

Crossing Over
Mark 4.35-41
June 20, 2021, Father's Day
Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips



Thank you, Pastor Patricia. And, since I wasn't able to be with you for worship last Sunday, I want to say how grateful I am for your 40 years of ordained ministry and for the wisdom of Mt. Zion to ordain you. There are so many people who have been blessed by your ministry. I am certainly one of them. And I thank God for you.

Like you, "It is Well With My Soul," is one of my favorite hymns. I've told the story many times but I'll tell the "Readers Digest" version again for some context.

The author, Horatio Spafford was a lawyer and real estate investor who lost everything in the great Chicago fire. Horatio and Anna had already lost a son to Tuberculosis and, on a crossing to England, they lost all four daughters in shipwreck: Annie age 12, Maggie age 7, Bessie age 4 and an 18-month infant. Anna alone survived. Imagine the trauma.

Horatio had stayed behind to finish some business but immediately boarded a ship to meet his grieving wife. As they crossed over the place where Anna's ship went down, the captain called Horatio to the deck. That's verse 1:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way;
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say:
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

When Horatio and Anna returned home, they faced a crowd of fellow Christians who wanted to know what horrible sin they had committed to warrant such great punishment. That's verse 3:

*My sin – my sin? You want to talk about my sin?
My sin ... not in part but the whole –
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!*

Imagine this additional trauma of folks you thought you knew assuming that it was your fault that your children had been lost. Not a surprise that Horatio and Anna had enough of American Christianity. They left that hometown crowd behind and crossed over to a new life and the vision of a new day in Jerusalem where they founded a children's center for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim children. That work continues to this day. And that's verse 4:

*O Lord haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll ...
Even then, it is well with my soul.*

The hymn isn't just about a tragic crossing of the Atlantic. It is a testimony to "crossing over" – leaving the familiar behind to enter new unfamiliar territory for the sake of a new vision.

The hymn, I think, is a great introduction to the lesson for today.

Mark 4.35-41 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

With the coming of evening the same day, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let's cross over to the other shore." Leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus in the boat in which he was sitting. There were other boats with them.

I want to stop here and notice that there were other *boats* in this storm. My friend Martha Bean pointed out that in all the stormy days we are living through, we are *not* all in the same boat. Some of us are in very vulnerable little dinghies. Some of us are in working fishing boats. Some of us are in well-protected and well-appointed yachts. We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same *storm*.

Then a fierce gale arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat so much that it was almost swamped. But Jesus was in the stern through it all, sound asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said, "Teacher, doesn't it matter to you that we're going to drown?"

Jesus awoke, rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be calm!" And the wind dropped and everything was perfectly calm. Jesus then said to the disciples, "Why were you so frightened? Have you no faith?"

But they became filled with fear and said to one another, "Who is this, whom even the wind and sea obey?"

For many years, I have read this story as a commentary on the disciples rather than the geography of the trip. What was it that the disciples were doing when the storm hit?

They were "crossing over."

And this is the point I want to make: When you make a commitment to leave the crowd of the familiar behind to cross over to new and unfamiliar territory, there will be storms.

Father Mike Raschko at Seattle University say that the parable from last week about those small, insignificant-looking seeds, growing into a big shrub is connected to the story of the storm this week. He says:

Small seeds were producing great storms. They were challenging worlds that many thought were set firmly on their foundations. Small seeds can do that. Simple gestures can change a life or a world.

In other words, the storm happens as the disciples were in the middle of sowing a revolutionary seed. They were crossing over from the land they knew – Galilee – to the strange and unfamiliar territory of the Gerasenes, where, by the way, they are immediately confronted with a possessed man who is freed from his possession only when Jesus sends the demons away into a drove of pigs who run over a cliff.

This is new territory for those disciples.

And again, this is my point: When you make a commitment to leave the crowd of the familiar behind to cross over to new and unfamiliar territory, expect storms.

In the movement to leave behind the 400 years of white supremacy in this nation and to cross over to a multi-racial democracy, there will be storms.

In the work to combat the forces that are producing climate change and to cross over to practice actions that honor and heal the Earth, there will be storms.

In our life together, to leave behind business as usual to cross over to a closer approximation of that Beloved Community, there will be storms.

In our personal lives, to leave behind the comfortable and the familiar to cross over to the possibility of growth, there will be storms.

When we exert the energy it takes to cross over, expect some troubled waters, some rough waves, some accusations that we are the ones who are rocking the boat.

But don't be afraid. There is always someone in the boat with us who can teach us that whatever our lot, it is well with our souls.

I will admit that I come to some of our conversations about our anti-racism work with trepidation. We are crossing over into new territory for some of us and I know that means storms are ahead. But every time the water gets choppy, there has been someone who acknowledges the storm and yet seems miraculously able to calm the seas. It isn't always the same person. But it is someone.

I want to thank you all for the love and support you have offered with the passing of my mom last week. It was, in an ultimate sense, a "crossing over." But it wasn't the only one. We spent years trying to cross over from the son she expected to the foreign territory of the son she had. There were storms. And often it was a voice of someone outside our life together that calmed the seas.

It was about 11 years ago that mom made that big crossing over – leaving behind all that had been familiar in that somewhat insulated place to travel almost 5000 miles to big liberal Seattle.

I remember that first Sunday she was with us. I tried to encourage her to simply come to worship that day because I knew Adult Learning was a program about gender identity led by Ruth Draper. No doubt that would be too much for mom to handle. But mom was never one to miss Sunday School. So there she was, on that first Sunday, hearing about transgender folks and non-binary people. And she seemed unfazed.

That afternoon there was a concert in support of Marriage Equality. I told her that she didn't have to come. But it was a concert! When would she miss a concert? I sat in the balcony the whole time keeping my eye on her for any telltale signs of discomfort. But, instead, there she was bopping along with the music; standing to clap; seeming to enjoy it all.

I realized at some point that mom must have somehow crossed over and that I needed to cross over too. I needed to make that journey to an unfamiliar place where my mom was freed from the limitations of the crowd she had left behind and she was learning to live in a new place. Of course, there were storms along the way. But there was always someone – many of you – who acknowledged the storm and lovingly and faithfully calmed the storm. I will be forever grateful to all of you for that.

I suppose it is inevitable that some people back home will see my mom's crossing over as a defection – a betrayal of their world. But mom didn't seem worried about turning back. Even when her mind was

clouded with dementia, my beloved Patrick was always her “other son.” She missed being in church with you all when that was too hard for her. She still sang those good old hymns with Lynn Gaertner-Johnston.

My mother’s final crossing over last week was all part of a journey to enter a new and unfamiliar place and to call it “home.”

Beloved ones, for the world’s sake, for our community’s sake, for our own sake, there is crossing over to do. Expect storms. But don’t be afraid because there will always be a voice that cries out from the wind and the waves to assure us that the storm is passing over.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Michael B. Raschko, *A Companion to the Gospel of Mark* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), pp.62 & 68.