

WHEN THE WINDS BLOW

--If ever we have any question as to what we're made of, we have only to wait until the winds begin to howl about our ears. And then we will know with certainty.

The howling winds represent those moments in life when things are not exactly going our way. The best-laid plans fizzle, our health takes a sudden skid off the track, our hopes for success in some venture are dashed by a completely unexpected course of events, what we have always relied on to serve us well now suddenly fails us, and so on.

I'll bet you can remember a time or two when the winds were howling around you. Everyone can. I know I can.

And, for all of us, it's at those moments when who we genuinely are inevitably finds itself at the center of the stage--raging, whining, blaming, cowering. When the winds begin to blow, there is no personal luxury of further pretense--of being able to amuse ourselves or deceive ourselves that we are different than we are, that we are more than we are, that we are bigger than we are. At these times, there is no real opportunity to be other than we are.

When the winds begin to blow, there is a testing and a self-revealing which unavoidably occur. For those disciples in this morning's reading, it is a test which they seem pretty miserably to fail, and what is revealed about them is nothing of which to be very proud. It's quite the scene there of frightened children--losing it, freaking out, scrambling about frenetically on the deck, convinced of their desperate helplessness and hopelessness, demanding that someone else, that some grown-up, deliver them immediately from their plight. Maybe if they had remained at their posts, conscientiously applying themselves to the tasks of sailing, things wouldn't feel so bleak. I'm just saying

--"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" they demand to know of Jesus. That's a bit uncalled-for, don't you think? That's a bit of a low blow that it should be charged that this Jesus--who has personally called them and, according to the accounting of the evangelist Mark, has already taught them through an assortment of sayings and parables, and has had them be privy to various acts of healing--should now so seriously disappoint and abandon. But when the winds begin to blow, that's just the sort of stuff that we come up with, just the sort of stuff that we come out with--stuff that in our sunnier, less-stressed moments would always have been thought to be beneath us, totally alien to us.

I've got a hunch about Jesus, who is said by Mark, as all that reported chaos is unfolding on deck, to be "in the stern, asleep on the cushion." Jesus must be one very sound sleeper, to go on dozing like that while just beyond him occur all that being wildly tossed about by rough seas and all that hysterical screaming by his traveling companions.

My hunch is that Jesus isn't really sleeping; he's "playing possum." He's pretending to be asleep, feigning his unavailability to them, leaving them for the moment to their own devices. It is one of those teachable moments, where they can get a clearer glimpse into who they really are and how far, for all their experience in following him, they have managed not to come.

This occurring on the open sea, this transpiring between two solid shores (why, an experience of an "interim" sort!), is a moment where Jesus can show to them parts of themselves to which they don't ordinarily pay any attention. If they don't know or acknowledge those undeveloped, unflattering aspects to self, there will be no

corresponding growth. One has to know that there is a problem and where that problem is before any correction can be made. Therefore, totally ignoring their ridiculous question as to whether he cares or not about their perishing, he pointedly asks back, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

These are a powerful nine words, surely the climactic heart to the story. Such questions show an understanding that the opposite of faith, as we might commonly think, is not disbelief or doubt; the opposite of faith is fear. To walk the path of faith is to proceed without the undue influence of fear.

Fear is part of the world of the child, who in many ways truly is helpless, since there is so little personal experience on which to draw in responding to extraordinary circumstances with confidence and competency. It’s sad, though, that we can drag so much of that sense of helplessness far into our adult years, as is evident in our insecurities and resistance--which is what we see in the acting-out on the parts of those unhinged sailors.

To walk the path of faith is to feel the fear, but to go on walking anyhow. Faith is not letting fear dictate or prevail. When the winds blow, faith is the remaining at one’s post, confident-enough in one’s abilities and experience, resolved to doing one’s best, trusting securely that, in one way or another, God is there, too.

--Jesus’ invitation at the outset of this tale is a perennial one. Though innocent-sounding enough, it sets up the whole teachable moment. “Let us go across to the other side,” he encourages them (and therefore he encourages us). That is to say, “Let us leave this safe, secure, predictable shore where we presently stand, and let us move out, let us move on, let us move ahead.”

In doing so, before arriving in time at the next solid shore, we can know to expect a certain fluidity in our experience, a rougher and somewhat unnerving time of ambiguity and uncertainty, which also happens to be an auspicious time of reorienting and renewing. And we can expect there to encounter fear, fear that will push to the wall the back of every engaged person--fear of the unknown, fear of challenge, fear of change--fear that is confronted by the trusting that there, too, is our God, who, though at times noticeably quiet, never, ever sleeps.

Let it not be lost on us that, in both Hebrew (*ruah*) and in Greek (*pneuma*), the word that is translated as “wind” can also be accurately rendered as “spirit.” And doesn’t that put a spin on this old tale? In other words, at the symbolical level, it is not concerned about the cyclonic or the monsoonal but about the spiritual.

Given the nature of God’s Spirit, periodically, we can expect to have the winds begin to blow. When the winds start to howl about our ears, disrupting, disturbing, disorienting, there is likely a teachable moment at hand.

How else, but through such moments that test us so strenuously, will we ever deepen and develop further into the persons, into the people, that we can be?

How else, save when the winds begin to stir, shall we ever grow on and grow up?

So, yes, let us go across to the other side. Shall we? Let us go.