My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

There’s a close connection between Jesus’ parables and his miracles, isn’t there? The miracles make plain the parables, and the parables help us understand what the miracles mean. So in our series of transformations in Mark 4, there is a close link between the parables earlier in the chapter and the events of this week’s reading. The journey on the Sea of Galilee takes place “on that day,” with Jesus and his disciples in “the boat”—meaning the same day and the same boat from which he delivered the parable of the sower.

Last week’s parable of the growing seed is one of many parables of absence. The sower leaves the seed and goes away “to sleep and rise day and night.” He does not intervene again until the proper time, “when the grain is ripe.” In this week’s story, Jesus acts out what he said in the parable. He has sown in the disciples the seed of faith. Now he takes a boat with them and, as in the parable, goes to sleep. Jesus’ sleep, like the sower’s, is a sign of trust in God.

While Jesus sleeps and trusts, a storm breaks out, and the disciples fret and panic. Any of us who have been in a storm on a large body of water or on the ocean know how this is. In a storm on a big lake or sea, Hollywood movies are quite correct when they give us waves twice as high as a little boat trying to make it back to shore, winds howling and squalling. A storm makes us think a modern boat, much less a lightly constructed little wooden boat of ancient times, will break up at any moment. And yet they never quite do. Have you ever thought what a boat represents in the New Testament?

Boats are an allegory for the church and keeping God’s will for the people. If we travel to the middle of the U.S. where I’m from, we’ll notice most churches are constructed like upside-down arks—long center beams, curved inside buttresses that flank the aisles, and all of this in elegant exposed wood. Boats are supposed to keep us safe from even the greatest of floods.

But back to our storm. We’re fretting and on the verge of panic. This is quite a normal reaction, as any of us who have found ourselves in peril know. This is what we do even in less dramatic cases, as when something that is to occur the next day keeps us awake all night. We know there is not much we can do about it in the middle of the night, and yet we fret. We find it difficult to be like that sower who simply goes to sleep while he waits for the seed to grow, or the master who sleeps in the middle of the storm. We want to solve it—and we want God to solve it—right now.

Think about it…while the disciples struggle to keep the boat afloat, their master sleeps. This seems to make their situation even more desperate. Apparently he has forgotten about them, is paying no attention to the storm, and does not care whether the boat sinks or floats. God seems not just far away, but absent, just like the bridegroom who is late and they don’t know where he is and when, or if, he will show. He’s just not here.

Finally they awaken Jesus. The absent master is now with them. He rebukes the wind and orders the sea to be still, and the storm abates. But if a moment before they were awed by the storm, now they are even more awed, asking who is this one whom even the wind and the sea obey. Maybe they just wanted help with the rigging. And they got so much more than they wanted.

If we read this with the earlier parables in mind, we begin to see connections. The mustard seed, the smallest and the least remarkable of seeds, becomes a huge bush, the largest in the garden, that can even give shelter to the birds. This transformation is a parable of reversal, of that new order which Jesus calls the reign of God, where the least will be great and the first shall be last. In a way the story of the storm at sea is a story of transformation and reversal as well. At the beginning of chapter 4, in order to be heard by the large crowd Jesus has to get into a boat, apparently so his voice will carry. Now, in the same boat, the same day, the voice of Jesus is powerful enough to silence the wind and calm the sea.

But notice the text does not actually say that his voice is particularly loud. But it certainly is powerful! A mild, smaller manner may command great deeds here. The mustard seed has become a large bush. The voice that had difficulty making itself heard now has the power to calm the fury of the elements.

But then that same voice that rebuked the wind and calmed the sea addresses the disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

This sounds like an unfair criticism. Most of us would fear just as the disciples did—no matter how much faith we have. And if we’re honest with ourselves, it probably takes much less than a storm at sea to make us afraid. We fear failure, loneliness, losing control, disease, and death. It’s human nature, right? Basically, we fear fear.

So Jesus’ words to his disciples—“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”—also address us. They don’t need the dire circumstances of this story to speak to us. Even in some of the smallest actions and the most common situations of daily life, we’re afraid. We wonder what will happen. And whatever the problem might be, we are convinced that we must solve it now, mostly because we feel the fear rising in us and we need to get that emotion out of us as soon as possible, right?

We cannot wait for the seed to mature. We cry urgently to a God who seems to be asleep. God is absent, and the boat is about to sink. We cannot wait to see the seed bear fruit, and bear the sower who simply lets it be.

And yet it is at this point that faith is most needed. The disciples do not need faith after seeing the miracle. They need it while the ship is floundering. We tend to think that miracles produce faith, or that they are God’s response to great faith. Either may be true. But true faith leads to trust even when there are no miracles in sight.

Could it be that sometimes we are given miracles because otherwise our weak faith would not trust?

Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

God is near and here. We trust and know that. But when our hearts are pierced by fear, particularly that which threatens our mortality or those of friends and loved ones, we are first to ask, “Where is God, now?” as days and weeks test our endurance of hope. And yet, we do not always see the miracle around us, happening right before our eyes. Others who help us through. Who ask of themselves what is important. Who begin to care more about their near and dear ones as a result of our illness and struggle. God can create, through the trauma, new beginnings and stirrings that would never have happened.

Now that’s not to say that we don’t hope and pray for recovery for the persons who are suffering. But new life can be born when we ask the essential and existential questions of life and death.

So we wonder if the disciples came to new realizations and understandings as a result of their near-death experience on the Sea of Galilee. We wonder if they faced their fears differently after this event. But mostly, we should wonder how we face our fears each day, and whether we are patient enough to let God’s hope and love show itself in more amazing ways than we can ever conceive. What do you think? How do you face your fears? On this bright sunny day, is there a storm in your heart?

Peace be with you, friends, for God is near and here. Asleep or awake, God is here. Thanks be to God, Amen.