

*Gary Harder, September 7, 2014*

**“Wild hope in a wild storm”**

Texts: Mark 4:35-38

Psalm 107: 23-32

Introduction: This summer marked one of the few times over the last 50 years that Lydia and I have not attended Mennonite Canada Assembly, held this year in Winnipeg. We are kind of “conference junkies”. We really enjoy these times of being together with folks, many of them our friends, from across Canada. But this summer we had too much other agenda – most of it very personal agenda. The assembly that we missed had a theme of “wild hope” – wild hope in the midst of storm and turmoil. Our personal agenda was the celebration of a wild hope.

Yes, we had our own wild hopes this summer, and our share of storm and turmoil. Our hopes were largely built around celebrating survival and joy and love through 50 years of being married to each other and dealing with a few of our own relational storms during those 50 years. We so deeply appreciated that two families from MFM could join us for our public celebration. We followed that public celebration with a four day retreat with our extended families – 23 of us – at the Riverstone Retreat Centre. No hint of any storms there. It was just a very relaxed, enjoyable connecting in with each other.

Our siblings and their spouses descended on us from across Canada. We were just a little bit anxious about the one couple who would stay the longest – two weeks. We disagree with each other about just about every topic we broach – especially politically and theologically. For example, they totally support Israel in its attack on Gaza – it is part of a fulfilment of Biblical prophecy, they say. The final battle of “Harmagedon” (a Hebrew name) will take place on Jewish soil (Rev. 16:16). Ever since the flowering of dispensationalism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this has been a popular part of Biblical prophecy. Hal Lindsey (The late great planet earth) and Tim LaHaye (The left behind series) have made it immensely popular in the evangelical world. (I suspect that Stephen Harper’s support of Israel is based on this same reading of Biblical prophecy). But I read the Book of Revelation primarily as John’s powerful challenge to persecuted Christians to resist Roman claims to divinity and almighty power, written in symbolic language the Romans could not decode but which the followers of Jesus could. I don’t look to the Book of Revelation for predictions of the future, even of

end times, though surely it has a powerful message of the ultimate victory of God's power of peace and love. And so my sister-in-law and I are at opposite ends of how we read the Bible on this issue.

She and my brother are deep fundamentalists who read the Bible far more literally than we do. And yet we love each other dearly. They are wonderful, compassionate, caring people. And we really, really enjoyed their long visit, agreeing to disagree in a loving way. Our disagreements didn't spoil our visit at all.

Mennonite Church Canada is struggling with this same political and theological diversity – especially now over the issue of same sex relationships. And again, the differences of conviction on this issue grow out of our different ways of reading the Bible. (I do not accept the premise that one side of the debate takes the Bible more seriously than does the other side. The two sides read the Bible differently). There is a lot of anxiety and fear over this “storm” of difference among us. Some churches, including my home church Rosemary Mennonite, have already left the conference over this issue.

The question asked at assembly was this: “How shall we maintain unity in Christ as congregations, area church or national church while understanding matters of same-sex relationships differently?” Will this storm blow us apart? Will our different ways of reading the Scriptures on this and other issues separate us? Will our fears defeat us? Or will we somehow find Jesus standing with us in the storm tossed boat calmly saying “Peace! Be still!”

There are storms all over the place.

- World changing political storms: We name only a few. Gaza. Ukraine. Iraq. Nigeria. Can increased violence and military interventions actually resolve these? Is increased violence always the answer? Does it really solve the underlying issues?
- National and provincial and civic political storms: We have survived provincial elections here in Quebec and in Ontario. But we in Toronto have an interesting mayoralty race going on right now. And Federally? My sister-in-law is a staunch Harper supporter. And I am staunchly, not. How do we navigate our strong differences of opinion on such things?

Church storms: That really is why Lydia and I are here at MFM. You have had some wild storms here at MFM. And so there has naturally been a lot of anxiety and fear, mixed with anger. Are we ready for some wild hope? Are we ready to hear that voice of Jesus saying: “Peace! Be still!”

And, no doubt, we have all experienced turmoil of one kind or another in our personal and family lives. Lydia and I have struggled this summer with a rather major family crisis. Amid a wild storm it is very hard to see any glimpses of hope at all, let alone a wild hope.

Fear is our common human story. And storms will always be with us. I want to pause here to ask each of you to name, only to yourself, your biggest fear right now.

#### Our text

The early church often used the image of a boat in their carvings. The church was a boat, often beset by wind and storm. In the caves where they sometimes hid are carvings of boats – and especially of Noah’s ark – a shelter in a time of storm. The early Christians were very attracted to our story from Mark 4, and the story of Paul’s shipwreck, and the story of Noah’s ark. These stories spoke directly to their situation. They saw themselves being in a very small boat in danger of being swamped by the brutal gales of both Roman and Jewish persecution. Let’s enter the story from Mark 4.

Jesus has been surrounded by large crowds. He is in a big time teaching mode. Parables are pouring out of him. Parables about what the Kingdom of God is like, like the parable of the sower and the seed, like the parable of the mustard seed. That section of Mark 4 ends with these words, “With many other parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it...”

“When evening had come he said to them (his disciples), ‘Let us go across to the other side (of the lake). And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.’”

There are a number of stories in the Gospels in which Jesus retreats, escapes from the crowds to find his own peace and renewal, and time for praying. Did he know what was about to happen on the lake?

“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...” The disciples are terrified, panic stricken, and Jesus is sleeping.

Let me take a bit of narrative licence here and insert a bit of narrative where there is none in the text.

Peter yells into the teeth of the storm, “Come on, you dolts, row harder, put your backs into it, maybe we can still make it to shore.” But Phillip screams,

“What’s the use of rowing when we are swamping in water. Bail it out. We’ve got to bail like mad. Grab every bucket and bail.” Thomas sees no hope in any of that. He whispers a terrified, “abandon ship, everyone jump out and swim for your lives. Maybe a few of us will reach land.”

And so it is that in Mennonite Church Canada, and in every church, we have many different voices, many of them panic stricken, each certain that their way is the only way to stave off shipwreck. Sometimes there is a sense of desperation there, almost a hopelessness, a grasping for the only life-line they can see at the moment.

Finally someone asks, “Where is Jesus?” Yes, where is Jesus? Why, he is sleeping on a cushion in the stern of the boat seemingly untroubled by the storm. “Teacher, do something, don’t you know that we are all 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?’”

Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? That challenges me. I was afraid this summer during our family crisis. I didn’t sleep so well then. I imagined all the worst scenarios. I didn’t know how to have the necessary conversations. I couldn’t see clear alternatives. I had a hard time seeing Jesus in the rocking boat.

When the church I was pastor of kind of imploded in conflict around the question of how to respond to the issue of homosexuality I felt broken, paralysed, afraid, fearing the worst. Who would abandon ship? Who would start bailing? Who would think that if we just worked harder our hard work would fix everything?

And the reality is that Jesus was already in the boat with us. Peace did come, not in an instant, but over time. And healing came. The boat is stronger now than then, tested and more resilient, as it sails into other headwinds and challenges as it embraces the future.

Can we hear Jesus asking us, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? After all you have seen me do, have you still no faith”?

The storm is stilled, the disciples calmed and awe-struck, and they do safely reach the other side – the country of the Garasenes, Gentile territory, not really a safe haven. And of course they sail right into some big personal storms – a man howling and mad, a dying synagogue leader’s daughter, a woman hemorrhaging blood for 12 years.

Wild hope in our world.

At the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly Betty Pries gave one of the main addresses. Many of you remember Betty from the work she did with you here at MFM. Betty talked about some of the fear and panic in much of the post-Christendom Church, including the Mennonite Church, and the anxiety attending our struggle around the issue of being a faithful church around the issue of sexuality.

She suggested that the Mennonite Church today needed to identify more with the state churches during the time of the Reformation. At that time Anabaptists were the radicals, the alternative church, the “New Way”. But we have become settled, and safe, and established, she said. Now we are a bit more like the state churches were then, she said.

She looked at how the Catholic Church responded to the outbreak of new thinking and reform, and the emergence of the radical Anabaptist movement.

- 1) One response, the official one, was one of defending the status quo, and attacking anything and anyone who threatened it. Defense, attack, persecution, desperately holding on to what was. The result of course was a gruesome persecution of those who challenged the church.
- 2) But there was a second Catholic response, she said. There was a counter-reformation. There were people, and groups, within the Catholic fold who really did look for a deeper spirituality. And for them there was a profound transformation. There was a renewal movement. There was change. There was a fuller surrendering to God. There were people looking to find Jesus in the center of that storm.

These two options are always there for the church, Betty suggested. The Mennonite Church today has much in common with the Catholic Church of the Reformation period, she said. We are quite established, and well thought of. In the face of the theological and biblical and cultural storms of change, (including the storm of knowing how to respond to issues of human sexuality) we have some options.

- 1) Defend and attack. Defend our positions fiercely and attack anyone who moves beyond our safe parameters. Stay entrenched. Claim that ours is the only faithful and only true Biblical position.
- 2) Risk spiritual renewal. Risk transformation. Risk engagement with the agitators. Risk surrendering to God in trust that God will do a new

thing. Risk exploring even things that frighten us. I think this is the only way that offers “wild hope”.

### Conclusion

We are in a boat. A sudden storm threatens us. We panic. And then we hear, “why are you so afraid?” And then we know that Jesus is always in the boat with us -in our national assembly boat, our church boat, our personal boat.

And then we see the rainbow, multi-coloured, spectacular, giving us a glimpse of wild hope.

Peace! Be still!