

<i>Date Preached</i>	20-Jun-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	08-June-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Proper 7, Yr B

" O Lord, You never fail to help and govern those  
whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness "



What is the most afraid that you have ever been? Personally, I've had my fair share of close calls while driving on the highway, and once, in high school, when my car broke down and I rang a friend's doorbell at three AM hoping for a lift home, I found myself staring down the barrel of his father's shotgun. But the single scariest moment of my life came on the Greek island of Samos, during a glee club tour in college. My friends and I had all decided to buzz around the island on mopeds, but, it turned out, there was one less moped than there were of us. Because I knew how to drive a manual transmission, I volunteered to take a Vespa instead. *Big mistake:* While I knew how to use a clutch, I *wasn't* used to operating it with my hand. Furthermore, while my left hand was supposed to be working the transmission, my right hand had to work the throttle. But I kept getting them mixed up.

About an hour into our ride, we were spiraling up some giant hill. The far edge of the road was essentially a cliff: It dropped straight down into the valley far below—no guardrail. I took a curve too fast; started heading for the edge; and still bungling the clutch and the throttle, I could not stop. I somehow managed to throw the bike into neutral and ram my feet to the ground, in a desperate attempt to keep from hurling myself out into the valley void. I stopped, thank God ... but with the front wheel of the Vespa dangling over the edge of the cliff, and the toes of my shoes dug into the hillside gravel with every sinew I could muster. I hung there—poised in space, like Wile E Coyote in the cartoons—for what seemed like several seconds, until I finally managed to roll myself back from the precipice and started to breathe again. Needless to say, I putt-putted the Vespa back to the rental shop and spent the rest of the day, alone, on the beach. But the image of that Vespa's front wheel jutting out over the valley has never left me.

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I tell this story of utter existential fear—of the feeling that this might be 'it'—because I'm sure that's what the disciples were going through in the story we hear this morning from St Mark. Jesus has suggested sailing across the Sea of Galilee. No sooner does everyone say "yes" than up blows the storm-of-the-century: tornadic winds,<sup>1</sup> pounding rain, and crashing waves, united in a concerted threat to drive the boat to the bottom of the sea. The disciples literally fear for their lives.

And where is Jesus? At the bow of the small boat in fervent prayer? At the gunwale, bailing? Or, at least, huddled in solidarity with the twelve, amid-ship? No. Jesus is by Himself, in the stern, fast asleep on a cushion.<sup>2</sup> He has taken the disciples from their homes and their

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<sup>1</sup> See Donahue and Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: Gospel of Mark*, p 158.

<sup>2</sup> This is probably not as comfy-cozy as it sounds to us. He is probably sleeping on a rough sack fisherman used to grab a few winks or perhaps a bag of sand used for ballast. *Id.*

comfortable lives; He has plunged them into a chaos of thronging crowds, longing to see and hear and touch Him, and of hateful religious authorities, longing to be rid of Him; and now He has placed them in mortal peril—the Vespa's wheel suspended in mid-air over the valley below—and He can't even *wake up*? The disciples must be incredulous: "What combination of oblivious, foolhardy and/or cold-hearted must this Man be?"

And this is the classical—the customary—interpretation of this passage from Mark: it is something of an epiphany, as the disciples come to see that Jesus isn't merely a wise teacher or a skilled healer—plenty of other people running around Galilee have seemingly similar gifts. No, His effortless calming of a sea cyclone belies powers no mere human could possibly possess: Jesus, they now see, is *truly divine*.

Now, as modern readers of the Gospel who already know and believe in Jesus, for us, His ability to still the raging storm is not news. But we *do*, I think, share the disciples' disbelief at the other, equally incredible aspect of this story: Jesus' sleeping peacefully as their lives teeter on the brink of death. For us, as for the disciples, Jesus' entirely un-human<sup>3</sup> reaction to the sudden maelstrom offers deep, reassuring insight into God's gracious and abiding presence with us:

- Jesus sleeps through the raging tempest not because He's oblivious, but because He's greater than any danger or risk this world can pose. He is *Above-all* ... and with Him, so are we.
- He remains impassive as we become unhinged because He is our Savior not from the transient dangers, griefs and illnesses of this world, but from the eternal condemnation born of human sin. He is *Everlasting* ... and with Him, so are we.
- He rests quietly while we crash about, shouting at the top of our lungs (if heard only by ourselves), because His fixity is not so much an example for us to follow ... as our sure refuge when we finally (and inevitably) exhaust ourselves. When, at last, we collapse from our own, futile efforts, we find Him right there where He's always been, abiding with us. He is *Sacred Stillness* ... and with Him, so are we.

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In the collect appointed for today, we praise God for never failing to "help and govern" those whom God loves. The eighth century Latin source for this collect uses distinctly nautical words here: You, O God, never cease steering or piloting the ship of those whom You have established in Your steadfast love.<sup>4</sup> God at the helm or the rudder of our very beings—how comforting a notion! Our pilot is lashed by the same storms ... of sickness or of desertion ... that we are, but will not leave the wheel of our lives. Our helmsman gets drenched and blown about ... by fear or rejection or hatred ... right along with us, but still steers us steadily ahead. Our tillerman is crumpled and crashed by the same cyclone ... of suffering, of grief, of resignation ... we are, but never wavers from the course and will, no matter what, bring us safely into port.

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<sup>3</sup> N.B. "Un-" and not "in-."

<sup>4</sup> "... quia numquam tua gubernatione destituis quos in soliditate tuae dilectionis instituis." Gelasian Sacramentary no 586 (cited in Hatchett, *Commentary*, p 187). The association of this collect with today's sea-tossed gospel reading is abundantly apt.

With the disciples, we will, from time to time, gape and wonder why God seems asleep at the wheel while we founder in ceaseless churning seas of despair or failure or pain. But then we will come to understand, again: Jesus sleeps not in oblivion or ignorance, but because He knows we have *already* been rescued, from everything ... and for ever.



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