

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 4th Sunday After Pentecost, June 21, 2015

The Presence of Jesus

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

June 21, 2015

Mark 4:35-41

I have been actively involved in youth work for over 60 years since I was a Boy Scout back in the 1940's and in that time have quite often conducted or participated in church services at youth camps and events, and periodically at churches in various towns and cities. For the past five years I have served as chaplain at Camp Bud Schiele down in Rutherford County and will be serving there again this summer. I conduct a vesper service there every Wednesday night during the summer. This morning I want to share with you a message that I have used at the camp for the youth and their leaders. I thought that this message would be particularly appropriate for Father's Day.

Often in youth camps, activities center around a lake and also, as occurred in the scripture passage I read from Mark, storms do come up sometimes causing fear but most often just causing inconvenience and resulting in a bit of discomfort. I well recall one such day when a storm did come up during an event at a very disrupting time. It wasn't a situation of fear as in our scripture reading but it was preventing us from conducting the activities which everyone had been looking forward to for days.

I looked up to the sky and quietly prayed, "Please Lord stop the rain at least for a short while." Almost instantly, the rain stopped and the sky cleared for long enough to complete the activities which were planned for that afternoon. The rains returned later but were not a problem. Did God hear my brief prayer or was that just coincidence? I find it hard to believe that it was a coincidence.

Picture that day about 2000 years ago when Jesus and his disciples were in that boat on the Sea of Galilee. It really is a misnomer to call it the Sea of Galilee by the way. It isn't a sea. It is much smaller. In fact, scripture refers to it as a lake. It isn't much larger than many lakes which we visit and enjoy every year. On that day, the disciples became terrified when the storm came up and threatened to swamp their small boat. Jesus calmed that storm in a moment and said to the disciples "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

My message today is an adaption of a story in *The Presence of Jesus* by Leslie Weatherhead (Abington Press, New York & Nashville). Weatherhead in fact adapted the story from another author. He was not even sure who the original author was but he thought that it was the late Dr. H. R. L. Sheppard, an Anglican priest and the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral from 1929-1931. It is a powerful story which I am pleased to share with you.

When I graduated as a commissioned lay pastor I was honored to be asked to give the sermon at the graduation worship service of my class. This is the same message that I gave at that time.

That said, let us think back to that day when Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Close your eyes and imagine the end of that day. It is evening and you are there, standing on the shore. The Sea of Galilee lies before your eyes.

In the west the splendid scarlets and golds have faded. It is the moment of daffodil and pale green sky. To your left, mountains run down steeply to the sea. You look up and see Jesus climbing up a spur of one of these mountains, seeking quietude in the bosom of the hills and in the hush of night; seeking to push back the tumultuous demands of all there is to do, to make a silence in which the soul can breathe, to pray. You can see his figure outlined for a moment against the fading light of that last glow of evening. But in the east, clouds have gathered; clouds that mean the storm is returning. Rank upon rank ... they sweep westward. The water of the lake turns from amber to steel. The wind ... strikes chill and cold, menacing almost. Then comes the swish of the rain. Jesus hears it long before it reaches him. He sees in front of him a shepherd's hut on the hillside. He makes for it to avoid the discomfort of a soaking, lights the single lamp he finds within, and kneels to pray.

Now imagine that you are on that mountain too. The storm is on you. You see a light shining from the window of the hut. Panting and disheveled, you rush up to it, seeking shelter. Glancing through the window, you see who is there, and you turn away. Shelter or no shelter, you feel you cannot intrude on his seclusion. But he has heard you. He rises, flings open the door. For you there is his smile, his word of welcome. Then the door closes. Just you and Jesus, Jesus and you.

I will not try and imagine what he would say to you...I know, I think, some of the things he would say to me...and you know some of the things he would say to you. But if he said nothing, his presence would say everything. I think at first you would lift your eyes to his. Then somehow you would drop them. It is hard to look into eyes that search the uttermost secret you have guarded from the world so long. Yet, if it be hard to look at him, it is harder not to look at him. After a while you would look again into those dark, clear, steady, quiet eyes, and find them not only searching but shining; shining, not with any light regard for sin, but with a compassion that goes below the sin to the pure desire beneath. And in eyes that are the homes of all your dreams you would see the answers to all your prayers. You would *know* that he believed in you. A tremendous confidence would drive away all your fears and possess your whole being. Just because you could never believe a faith in you like his, a new faith in yourself would be born forthwith, and you would know yourself to be prepared for anything.

Now the storm has passed. It is long after midnight, but you do not care. He sees you a little way on your path homeward. Then he turns back to pray. You have half a thought to go back with him. The thought of parting seems for a moment more than you can bear. Then you feel that you *can never* really be parted from him, though he goes his way and you yours until the end of the earth. Something marvelous has happened. He is still with you. He hasn't gone back after all. He is dwelling within you. There has been a new birth. He will express himself through you. It is as though you had gained him forever...You are not just "you" any longer. You have become a self whose highest joy and truest life will forever be to express Jesus, and bring to others the wealth and beauty he has brought to you.

The wind is hushed now. A crescent moon sails quietly through the last ranks of the storm cloud. Here and there a star...You stride back to your job again on feet that scarcely touch the mountain turf; back to a life that can never, never be the same again. For in your heart there is an inward strength, an exultant radiance...an outgoing love, and an ineffable peace. They do not belong to this world and *nothing* in this world can destroy them.

"Ah," you say, "but this is imagination." The hut, the light, the mountain, yes. But not the Presence. Unless the New Testament is a lie, then this experience is for

you...look and listen and you will see and hear. "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ"...think quietly of him. He is nearer to you than any figure of speech can describe. He will know what to do with you. He will tell you where to begin *now*. And you will go back to a life that has become quite different because you have been with Jesus. You will find him everywhere, both within and without. And for you the whole earth will be full of his glory.

Alleluia. Amen.

Note: All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.