the day of salvation. We can choose the pilgrimage way and take time out for God. We can choose a walk with Christ who brings us peace, who brings us the saving presence of God. We can choose this not only this Sunday, but every day.