

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

“The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring cleaning his little home.” That’s the opening line of Kenneth Grahame’s book *Wind in the Willows*. “Spring was moving in the air above,” the story goes on, “and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing.”

Something above calls him up to the sun and air, and so Mole suddenly bolts out of the house and scrabbles up his tunnel until he pops out into the sunlight. He finds himself rolling in the warm grass of a great meadow. Exploring the meadow, Mole takes in the birds and the flowers and the breeze. It all seems too good to be true.

“He thought his happiness was complete,” the story continues, “when, as he meandered aimlessly along, suddenly he stood by the edge of a full-fed river. Never in his life had he seen a river before.”

The gurgling and sparkling water fascinates him. Sitting on the grass, Mole spies the Water Rat who comes across the river in a little blue boat, although Mole wasn’t exactly sure what it was. Rat invites Mole to come aboard.

“This has been a wonderful day!” says Mole. “I’ve never been in a boat before in all my life.”

“What?’ cried Rat. “Never been in a boat? What have you been doing?”

“Is it so nice as all that?” asked the Mole shyly.

“Nice? It’s the *only* thing,” said the Water Rat solemnly, as he leant forward for his stroke. “Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing* – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing,” he went on dreamily: messing – about – in – boats – messing – ”

“Look ahead, Rat!” cried the Mole suddenly.

It was too late. The boat struck the bank full tilt. The dreamer, the joyous oarsman, lay on his back at the bottom of the boat, his heels in the air.

“– about in boats – or *with* boats,” the Rat went on composedly, picking himself up with a pleasant laugh. “In or out of ‘em, it doesn’t matter. Nothing seems really to matter, that’s the charm of it. Whether you get away, or whether you don’t; whether you arrive at your destination or whether you reach somewhere else, or whether you never get anywhere at all, you’re always busy, and you never do anything in particular; and when you’ve done it, there’s always something else to do...”

“Look here! If you’ve really nothing else on hand this morning, supposing we drop down the river together, and have a long day of it?”

The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh of full contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. “*What* a day I’m having!” he said. “Let us start at once!”

The disciples in Mark’s Gospel this morning are having a somewhat *different* day on the water. To be fair, this group of mostly seasoned fishermen are not messing about in their boat. And instead of bumping into a river bank on a sunny spring day, they are caught in a life-threatening squall.

In the minds of ancient Palestinians, wind and sea whipped up together symbolized chaos and disorder. Jewish and Greco-Roman mythology said that the wind and sea were controlled by gods or monsters, spirits or demons.

Just so, Jesus speaks to the chaos and disorder with the same words he used earlier in Mark’s Gospel to silence a demon. Our translation, “Peace! Be still!” sanitizes his language. Mark’s Greek is somewhat stronger – something more like: “Wind and waves, muzzle yourselves. Shut up!”

In response, the wind “grows weary” and the great *storm* relaxes into a great *calm*. Then Jesus turns to his followers and asks: “Why are you so afraid?” Surely, Jesus knows the answer. And so, the more intriguing question is: “How is it that you do not have faith?” Given all that Jesus has done, he may well be wondering what he has to do to finally get through to them: “How is it that you cannot see who I am?”

Since his baptism in the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has faced down Satan in the desert, cured a Jewish man possessed

by a demon, restored Peter's mother-in-law and a leper and a paralyzed man and a man with a withered hand and finally liberated a Gentile possessed by a legion of demons – all of which has so far earned him an increasing number of people who want *more* from him as well as an increasing number of religious and political people who would prefer that he did substantially *less*.

And now, having just silenced a potentially fatal windstorm, Jesus finds himself asking his closest followers: “Why are you so afraid? How is it that you do not have faith?”

The disciples have become accustomed to Jesus performing miracles. In fact, first century Palestinians had far more flexible notions about how nature works than we do and were accustomed to stories about people's extraordinary deeds. For them, phenomenal stories about Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha were evidence of God's presence.

What's more, in the ancient world a man expressing fear publicly was intensely shameful. And yet, the disciples *were* afraid. The Greek emphasizes that they were *enormously* afraid. In the face of the unknown, whether it involves challenging or threatening events or people, even the strongest of us can lose composure.

And so it seems to me that we drag an ancient and unwarranted shame into our interpretation of this Gospel if we imagine that Jesus is chastising or scolding these men. What if, instead, Jesus is *not* barking at his followers like a drill sergeant as if to say, “Snap out of it. Grow up.” What if there is more compassion and love in this story?

Mole and Rat's adventure in *Wind in the Willows* is part of a beautiful tale that we tell children. Rat is full of joy and life, and Mole is ready for adventure. I marvel that, as adults, we don't tell ourselves *this* gorgeous story about Jesus, the embodiment of joy and life. Jesus is a compassionate and highly skilled teacher, and he knows what his followers are afraid of and why.

If we will let ourselves imagine Jesus more like we picture the Water Rat, full of composure and enthusiasm, we may hear Jesus opening a moment for his followers to notice and name what they are afraid of. “Why are you so afraid?”

And then following that moment with an opportunity to notice – really *notice* – and maybe for the first time, *who* is in the boat with them. “How is it that you do not have faith?”

Eventually, at some point in our spiritual maturing, something similar to Mole's story happens to us – something moves in the air

above, and in the earth below and around us, penetrating our houses with a spirit of divine discontent and longing. Something calls us up to the sun and air; making us more aware of the God who loves us into being and who is closer than our own breath.

The disciples have seen a number and variety of miracles and yet they are still afraid. “Teacher,” they cry, “does it not matter to you that we are perishing?” Jesus answered their question by tranquilizing the storm.

The miracle reveals power that, as far as his followers know, belongs only to God the Creator. And so they are afraid nearly to the point of hysteria. “Who then is this man,” they ask, “that even the wind and the sea obey him.”

They are not questioning his identity, you see. No, they are deeply troubled about where Jesus stands in the hierarchy of power. They are extremely agitated about the source of his power.

The problem with miracles, you see, is that, while they are great for provoking awe and worship, they don’t do much to encourage us to integrate, embody and enact the stunning power of the love of Christ in our own lives.

There are four words in the earliest Greek manuscripts of Christian scripture that in English mean: “wonders,” “works,” “powers” or “signs.” The word “miracle” shows up only in modern paraphrase translations of the Bible. The four Greek words all refer to evidence or moments of God’s heavenly realm drawing near to us.

Jesus didn’t muzzle the storm to teach us that, if we just believe hard enough, God will act to relieve whatever chaos we are in. He did not calm the sea to show us that, if we have *just enough* faith, life’s hardships will go away.

We are right to pray for miracles and sometimes astounding things do happen – events that defy science and reason. It’s just that miracles are not the main point. Our relationship with Christ is what liberates us to trust God’s unquenchable love for us and all creation.

Whether we choose to embrace life full on or choose to live buried away from the world in isolation, we *all of us* will encounter tempestuous seas. We will all experience life-threatening dangers and some of us will even meet withering hatred. We can face them all together, caring for each other. Like Mole and Rat!

We always venture out into seas – calm *or* stormy – in a boat with Christ, the perfect manifestation of the love of God. Christ, the joyous, who thinks there is absolutely nothing half so much worth

doing as simply being alive here with us in *this* little boat, St. Elizabeth.

“What a day we are having! Let us start at once!”

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