

Other boats

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There is a puzzling and disturbing detail in Mark's account of the storm at sea, one we often do not even notice. In verse 36, we are told that when Jesus heads across the sea with his disciples, "other boats were with him."

We often imagine a lone boat in the middle of the storm. But the picture the text draws includes other boats--presumably also in the storm, and presumably also in danger of sinking. And yet neither the disciples nor Mark seem at all concerned about them.

This is very different from what we know of the early church, where prayers included not only believers near and far but also the surrounding society's people and even the emperor himself, who might be *persecuting* the church. The church saw itself as the priestly people of God, whose mission included calling on God for the entire world. In worship, the all-important "prayers of the saints" reflected this vision.

The vision has often been lost. A church might pray only for itself and its members, and perhaps occasionally for those involved in major disasters. But we are seldom told that we are gathered in order to pray for the world. We hear that we gather to worship God and to hear the Word of God--but not that we gather to pray for all of God's creation and to seek its peace and justice. Yet according to the Word of God, this is *part* of the worship of God!

The calming of the sea brings to mind the image of the church as a ship of salvation. The world around us is in turmoil, and fleeing its dangers we cling to this ship, which is particularly blessed and protected by God--just as the boat in which the disciples travel is blessed and protected by Jesus.

What we forget is that we believe in a God who so loved *the world*. We can presume that Jesus loves not only the disciples with him in the boat but also all those others in the other boats in the same storm. And when he silences the wind and calms the sea, he saves everyone caught in the storm. This reminds me of the episode in Genesis 18 where God agrees to forgive an entire wicked city for the sake of ten who are not. One might even say that by merely being there, and being part of the storm with the others, the disciples are instrumental in the survival of those others.

Perhaps this is a paradigm that points to an often forgotten dimension of the church's mission. Could it be that this priestly people of God, by the mere act of existing in the midst of a tumultuous world and calling upon God's love and saving power, is also working for the hope and salvation of that world?