



Holding On, Letting Go and Learning to Trust  
Mark 4:35-41

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
20 June 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Although I am mostly recovered from the past week of Adventure Camp with our junior high students, I confess that the recovery period for each year of Adventure Camp gets extended a little bit longer with a few more Advil towards the end of the week. After twenty-one years of junior high ministry, I will still tell you – they are my favorite. Not so old that they are too cool for some activities and not so young that they cannot make the leap to some very profound moments of understanding about their faith, self-awareness, and ability to shape the world around them. So last week – we climbed a mountain. Some of us repelled over the edge and back down the mountain. We ziplined over lakes and through trees not always able to see the end of the zipline and the next landing platform. And we found ourselves in unknown waters – with not much more than a paddle and a lifejacket – learning to navigate islands, coastlines, and the occasional dead tree. All leading us to learn to trust ourselves, each other and our God with just a little more confidence and a whole lotta faith – especially when you are hanging by a rope, on the side of a cliff, 35 feet off the ground.

I am always surprised by the matter-of-fact way that Mark tells the story of Jesus calming the storm as if the disciples were not afraid for their very lives. Mark writes like a reporter: Jesus said, “Let’s go to the other side;” the disciples got into the boat. Jesus fell asleep. There was a storm. Big waves. Jesus woke up. Jesus told the winds and the waves to be still. And then, we can almost imagine the next line. Jesus went back to sleep. My guess is that the disciples had a little more to say than a simple question thrown at Jesus about whether or not he cared that the disciples might die. I can imagine that the disciples were holding on to the sides of the boat with white knuckles, praying, screaming, vomiting, cursing, and begging their Savior to wake up. Even though most of them were accomplished fishermen, still, I believe, that they were not just afraid – they were terrified. As if they had come to take the presence of God for granted and expected every moment to be easy from that point on. One of our junior high boys decided he was going to repel off the mountain. So to the rope he was attached. A back-up rope was also attached, just-in-case. He climbed down to the ledge and then put his heels up against the edge of the cliff. All that was left was to let go and lean back. He stopped to double check with the guide – was everything attached? Yes. Could you check one more time? Sure. And then as his elbows and forearms shook he slowly released his grip on the rock – one finger at a time. And then he trusted the guide and let go all the way. You could see the feeling of relief on his face as he did not plummet to the ground but simply hung in the air. The guide had spoken the truth.

I think the disciples just want to know that Jesus knows what is happening to them – that he is not sleeping through their fear as their world collapses around them. I am pretty sure that is what all of us want – to know that Jesus is aware of our fear, our suffering, our last moment before we are forced to remove our last full fingered grip from what we are holding on to and trust that Jesus is there waiting for us to trust enough to let go. Who among us has not known that moment? Who among us has not wished for that one all-consuming storm to be stilled so that the world we have known and loved rights itself back into normal and we go on with this life as if nothing has happened?

I will tell you there were highlights, moments considered miraculous, every day of camp. The first night, when students are trying to figure out everybody’s names, a game of basketball in the pool can bond a group

together like almost nothing else. And Monday morning found us hiking to our mountain climbing spot – the hike alone was enough for some of the students. We offer this week of adventure as “challenge by choice” but our hope is that everyone will choose to at least make the attempt at each adventure. During the first five hours of rock climbing, we had two students who refused to climb at all. They had all the gear – their helmet, their safety harness, a willing guide – but they were not to be persuaded. It was not until late afternoon, as I was preparing to come down the mountain that I heard the name of a student being cheered on. Imagine my surprise as I was coming down the mountain – one of the two hold-outs was climbing up the mountain and preparing to meet me in the middle of the mountain. Ziplining is less challenging than mountain climbing – you simply have to step off the platform and hang until you zip down the cable to the next platform. Although some students were eager, others were anxious and figuring out the best excuse to not step off the platform. And yet every single student took the step and floated into the air as they flew from one platform to the next. However, the kayaks, they are my favorite. Students will easily get into their kayaks. They will listen to Pastor Tony and me – share tips for how to get the most out of each paddle. They will stay in the safety of the lagoon and practice with big smiles on their faces. And then it is time to hit the open water. The crowd thins out quickly with adults scattering in the midst of the students and students who have figured out the paddling begin to move towards the front of the pack. I usually stay at the back to keep track and give extra encouragement to the stragglers. Yet even with the encouragement, I also have my tow rope ready in case I am called upon to begin a kayak train. Does my staying behind bring comfort to the two or three stragglers at the back of the pack who watch the rest of their friends move ahead? Maybe – I have never asked. I just want to be a presence – following from the back of the pack – encouraging – supporting – nudging the students to keep going. Even as we practice “challenge by choice” with the students, they are never left without an option for assistance.

In the kayak, you have to learn to balance. You learn the proper placement of your hands on the paddle. You need to remember to keep your back straight and your feet on the foot pedals. And you need to keep your paddle right side up and dig deep into the water. If you are also trying to remember to drink water, apply sunscreen, and not tip yourself over dumping your shoes and towel into the water – well that is a lot to remember. And we were on the water on a calm day – no white caps, no winds, no storm. Imagine being in the boat with the disciples watching all your fishermen friends panic at the waves barreling over the sides of the boat threatening to wash you over the side or capsize the boat altogether.

No matter how much we prepare in this life – we are never ready for the true power of the storms that bring the winds and waves and break us to our knees holding on for dear life, praying that our God hears our cries for help. It can often feel as if Jesus is asleep in the boat. Why doesn't God answer my prayer? Is this healing too much to ask? If my world has shattered, can't God put it all back together? The answer is yes, of course – God can do that very thing you are praying to happen. The only truth we need realize is that God is answering our prayers from a perspective other than our own. God, looking on us with love, is answering our prayer from God's view of this life - outside time and space. It may be that in my prayer for healing, God has said yes, but heals in a way that brings my loved one to a new fullness of life that does not include me for a time. I am learning to live with that answer. Learning to trust that God is present with me, with us, waiting for us to let go of whatever we are holding onto so that we can trust that Jesus is already there – waiting for us – always – forever. Amen.