

# Stormy Weather

## Mark 4:35-41

Several years ago, a group of our church kids was on a roller coaster at *Hershey Park*. It must have been quite a ride. Apparently, a wig flew off the head of the lady right in front of my son, Caleb. The wig landed in his lap. His reflex was to be helpful. He tried to put back on her head. Joyce Arnold, who reported the story to me, suggested that he simply hand it to her.

The park has since added more roller coasters, each allegedly more exhilarating. A roller coaster is scary. Still, in the back of our minds, we know that it only provides a cheap thrill. There is no real expectation of peril, no sober contemplation of our mortality. It is, after all, just a ride.

Have you ever faced peril that you knew was more than just a cheap thrill? Perhaps, you have tasted combat. Perhaps, you were on a plane that had a mechanical failure at 30,000 feet. Maybe your experience was closer to the ground, but just as terrifying, such as the bad news you received from the doctor. I've never understood amusement parks and thrill rides. It seems to me that if we just live long enough, we are all likely to experience something that will shake us to the core.

One night on Lake Galilee, Jesus' disciples became quite shaken. This is because they were certain that they were at death's threshold. A storm had descended upon their little fishing vessel, and doom seemed imminent. But, this troublesome stage had to be set in order to demonstrate that their unusual Rabbi asleep in the back of the boat was, in fact, the Lord of all Creation.

### I. The Desperation of the Crew (verses 35-37)

<sup>35</sup>That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

<sup>36</sup>Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. <sup>37</sup>A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

#### A. Jesus Needed to Get Away

Jesus had been teaching a multitude gathered on the shore from a boat on the lake. There were just too many people for Him to sit among them. In Capernaum, crowds had swarmed Him. He had driven out many demons and had healed countless people of their diseases, almost on demand, but also from His own compassionate initiative. One day, a group of men could not get their sick friend to Jesus because of a crowd. They ripped a hole in the roof of the house where He was teaching and lowered the man into His presence. Jesus was so accommodating to the demands of the crowds that He missed meals. His family worried about His mental health.

Sitting out there on the lake at the end of the day, with another mob waiting on the beach, it seemed reasonable to suggest, "Let's get out of here for a while!" - "Let us go over to the other side." So, they left, "just as he was." None of them ran back to the house to change clothes or to pack. At their Master's bidding, and to their credit, the disciples set sail for the other side of the lake with Jesus, "just as he was." Jesus was so worn out that He nodded off very quickly.

## **B. The Disciples Were in Authentic Danger**

The Sea of Galilee is not a sea at all, but a fresh water lake. Also known as Gennesaret, the lake is 680 feet below sea level, which makes the air that hovers above it quite warm. But, the lake is also surrounded by mountains. As the higher, colder air descends from the mountains it is compressed in the ravines and gorges between the mountains. These create natural, powerful swirling systems that empty right onto the lake; mixing with the hotter climate and causing hurricane-like winds. Sudden storms that seem to come from nowhere still occur regularly on the Sea of Galilee. Compound such a storm with the night and the fact that the deep was linked in Jewish lore to the abode of demons. Tack onto that the fact that they were heading over to the pagan side of the lake. Would it not have been wiser to just let this little venture wait until morning?

Christians today, who have the advantage of knowing how such Bible stories turn out, can get a little pompous without really putting themselves in the shoes of these frightened disciples. Right alongside Jesus, we ask, "Where was their faith?" There is an old Navy adage that says: "If you can keep your head when all about you others are losing theirs, maybe you just don't understand the situation." These men were not panicking because they were spineless sissies. These men were seasoned fishermen. They knew this lake well. It was their professional judgment that they were going to die. They were in a degree of peril that most of us have never experienced. They were not overstating the crisis. The text clearly states that the boat was "nearly swamped."

Jesus can ask people, "Where is your faith?" We should think twice before we follow suit. When our reflex is to belittle the faith of these disciples, we minimize the severity of the danger they were in and we cheapen the salvation Jesus brought. If they overstated the crisis at all, it was only because they underestimated the presence of Jesus, not because they had overestimated the storm. Underestimating the power of the presence of Jesus is something we have all been guilty of, and probably in circumstances far less perilous than what these disciples were facing.

Sometimes, it only takes a domestic squabble or a tough month financially for some of us to underestimate Jesus' presence. A failed goal or a trivial disappointment makes some people doubt that He cares. Most of us have not tasted life-threatening fear quite like the fear triggered by this storm. Perhaps, some of us have. But, we have all doubted Jesus in much smaller crises.

## **II. Two Dispositions in the Craft (verses 38-41)**

... <sup>38</sup>Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

<sup>39</sup>He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

<sup>40</sup>He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

<sup>41</sup>They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

### **A. Jesus Slept Like a Baby**

There are two ways of considering the restfulness of Jesus in this story. The first emphasizes His deity. He had initiated this journey that sent this ship sailing into a violent tempest. Some speculate that He did so knowing that a storm would rise and that He would show Himself to be the Ruler of the elements. He knew that He would simply wake up and calm the storm.

There were things that Jesus knew because of His unity with God that His disciples could not know. Why shouldn't He sleep? He was, after all, God. He could teach His disciples about faith without needing to model it. "Where is your faith?" would still be a valid question. But that view leaves me a little empty in regard to Jesus' complete identification with our human experience.

I lean toward a second view that emphasizes Jesus' humanity. During His time on earth, He was like us. We do not get to pre-plan our responses to life's storms. I believe that Jesus slept because He was tired. The Father hid some things from the Son, and I'm not convinced that He *KNEW* a storm was coming. Like everyone else in that boat, Jesus knew that the lake posed a threat, but when He awoke, I believe He simply responded to the situation as He found it. That way, Jesus could fully model faith to His disciples even as He rebuked them for their own lack of faith.

I cannot be certain if Jesus knew of the storm in advance or not. His dual nature as fully God and fully man remains a holy mystery. But, I do know that He slept like a baby. On the other hand ...

## **B. The Disciples Screamed like Other People's Babies**

There is no questioning the humanity of everyone else in that boat. They were scared stupid and they showed themselves to be the sinners that they were. In their fear, they rebuked Jesus for sleeping. "Hey! You need to wake up and panic with the rest of us!" Three gospels record this event. Only Mark records the question, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" I guess Jesus had not done enough to convince them that He cared about them. How human is that – to bite off the head of a friend or loved one because you are in crisis? We excuse ourselves by blaming pressure or stress. Call it the sin that it is. That's the first step toward defeating it?

"Surely what a man does when he is taken off guard is the best evidence for what sort of man he is. If there are rats in a cellar, you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats, it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way, the suddenness of the provocation does not make me ill-tempered; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am." - C. S. Lewis

I really like that quote, but at the same time, I kind of hate it for it exposes me as the fraud I can be. Is it just me, or do those closest to you always get the best you rather than the ticking bomb that is left at the end of a day of biting your tongue and guarding your reactions - not always out of genuine peace so much as out of self-restraint and the expectation of others as to how a Christian should conduct himself? Are you always the same lovable charmer the rest of us sees from week to week? Or, does a bear live in you too? We call our ill-temper, meanness and stupid words "stress". In reality, is it not the same sin we see in these disciples in this boat on Galilee?

A man took his first plane ride. He didn't want to go at all, but was finally persuaded to try it. Fearful, he got in the plane. The pilot took off, circled the field and returned safely.

Someone asked the uneasy rider, "Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

The man replied, "I'll tell you what. I never did put my full weight down in that thing."

"Faith means putting our full weight down on God. Faith is not just believing that God exists. It is actually anchoring ourselves to that God." - Hal Brady

Just as Jesus rested in a full sense of the presence of His Father, the disciples, after all they had seen, could have found rest in the presence of Jesus. Still, it takes time to cultivate that mindset.

"Quiet! Be still!" These are the same words translated in chapter 1:25: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" when Jesus sent a demon out of a man. The amazing thing about how Jesus cast out demons was the utter simplicity of the process. Other exorcists utilized many potions, prayers and verbal formulas to drive out demons. Jesus spoke, and the demons obeyed. Now, nature responded to Jesus' authority in the same fashion. The storm on Gennesaret was terrifying, but the way Jesus stilled that storm was frighteningly awesome in its own right ... and holy. With a word, Jesus spoke, and a storm died. The disciples' inappropriate rebuke of Jesus gave way to a more acceptable question: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him?"

### **III. Three Deductions from the Crisis**

#### **A. Discipleship Is Not for Sissies**

Verse 36 says, "There were also other boats with him." Matthew and Luke do not mention these boats. Even in Mark, they become quickly irrelevant to the story. Did they form a little flotilla of crafts, all of which witnessed the majesty of Jesus on the lake? Or, considering the utter silence about them by the other two Gospel records, did they only venture after Him for a distance until they figured out that He was charting out into the deep after dark? Perhaps, they were on the fringe of discipleship, drawn to Jesus, but unwilling to follow Him in any radical or dangerous way.

That is only my speculation, of course, and we should leave it at that. Still, the Gospel record is filled with accounts of people who were initially attracted to Jesus, only to turn away for one reason or another. People today often have a mistaken notion that coming to Jesus means the end of life's storms. In the earliest days of their Christian experience, God's provision always seemed miraculous. Doors opened at just the right moment. I can think of many times that God opened doors for me, probably because I was too green to make wise and sound spiritual choices, but storms teach us that real maturity comes from trusting God even when there is no evidence of His presence beyond our faith in the unseen. Ultimately, we have to make grown-up decisions, less by signs and open doors, and more according to intimacy with the heart and mind of Jesus.

#### **B. If Faith is to be Tempered, It Must be Tested**

Some people encourage others in life's storms by hinting that behind every cloud there's a silver lining. On what authority do they promise this? Tell that to Job, who suffered horribly and died never understanding why. The only silver lining God promises is that in everything He works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. When we flesh out what Paul meant when he said that, we learn only that God is always molding us into the image of Jesus, building our faith, so that when we get to heaven, we'll look like we belong there.

I am a little concerned about churches these days that tailor their message to felt needs; what God will do for stress, marriages, depression, addictions. Is that truth in advertising? How long should we tease people with such bait before we spring the foolishness of the cross on them? No Jesus - no forgiveness of sin, no power unto victory, no purpose behind your sufferings. Jesus is the only silver lining of which we can be sure. Heaven is the only guaranteed prize of faith. Ultimately, our faith is proven by how we respond to the storms and the trials that enter into our lives. People may not live what they profess, but they tend to live what they really believe.

### C. The Presence of Jesus Is Powerful in Any Storm

A man boarded a plane that was flying from New York to London. As the jet sat ready for take-off at the runway, the pilot's voice came over the speaker system:

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard flight 222 for London's Heathrow Airport. Today we will be flying at 35,000 feet and at approximately 500 miles per hour. Our flight course will take us over Canada, Iceland, Greenland, and a small part of Ireland. We shall be in the air about eleven hours. We are almost ready to take off now - just as soon as I get up my nerve!”

I look for a little more assurance than that from my pilot when I contemplate speeding through the air at 35,000 feet and hundreds of miles per hour. No pilot is more trustworthy than ours:

“I'd rather be in a rocking boat with a calm Jesus than to be in a calm boat with a shaky captain.” - Jess Moody, *A Drink at Joel's Place*

In his study on the armor of God, *A Wardrobe from the King*, Berit Kjos tells of a contest to find a painting depicting perfect peace. Artists from everywhere entered. Two finalists remained:

“As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd. A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. Surely this was the winner.”

Then, the second painting was uncovered:

“The crowd gasped. Could this be peace? A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; the crowd could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power. A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed ... she manifested peace that transcends all earthly turmoil.”

“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

He is your God. He is your peace in the midst of the storm. The gift of a peace that surpasses all understanding cannot be made truly evident when there is nothing going on in your life, but only when the whole world is going on all around you. Still, what can disturb you when the assurance of forgiveness and of heaven as well as the peace of Christ has captured your heart and mind?

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