

“Peace! Be Still!”

Mark 4:35-41

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‘Chaos’ is a word that might describe the scene depicted in Mark’s story of the disciples out in a boat in the midst of a storm. The wind arose. The waves beat upon the boat. The boat was nearly swamped! The disciples were sure they were perishing! Jesus surveyed the situation, raised his hands and spoke to the chaos: “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

I think of this as one of the truly great, truly relevant stories in the whole Bible. It is a story about where to turn in the midst of a crisis, when chaos breaks in. Who cannot relate to this story of chaos breaking in? I remember studying for my Old Testament final exam freshman year at Trinity University, and suddenly throwing up my hands saying out loud, “I wish I knew more about Isaiah!” My roommate, Jesse Chrisler, noted my late night chaos, and simply said, “Concentrate on what you do know!” I tell you, he was Christ to me in that moment. He calmed my storm. When I saw Jesse forty years later at our class reunion, he asked me how I was doing with Isaiah! I smiled and quoted a few verses so he’d know I was in a better place.

Chaos breaks in any old time; in the kitchen preparing a special meal, on a job interview, in a conversation with a college admissions officer, on a Habitat site when suddenly there is not enough work to be done, at a soup kitchen when it seems the meatloaf won’t stretch nearly far enough, at the Heifer Farm when the goats let you know they’d really rather not be milked at that moment.

Chaos breaks in, and like the disciples in the story, we feel a dread come over us; our boat seems to be sinking; we're going under. Like the disciples in the story, we need to know where to turn. In their panic, they turned to Jesus who was actually in the stern asleep on a cushion. It is to this same Jesus Christ we turn when chaos engulfs us. Fortunately, he is still nearby, even in the same boat with us, in the stern of our boat. I take that to mean the Christ is as close as the next human being, for that is where Christ dwells, in the hearts and minds of the people all around us.

In a way, this is why we are such advocates for mission trips. We have this confidence that when we step outside of our comfort zone, we discover the living presence of Christ in our peers, in our advisors, and in the people we serve. When our youth return from their mission trips, they bring enough enthusiasm and energy and joy to raise the Titanic from the ocean floor. They may or may not be able to articulate why this is so. My belief is that it has everything to do with encountering the Christ in the midst of chaos.

The chaos may erupt in the bus on the way to Providence. It may erupt on a roof on a Habitat house in Delaware. It may erupt in the water buffalo pasture at the Heifer Farm. There's a part of us that wishes there'd be no such chaos, smooth sailing all the way along. But there's another part of us that knows better, that knows these are the places where Christ is present, proclaiming, "Peace! Be still!"

I mentioned my college roommate, Jesse Chrisler, being Christ to me in the midst of a personal chaos. I would just lift him up as a symbol this morning, a sign that Christ literally is present in the person right next to you. He or she may be asleep in the stern or on a pew cushion, but your neighbor is there, waiting to be Christ for you. Take Jesse with you in your vans, on your bus.

Perhaps it will be YOU who says to a friend, “Concentrate on what you do know.” Perhaps it will be YOU who is Christ to another.

“Peace! Be calm!” At the end of Mark’s boating story, when the sea has calmed, the disciples are totally awed. Their flesh is covered with goose bumps. They are nearly speechless. One of them is able to mutter, “Who, then, can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey?” Who can this be? It is, of course, a rhetorical question. They now know precisely who this is. It is the Christ. Among them! During these coming days of mission endeavor, watch for the goose bumps. They will confirm that God is there in your chaos, in your boat, in your heart. I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.