

Be still! Let the Lord sleep!

Twelfth Sunday – Year B – June 20, 2021 – **Father’s Day & World Refugee Day**
Readings: Job 38:1, 8-11; 2 Cor 5:14-17; Mk 4:35-41

“*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*” (Mk 4:40)

Prologue: Psalm 121:3-4 reminds us: “God who keeps you will not slumber; and who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” But the gospel passage has Jesus asleep in the boat amidst the storm, with the disciples crying out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mk 4:38) Of course God cares! The binary of stillness versus storm; fear vs. faith, provides food for thought.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Much as it applied to the fishermen-disciples in Jesus’ time, today’s gospel passage is very relevant for us during this Covid-19 pandemic. It begins with: “On that day, when *evening* had come ...” (v.35). Jesus is tired after a long day of ministry: traveling, meeting people, curing the sick and teaching them truths in parables. Last week’s reading ended with, “Jesus explained everything *in private to his disciples*” (v.34). So, Jesus is looking for a restful break, so to say, to spend quality time with his disciples alone. He instructs them, “Let us go across to the *other side*” (v.35). For the disciples, *this* side of Galilee is ‘home’ where they have family, friends, familiar faces, time-tested traditions, people of the same mindset, culture and orientation. But the *other side* involves distancing, for they are “leaving the crowd behind” (v.36) and venturing out upon the waters towards the unfamiliar shores of the country of the Gerasenes (Mk 5:1). There, they will encounter ‘*otherness*’: a so-called ‘pagan country’ with people with unfamiliar mindsets, of a different culture and religion. The very idea of mixing with ‘pagans’ is unsettling. That factor, too, is causing a certain churning within, a mini storm, so to say, among the disciples. The “great windstorm” adds to their woes. They are totally focused on themselves: their forthcoming encounter with pagans, the threat of the winds and waves, their boat “which was already being swamped” (v.37) and the possibility of them perishing. In panic, they wake the sleeping Jesus up and say to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (v.38)
2. Were the disciples fully aware ‘*who*’ was asleep in their boat, they would have let him sleep undisturbed for they would have known that he has divine power to quell all storms. Their limited knowledge of Jesus, however, is sufficient for them to call upon him for help. In the span of a few minutes Jesus reveals ‘*who*’ he really is. On the one hand, he is fully human, requiring rest; he sleeps. And on the other, he is fully divine; hence has the power to still all storms. In the biblical tradition, the only one who has control over all the elements of nature is obviously the one who created them: God. We have biblical references to substantiate this: for instance, Job 9:1-12; 26:12-13; Pss 74:13; 89:9; 104:5-7; Isa 51:10; etc. Jesus’ command to the wind and the sea: “Peace! Be still!” (v.39) results in the calming of the sea. Evangelist Mark wants to tell his readers that the “One who is to come” has already come in this person: Jesus Christ. And the revelation of the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus is not merely a matter of preaching and words, but is corroborated with Jesus’ practice and works. At creation, God created the cosmos out of chaos. Now, God is once again bringing cosmos out of chaos through God’s Son, in the power of the Spirit. The disciples’ rhetorical question: “Who can this be?” (v.41) already gives a clue to who Jesus really is.

3. Jesus' two rhetorical questions to his disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (v.40) remain unanswered. Here, one can refer to today's first reading from the Book of Job—a 'didactic book' meant to teach vital lessons—wherein God seems to provide an answer to Job and his three friends' questioning "out of the whirlwind" (38:1). "Out of the whirlwind" is a scriptural device to denote a so-called '*theophany*', a revelation of God. God's logic is simple: Were you there when I created the winds and seas? Don't you know that I am the sovereign God over and above everything and everyone else? Against the background of the ancient Jewish belief that God rewards the just and punishes the wicked (something like the Hindu 'karma theory' of divine retribution), Job is made to realize that it is foolish for human beings to question God's ways. God, the Creator, knows what is happening to us and our world; so, we ought to simply trust God and get rid of all our fears no matter how justified they might seem at present. The question addressed to Job, and the two questions—"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"—are not only addressed to characters in the Bible, but also to Christians of the early Church who weathered innumerable storms, within and without: threats, insecurities, persecutions, temptations to abandon their newfound faith, uncertainty about the second coming of Christ and so on. Moreover, the same questions are addressed to you and me, especially during the pandemic when so many are asking: Where is God? Is God sleeping? Does God not care about us?

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme

The psalm (107) expresses praise and thanks given to God by different groups of people for being saved from various troubles. The focus is on those who were rescued from storms at sea. The psalm links the first reading and the gospel passage, the keywords being: "He made the storm be still" (v.29).

Though the second reading does not directly deal with our theme, Paul exhorts his people to have faith in God because the death-and-resurrection of Christ is the assurance that God *will* grant us our hearts' desires. Jesus is our steadfast anchor (Heb 6:19) who supports us through the storms of life. Indeed, in Jesus, "everything has become new!" (v.17)

Current Covid Concern: Pope Francis chose this particular gospel passage to reflect upon at his 'Extraordinary Moment of Prayer' at an empty San Pietro's Piazza, Rome, on March 27, 2020, at the peak of the pandemic. He said: "*It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, Jesus is in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: 'Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?'*" I ask myself: When storms come in my life, will I be able to be still and fearless? Will I let the Lord sleep since he, and he alone, can control all the winds and waves of my life?

Tale End: A captain of a ship was known for his deep faith in God. Before every trip, he would pray earnestly and then begin sailing. His habit of prayer was pooh-pooed by his sailors. "What's the need of praying?" they'd ask him jeeringly. "I pray to remind myself that God is my anchor and to remind God that He is my captain!" On a later trip, when mighty winds and waves tossed the ship on the high seas, everyone panicked and began praying. They begged the captain to join them. He replied, "I've already anchored this ship on God. But it might help if *you* begin praying at least now." God says, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 127:1).
