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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Third Sunday After Pentecost
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Psalm 9.9-20
Mark 4.35-41

The Church In Troubled Times

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” — Mark 4.37

Last Sunday I had the pleasure of preaching at Christ’s Community Church, UCC, in Chicopee. I had a delightful time. Since it was Father’s Day, they decided not to have coffee hour. Consequently, I was out of church before 11:30. My normal routine here at First Church rarely gets me out of the building before one or two o’clock. I decided to stop at the Big Y on the way home to pick up a few things for lunch. You can’t believe how many people were there! (said with mock disbelief) This left me wondering...how did all of these people get home from church so quickly, get changed, and get out to the grocery store by 11:30?

I guess I should know better, but it still comes as a bit of a shock to a sheltered preacher boy. Not everyone is going to church on Sunday mornings. In fact, most people aren’t going to church. Inter-religious differences aside, many of our society’s nominal Christians have decided to spend Sunday mornings grocery shopping, washing the SUV, mowing the lawn, or (the alternate activity that I’d find most tempting) drinking coffee and reading the *New York Times*.

I should have seen it coming. Growing up in Seattle, this cultural drift was already well underway in my childhood. The Pacific Northwest is now referred to by sociologists of religion as the “None Zone,” because it is the one region of the country where the majority of people answer “none” on surveys of religious preference. But all of these prominent New England churches in the center of town tend to give the illusion of a more churched culture. And yet buildings alone won’t be enough if everyone decides that they’d rather spend their time on a bike ride or at Starbuck’s.

My shocking re-introduction to secularism was amplified this week when a *Wall Street Journal* feature article reminded me of Philip Larkin’s classic poem from the 1950’s, “Church Going.” The poem pictures someone riding his bicycle through the English countryside and cautiously entering an empty church:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.

The cyclist walks around the church in the “awkward reverence” of someone on alien turf. He’s not that impressed:

I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,

Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

But then, as he rides on, he wonders:

When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Those are tough lines to read, for someone in my business. To be sure, my America is different from Larkin's Europe, and things are still bustling pretty nicely here at First Church. But nothing can be taken for granted, church-wise, in these times. In the past year, I've come home sad from many a clergy gathering as I've listened to heart wrenching stories of institutional decline: budgets declining, endowments eroding, buildings becoming burdensome or being sold, recently vibrant congregations considering mergers to buy a few more years of survival.

In this melancholy frame of mind, I find it easy to identify with the panicked disciples in today's gospel lesson. They are out in a boat, the seas get dangerously rough, and Jesus is sound asleep. They cry out, "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" There is so much feeling in that short sentence—fear, abandonment, urgency, anger. No serious church person today can escape some mix of these emotions. As I looked up other translations of the verse, a little litany took shape in my head:

Mainline church membership declining for decades...

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? (NRSV)

Beloved colleagues leaving the ministry for other vocations... *Teacher, don't you care if we
drown? (NIV)*

Massachusetts Conference UCC cutting budget by \$200,000...

Teacher, is it nothing to you that we are going down? (Message)

Neighbors who once joined us in the pews now search elsewhere for meaning and community...

Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die? (Good News)

We know how those disciples felt, don't we? Jesus drags us out from the firm and familiar feel of dry land into stormy seas with nothing but leaky boats. And then he has the nerve to fall asleep and let us fend for ourselves?!

We've been talking a lot in our church leadership about what it means to be a Christian congregation in a new era—call it post-Christendom or post-Modern, or post-whatever-you-like. Simply put, things ain't like they used to be back when we had two full services, over a hundred kids in the youth group, and the “Meadow-Weds” and “Middlers” filling Bailey Hall for regular fellowship. (If you don't know what I'm talking about, don't worry. I don't either, really.) There was a stability and perceived constancy to the life of our church back in the 1950's, and though many people in this room remember it, and maybe long for its return, it is most certainly gone. We've left that dry land and now we are out at sea. An, moreover, we don't know where we're headed. (I once heard Diana Butler Bass describe post-modernity as a world where the street names change every day and there are no maps.)

So, we can relate to the disoriented disciples: *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?* What did Jesus have to say to them? What might he have to say to us? An *apology*, might be nice. Or at least a little sympathy. But instead the tone of his response is more akin to an angry parent driving the noisy family station wagon to the Grand Canyon: “Don't make me pull this car over!” 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.⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Mark is sparing with details, but I like the little one he throws in here: “and there was a dead calm.” Even though the meteorological storm has ended, this calm precedes a theological storm. Jesus lets us have it. *The Message* version puts an especially good point on it: “Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?”

Well, so much for wallowing in the mud of our difficult predicament in post-modernity. Sure, these are hard times, but Jesus has—since the very beginning—been pulling his followers off of safe land into rough waters of mission and growth. Being comfortable and stable has never been the church's calling, and times of such comfort have always given way to times of institutional turmoil and, ultimately, renewal. As Stanley Hauerwas, Duke theologian and well-known cusser once aptly put it, “God is killing the church in America. And we God damn well deserve it.” (He's not ordained, so he can get away with talking like that!)

The mistake the disciples made is the same mistake we make. They assumed that the *setting* for mission and ministry would always remain the same—dry land, traveling from city to city. But Jesus pulls a change up—this time we're taking a boat! If your faith is real, it will work just as well on the water as it does on land. If *our* faith is real, it will be just as strong in an era of cultural challenge as it was in an era of cultural embrace. Chances are it will even grow stronger. It will have to. We may even be freed up by the realization that that we are not thriving, growing, flourishing, pulled-together people. This may just be God's way of creating space in our lives for the understanding that we need the presence and love of Jesus.

The new questions that await us on the other shore may not be as distant from the old answers as we think. Has the human need for meaning and renewal disappeared since the 1950's? Do people now struggle less or worry less? Has our affluence solved all of our spiritual problems? Not likely. Even Larkin's secular cyclist knows that something still matters in the old church:

A serious house on serious earth it is...
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground...

Gone is the day when First Church memberships are practically doled out by the Welcome Wagon or distributed with employment papers at Mass Mutual. The grocery stores aren't going to start closing on Sundays anytime soon. But the surprising hunger to "be more serious" will always bring some people who at least want to take a look in here, to "gravitate to this ground," to see what is happening.

Jesus—a bit grumpy having been abruptly awakened from his restful nap—is calling us to new ministries in a new time. We have the faith. We've been taught it, or we can learn it anew. But we have to take hold of it, to trust it in this new place.