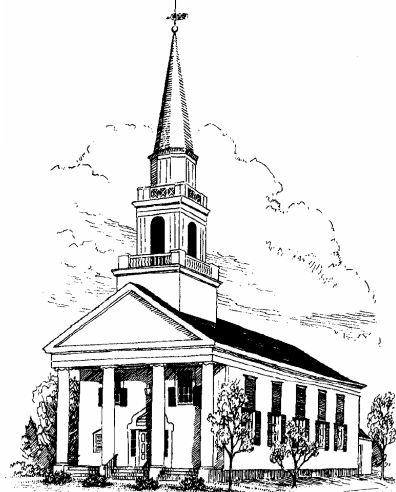


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 21, 2009
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“Who Is Jesus, Continued”

Scriptures:
Job 38:1-11
Mark 4:35-41



Deadlines seem to rule the world. Probably the most famous, or maybe infamous, deadline in our country is April 15, income tax day. But there are lots of others: grantmakers set deadlines for submission of proposals, Registries of Motor Vehicles set deadlines for license renewals and automobile registrations, publications set deadlines for submission of articles, including our own church newsletter.

I thought about the word “deadline” and realized for the first time this week that it had the word “dead” in it. So I looked up *deadline* in my beloved unabridged dictionary and found first the usual definition that we’re used to—the latest time for finishing or submitting something—and I found also the former definition which originated in the 1850s, which was: *a boundary around a military prison beyond which a prisoner could not venture without risk of being shot by the guards. A deadline.*

Many of you know that in the years previous to my entering seminary I worked in the area of health care reform. At one time I worked as a member of a team of health policy analysts in a state agency charged with generating information for the public from the data we stored about hospitals. At the time this was a brand-new use of these data. We had figured out we could glean a lot of comparative hospital information out of these data—comparative hospital costs, the rate of certain surgical procedures, the rate of hospitalizations which had been preventable – it was an exciting time in health care information circles, but scary and risky, too. It was scary and risky because all the hospitals in the state were included and our analysis could and sometimes did point up that the big, respected hospitals just might have a little improving to do, too. And our reports had deadlines, deadlines for publication. Sometimes the deadline came from the office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Sometimes the deadline came from the Attorney General’s office. But most of the time we set our own deadlines internally.

Several departments had to collaborate with each other to complete the report, but one department was the last stop, the Communications Department, which had charge of the printing, assembling and final release of the report. There were lots of other teams within our agency who funneled their publications through that one Communications department, so we all had to make sure our own individual projects wouldn’t get held up there and miss the final pub-

lic release deadline.

So, invariably, towards the last few weeks before the publication deadline, panic would begin to set in because Communications was always out straight. Our contact there was Heather. It would start with one of us on the team e-mailing Heather inquiring about the status of our project. We would be assured that it was in the queue with everyone else's. Several days would go by and then someone would telephone Heather to see how things were going. Then one of us might grab our project manager to contact Heather to add a little clout. Sometimes we would give her Godiva chocolates. As the days and weeks passed and the panic rose higher, Heather would somehow remain immune from our whirlwind of worry. She never worked through lunch. She left at 5:00 each night. Upstairs we would be pacing, drinking coffee, flipping and pointing at our calendars, checking our watches, frantically e-mailing, calling, until I remember one day our panic reached the point of full-blown frenzy. Four of us, including our manager, marched downstairs to Heather's cubicle spouting and spitting our doubts and fears and confronted Heather right there about our looming deadline and our great fear of missing it. Heather calmly looked up from her computer, leveled her eyes upon us, smiled sweetly and said, "Is anyone going to die?"

With that one reality check from Heather, you could almost hear the sound of panic deflation, like a giant balloon letting out its air all over the office. Well, no, no one was going to die if the report was a day late, or even a week late. Put in that context, it felt foolish to put all that energy into worrying about a *deadline*. None of us, nor anyone else, for that matter, was going to be shot if we ventured over that line.

Admittedly, though, conditions *are* becoming deadly for our disciples this morning as they hit the panic button. And we can imagine that a little bit of fear and concern had already set in earlier in the evening when Jesus said to them at the end of a day of teaching and preaching beside the sea, "Let us go across to the other side." The other side of the Sea of Galilee was foreign territory, unfamiliar, unknown, scary, maybe even risky, because it was the land of the Gentiles, home to a largely non-Jewish population. It is here that we get our first inkling in Mark's gospel of Jesus' radical inclusion, that Jesus' message will be for everyone, not just for the Jewish people on this side of the sea, but all will be included. So the disciples leave the crowd on the beach behind and take Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was.

So it's not enough that it's the end of the day, it's getting dark, and the disciples are a little nervous about the trip anyway, given the all-inclusive destination. Because then, wouldn't you know it, we read, "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." But Jesus "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?'" In Luke's version of this story, they say, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" It is only in Matthew's version that they actually say, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!," which may be the reason why, when we read this passage, we automatically think that the disciples are waking Jesus up to do something. But it may be that it's driving them crazy that he's sleeping through all of this.

Especially here in the gospel of Mark, which is remembered for its messianic secret throughout – the secret of who is this guy? Who is this Jesus? – we can interpret the disciples'

motivation for waking Jesus as something other than “do something!” Because at this point in the gospel of Mark, they don’t know that he can. They have witnessed a few exorcisms, some healings, but the true nature of Jesus has not yet dawned upon the disciples. Their waking him up to say to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” may be the same as, Teacher, how can you sleep through this? Teacher, how can you remain so calm, so impervious, so unruffled in the face of impending disaster? Teacher, how can you take your nap when we’re in a panic? Don’t you care?

“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.”

Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? Whoa. Who is this guy? Because we know of only one way that the wind and sea are controlled. Because we remember in our Hebrew scriptures Job’s hearing before God as a reminder to all of us just who orders the wind and the sea around. God answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: now wait just a minute – who’s daring to question me? I’m the one who does the questioning. Excuse me, where were you at the beginning of creation? Do you remember just “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?” And, hello-o, “When I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, ‘thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’? I am the Lord of wind and rain...”

If God created order out of the chaos of wind and sea, then who is *this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him? Who is this guy? Who is this Jesus?

Our translation this morning says the disciples were filled with great awe, but many scholars prefer the literal translation of the Greek phrase meaning “they were afraid with great fear” or they were “fearful with a great fear.” The King James version reads “they feared exceedingly.” How would *we* react in the face of this man Jesus rising from sleep in the back of the boat in the middle of a raging, life-threatening storm and simply saying “peace, be still” and everything stops? Would we be afraid? Today, knowing what we do know about Jesus, we might imagine a different reaction than fear – maybe cheering, or falling to our knees in thanksgiving, or heartily embracing him. Perhaps others among us, those not wishing to expose their lack of faith might say, oh yeah, I knew we’d be OK with you here with us in the boat, Jesus, I just forgot for a minute. I was about to lay down for a nap myself, really, just wanted to watch the waves...

The more important question is not how would we react on *that* boat, but how do we react today on our own boats? And I don’t mean literally as we cruise out of the marinas. I’m talking about our own lives, these vessels outfitted for the storms of economic disaster, or emotional upheaval, or the breaking away of family relationships, or the sinking of our children into deadly behaviors. How are we handling these dead lines which crisscross our lives, the ones that keep us frozen in fear, panicked in our hearts, that we might lose our jobs, not get into college, lose the house, fail the exam, be left for another, lose our health, lose our partner, be left alone and penniless with nowhere to go?

Jesus said: Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? Rev. Michael Lindvall of

Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City points out that Jesus' and all those angels' telling us not to be afraid is not the same thing as "there's nothing to be afraid of." Because there is. We have plenty to be afraid of. And it seems to get worse for us as time goes on. Yet, unlike the disciples on that boat, who wondered among themselves who this man might be that even the wind and the sea obey him, unlike them, we know who Jesus is. You would think that would be enough not to panic.

But we are not going to see Jesus arrive on Wall Street and say "be still" and restore our 401Ks and retirement portfolios. We will not see him wake up in Iran and yell "Peace" and have harmony restored. He will not show up to quiet the ugly arguments in the homes with stormy marital discord. But his divine promise and presence guarantee us that none of those things has the last word. Not cancer, not divorce, not even death—none of those has the ultimate power, only God. Job found that out.

Then, how do we proceed in faith? Where do we find Jesus? Frederick Buechner wrote: *Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going. Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can, call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us the way. ...when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we're done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, [we may] find him.*

Friends, whether we're fretting deadlines or death itself, may we remember that Jesus is right here in the boat with us. Peace. Be still. Amen.