

Calm Amidst the Tempest

Mark 4:35-41

Now that we're in the summer hurricane season, the first category-five storm that has raged across the southern border of the U.S. is a tempest called, "zero tolerance." The nearly-universal outrage to the new immigration policy of the Trump administration has resulted in a partially-reversed approach of detaining and separating children from parents of those who illegally cross into the U.S. Not only is there confusion over what's happening, this has tested the core of our collective morality and humaneness as a society.

Though the recent flashpoint came from media coverage and images of distressed children (as young as toddlers) wailing inside chain-linked holding pens in detention centers or, in some cases, transported hundreds of miles away to shelters in other states, the problems with our complicated immigration system and our treatment of those seeking refuge and safety is a long-standing one over many administrations and Congressional majorities of both parties. For some, yes, it's a matter of keeping foreigners out; for most, it comes down to a philosophical and visceral struggle between the moral authority of policies or the genuine needs of people, securing control of our borders or showing compassion to refugees, prosecuting to the extent of the law or acting in the merciful spirit of love.

Truthfully, there are no easy solutions to this crisis or to the nagging problems associated with immigration laws currently on the books. However, it is one thing to approach policy-making with a humane spirit of fairness and hospitality (particularly to refugees and asylum seekers) in contrast to a punitive intent out of fear and with rash discrimination. Frankly, it's the latter that appears to characterize the current policies

which should be a concern to us, because, as a society, we have been there before and when we were, it resulted in some of the darkest moments of our common history.

Similar scenes of separating vulnerable families—quite legally, mind you—were inherent to the institution of slavery; likewise, a century ago the federal policy toward Native Americans was to separate children from their parents and communities and customs to indoctrinate them in “American” culture at Christian boarding schools. During the Great Depression, Mexican Americans were blamed for the economic downturn in California and Texas and, consequently, over a million were deported, displacing parents from children; the following decade, FDR by executive order instituted the dreadful legacy of Japanese internment camps, which also separated families for the sake of security. Hence, this isn’t new to our country. What alarms us now in the dehumanizing treatment of immigrants is, unfortunately, characteristic of how an entire underside of our society is repeatedly addressed by our system of law and order. Though we may not witness or experience it firsthand, in this country, the government legally arrests, detains, and socially shames vulnerable people more often than we realize.

For that reason, before we collectively move onto some other crisis, we should pause to let the impression of this one sink in. George Santayana’s famous line bears mentioning: “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This is something we should take to heart. We shouldn’t pass this moment off as an aberration or anomaly, as if it’s insignificant and relative only to the politics of our time.

Besides, when things like this occur—when people are treated inhumanely—parallels to another dark period in human history are easily

made—hauntingly evident to those who still remember it all too well. First came the lies and propaganda, then the targeting and scapegoating of vulnerable populations; then came deception, secrecy, and a lack of transparency and accountability for police practices and government edicts, with denial and doublespeak by various governmental and party leaders. I'm referring to the early years of Nazi rule upon German society. It's not being alarmist to note and recognize these and other parallels, including the acquiescent support for Hitler's cult by a German population who were drawn to the strong hand, while largely overlooking the ghastly rumors about pogroms, concentration camps, and Gestapo tactics by claiming, "Germans would never do that! We are a Christian nation!"

Yet, to quote Elizabeth White, historian of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

"The way Hitler worked was he would make these pronouncements, and people would go off and figure out, what did he mean? How are we going to do this?" ... "You could work towards the Führer by being innovative and ruthless."

In other words, rather than giving explicit orders to each member of the Nazi party, Hitler made numerous statements vilifying Jewish people and declaring the need to exterminate them. ¹

Before it was all over, of course, the victims of Nazi policies included the range of vulnerable people, Jews and non-Jews alike—dehumanized, detained, deported, and ultimately eliminated for what were seen as very practical, utilitarian reasons: they were threats to national security; they undermined the German economy, or were a blight upon society.² Most Germans claimed they didn't know about atrocities or didn't believe it; they were merely being supportive of the Führer and their Fatherland. History

¹ Lorraine Boissonault, "The First Moments of Hitler's Final Solution," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/first-moments-hitlers-final-solution-180961387/#ejm2kf1X2WE5397W.99>

² "Mosaic of Victims: An Overview", U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

would say, they simply drank the Kool-Aid—something many Germans wouldn't recognize as toxic until later. As the wisdom goes, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

It's hard to tell what will unfold in our lifetimes. Political winds and circumstances change, to be sure, but the plight of vulnerable people doesn't. Those who are on the receiving end of unnecessary punishment, harassment, public scorn and social disgrace are traumatized by what they experience and how they are perceived by the wider society. Maybe it's always been that way.

That could be the reason Jesus' teachings and his embrace of the least of these stood out in his own day as memorable and worthy of following, even at a cost. His concerns were not all that common in the mainstream. The cost included the burden of fighting public opinion which did not warm up to those easily scapegoated in Judean society, including Samaritans and other foreigners. It was never easy. Jesus never mounted a significant campaign to transform Judean society or end the imperial control of Rome. The powers that be remained the powers that be before and after Jesus.

As we know from Scripture, even the first generation of apostles were rounded up at various times, arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed—just like the people they stood up for. They could well be counted among the vulnerable in our own world who live much of their lives caged and constricted by the standing laws and legal authority of those who rule the land. It's a distressing reality to be powerless against those who wield it and who can lock you up for whatever offense they can accuse you of, whatever your circumstances. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was born out of such a state.

Granted, it's unlikely you and I will ever find ourselves in that place or entirely powerless in a system that discriminates against the weakest. We won't be the ones who make the cover of *Time*. For that reason, Jesus' stories and teachings will speak to us in another way than from the sense of vulnerability felt by the least of these. So it's important for us, then, to *empathize* with them to the degree we can and to *stand up* for them when we can, so that we will not find ourselves among the passively silent majority who do not even know how, where, and why terribly unjust and inhumane treatment occurs. For, as history shows, when no one notices or stands up to defend victims, that is when great and historic evil occurs.

With that in mind, I'm drawn to this week's text from Mark for what it says to us in this time. It's a perspective to appreciate so that we do not lose our souls or our humanity. It's about surviving and finding our way through turbulent waters and buffeting winds, recognizing we are all in the same boat. Regardless of where anyone is located in this collective vessel, what impacts one affects the survival of all; when harm is done to one, eventually, it will violate everyone. When one suffers, we all will suffer. The winds and water do not discriminate. When one is vulnerable, we are all vulnerable. Ultimately, everyone's survival is at stake.

I admit, we tend to interpret this story only with the role of Jesus in mind—the one that makes him out to be an amazing wonder worker—as a cosmic superhero saving the day. He wakes up and commands all the bad things to go away. That's a prayer often emitted by many of us. It's an honest belief and earnest hope to which many people cling—"Save me, Jesus!"—except, in all-too-many situations, things don't immediately change (if at all), so it appears Christ remains fast asleep in our boat.

So maybe it's time to view the story in a slightly different way—maybe more in the way the Gospel writer intended from the very beginning. One has to wonder, since something seems odd about the circumstances. Half the disciples were fishermen who were very familiar with the waters and the darkness, so why would they be caught off guard by the tempest and then so afraid, since after sunset is when they normally cast their nets? They would have known what they were getting into when they left the shore. Bad weather was a constant concern, day and night. So, the point of the story can't be just of Jesus protecting them from what experience, common sense, and hard-earned wisdom should and would have already taught them.

I wonder if the fear these fishermen were feeling would not have been theirs, as much as it was representative of those who did not know what to do when the winds and the waves buffeted them. It was about those who were caught unaware of what was rising in the east—those who lacked wisdom, experience, foresight, and skills to survive in such a moment. They would be the ones to cower in fear, afraid of what would happen to them in the tempest.

Who are they? They are the ones who lack understanding of the context of where they are. They are the ones drifting along thinking they're just out on a pleasant evening ride, unaware of what's going on around them and what's coming their way—unobservant of what will threaten them in the darkness. They are the ones who are caught unprepared in a crisis and lack composure and wisdom to do what's right when it's most needed.

In Jesus' time, it was those mainly in the ruling class, who drifted along benefitting quite well from the status quo and imperial rule, unaware of how much injustice existed in their society or how many vulnerable

people suffered needlessly. Or, it could have included those who were driven by their hatred of foreigners and imperial control, yet blinded to how Jewish nationalism was going to force them into a cataclysmic showdown with Rome, which occurred 40 years later in Jerusalem's downfall.

If we put it into our present context, it will look much the same. It doesn't take divine revelation to notice racism when it's happening or that when certain people are demonized, something evil is about to occur. We should know that if the powerful characterize lies as truth and truth as lies that this is intended to confuse us and manipulate our minds and mess with our moral compasses, so we can't figure out what's true from false, right or wrong, or certainly muster any strength to resist it. History has taught this lesson many times before in its darkest moments.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if we bully the weakest people and traumatize their children, they will not easily overcome this and will live with these scars as marks on their souls. Every action has a consequence—be it for good or for evil. History will eventually write the story when great injustices have occurred, and usually it is not as kind and understanding as perceived at the time.

If we take seriously Jesus' role in this story, we know he didn't remain asleep in the storm. Like the tale of Jonah which is the literary basis to this narrative in Mark, Jesus was awakened by the panicked crew to help bail them out of this calamitous crisis. But unlike Jonah, who lacked an empathetic heart for Israel's enemies, the Ninevites, and chose only to jump ship, Jesus instead did the right thing: he stood up, resisted the forces of fury, defied their power, and brought calm back to their world.

It's an amazing story, but one that could have had an entirely different outcome. Jesus could have slumbered through it all, enjoying his

little dreamland of a happy eternal home in heaven unengaged in the crisis they were facing. Or he could awakened and abruptly mirrored the panic of his crew and recklessly chosen sides, sending out an executive order over who should stay and who should be tossed overboard, who would live and who should die, who was expendable from who was not. Or he could have awakened and simply bailed out of the boat like Jonah did, banking on some great escape to rapture him from the evils of earth. Instead, Jesus awoke, stood up, resisted the forces of destruction, and saved everyone in that boat—from the greatest to the least of these.

That, my friends, is where we are in such a time as this. The world around us is waking the church up to face the crisis we're in. We, as the body of Christ—those who represent Jesus in this time and place—are making our choices known, one way or the other. Many are still fast asleep (or at least pretending to be so), remaining unengaged in the current tempest. Some are throwing people overboard looking out for themselves. Some are, like Jesus, taking on the unholy forces of the winds and the waves. The tumult isn't going to pass by on its own accord without resulting in a lot of unnecessary damage, as the lessons of history tell us. So, what will we do to bring calm amidst the tempest?

These are days that call for spiritual discernment, wisdom, fortitude, and resistance to the forces that threaten our world, where we must personally and collectively draw upon the Spirit of God to strengthen our resolve and help us save our fragile nation. As people of faith, the Spirit of God is a marvelous calming presence which can help us be true to our calling to be a moral compass for others who panic in times like these, or those who lack such faith, yet desperately hope that the tempest will end and the boat we share as human beings finds more peaceful waters.

So what will we do? As people of faith, we are being awakened; the boat is rocking and the world needs our help!

Mind you, I don't want to underestimate the complexity of immigration. If it were a simple problem, wiser heads than mine would have brought about a much more fair and equitable policy. But, as people of faith, as followers of Jesus, our role in life is to follow his moral lead. I don't believe Jesus was worried about protecting borders, because he refused to respect artificial, humanly-imposed barriers of all types in his own time. I'm certain Jesus would stand up to defend, not the great powers of earth, but the oppressed lives of vulnerable people—at the very least, the orphan, the widow, and the refugee.

Even his own life demonstrated that the spirit of empathy and compassion must always have priority over the authority to arrest and punish—and divine love and human mercy, the same over the institution of law. For laws and governments are reflective only of the times when they exist, but the testimony of love and compassion exceeds even the generations well onto eternity. Therefore, if any verse is to be recited from Romans 13, it should be this: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Friends, when we recognize and remember how small our boat is and how vulnerable so many lives are within it, our first and only prayer should be for safe passage for all.

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