

When the Storms Come

Mark 4:35-41

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Church in the Park

Introduction: Our scripture today is familiar, the story of Jesus calming the storm. In one sense the story comforts us, but in another it is confusing, even frustrating to hear about Jesus calming the storm. The problem is that when we are in the midst of our own personal storm sometimes we feel like God isn't with us, isn't stepping in to protect us. We struggle with evil and chaos.

There is also the struggle for us to decide if the story is "true." With our knowledge of nature, we don't know what to believe. I do believe that Jesus calmed the storm and I believe He comes to be with us in the midst of the storms that seem to batter us, but there are times when I feel the absence of God when I cry out. As the father said when Jesus healed his son, "I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

There are a few pieces of background I'd like to share. This is the first time that Jesus is going across the Sea of Galilee to the east, which was the land of Gentiles. Before this He ministered only on the western, Jewish side of the sea.

The Sea of Galilee can whip up a storm quickly. That very thing happened when I was on a boat in the Sea of Galilee. Without warning a storm arose.

Finally, the fact that Jesus was sleeping shows His physical exhaustion and His trust in God.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he 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?"

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?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Prayer: Holy Jesus, sometimes it seems that you are so far from us when we are hurting, troubled, and in pain. In those moments calm the rough and restless seas of our hearts so that we may see and hear You, the Holy One who is with us leading us safely through all the storms of life. Amen.

Whether you understand this story as literally true or not, it has truth in it. It's a popular story that speaks of Jesus stilling the storm. When we are in a storm, like the disciples, we turn to Jesus and expect Him to calm the storm, but there is one phrase of Jesus' that bothers me in this story. It's when he says to the disciples, "Have you still so little faith?" I don't get it.

The disciples had enough faith to wake up Jesus and get Him to calm the storm. Isn't that the kind of faith we want? When we're in trouble, we call on Jesus; isn't that what it means to have faith – to believe that Jesus can and will calm the storm?

I've wondered about this "little faith" phrase for a long time. I needed to figure out why Jesus said to His disciples, "Have you still so little faith?"

Here's what I found: Jesus had already commissioned the disciples to cast our demons, but they do not or will not rebuke the wind and the waves of the demonic sea. They don't even try. They don't even consider trying to use the power Jesus has given them to calm the sea.

It isn't that they have so little faith in Jesus. It is that they have so little faith in the power Jesus has given them. They think, "Jesus will save us."

This isn't the only time we will see the disciples failing. When Jesus comes down from the Transfiguration, he meets the father whose son is possessed. The disciples cannot or will not cast out the demons. Jesus is frustrated and sad at their lack of faith. He rebukes the demon and it comes out.

The disciples left everything to follow Jesus. They trusted Jesus with their lives. They trusted His words and His power. What they didn't trust was Jesus' power in them.

Jesus calls the disciples to follow Him, which means He must have believed they had the power to be like Him. He gives them power to proclaim the gospel, to cast out demons, and to heal diseases and sickness. He even tells them in Matthew 16 that the gates of hell cannot prevail against them.

Remember the other story about the waters of Galilee? Jesus comes to the disciples walking across the water. Peter tries to walk on the water and for just a minute, he trusts in Jesus' power, but once he realizes that he might have the power in Christ to walk on the water, he loses his power and sinks. And, again, Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Peter doesn't doubt the power of Jesus to stand in the swirling water. He doubts his own power.

And we are much like the disciples. We are of little faith. We believe in Jesus enough to worship Him. We trust Him with our lives. We trust in His words and in His power to bring new life and to overcome death, but we won't trust in His power in us.

Just as Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to reach new people, the Gentiles, He has entrusted us with the power to share the gospel – not just inside Geneva, outside Geneva, too.

Reverend Stephen McKinney-Whitaker, pastor of the United Presbyterian Church in Peoria, IL, says it this way:

“We are given the power to cast out demons, but we stand trembling in their midst instead of rebuking them. We stand on the shore, fearing the storm that’s sure to brew if we try to cross to the other side with the love of God because ‘those’ people on ‘that’ side are not worthy or deserving of the love of Christ or so we’re led to believe. Will we weather the storm if we try to cross that boundary? Maybe it’s just best to stay on dry land.” [The Reverend Stephen McKinney-Whitaker, “We of Little Faith,” Day 1 Ministries, June 21, 2015]

Reverend McKinney-Whitaker goes on to say:

“Every day, I see another panic-filled article about the decline and death of the church. We’re terrified the church isn’t going to survive the storm. We look around for Jesus and wonder if the church is going to die while He’s napping. Doesn’t He know that membership is down? Doesn’t He know the budget is broken? Doesn’t He know we’re taking on water? He knows our prisons are too full and children’s stomachs are too empty. He knows we craft laws that protect our right to discriminate while there aren’t enough laws to protect abused women and children. He knows exactly the toll of the storm.

“I’m not sure we do. We’re too busy trying to calm ourselves to calm the wind and the waves that batter people’s lives. We don’t believe we have the power to stand above the forces of prejudice, hatred, bigotry, violence, abuse, and terror. Instead, we huddle down in the bottom of our boats and watch the squall through stained glass. What else can we do?” [Ibid.]

We come to worship. We come to follow. We come to comfort each other. But that is not enough. Like the disciples, we are called to lead, to heal, to proclaim the gospel.

During the riots in Baltimore last month, I was so proud to be a pastor when the local pastors, along with the faithful, stood between the rioters and police. It took courage. It was dangerous. The crowds had been violent. Who knew when a rock was going to fly or when someone was going to knock down the clergy who were “in the way of the violence”? I believe those pastors heard the call of Jesus. They didn’t sit around their kitchen tables or in prayer circles in their churches. They led, they healed, they proclaimed the gospel. They didn’t wait around for Jesus to take care of everything. Jesus had commissioned them to lead, to heal, and to proclaim the gospel.

We are living in dramatic times. I think Jesus is calling us out of the church beyond our comfort zone.

One terribly sick young man killed nine loving Christians at a Wednesday night prayer meeting. What a tragedy! Those beautiful people had embraced that young man, invited him into their circle. Later he admitted that he almost changed his mind and left without shooting them.

When he was arraigned, the families of the victims were allowed to speak to him about their lost loved ones. They honored those who had been lost. Then they told that boy that they forgave him. In all their pain, they spoke Jesus' words of forgiveness – the words he spoke from the cross.

There is one more small point I want to mention. That night they were having their regular Wednesday night Bible study. If I have my numbers right, there were nine who were killed, two children and one adult who lived.

Here's my point: We worry that here at Geneva we don't have enough people, but look at the power of the witness that came out of a Bible study with ten adults and two children. There is power even in small numbers. Jesus gives us power to act and live in His name.

I pray that we have enough faith in the power Jesus gives us to lead, heal, and proclaim the gospel.

Presbyterian Outlook published a prayer for this day. I used the first part of the prayer for the invocation. Now I would like to end my sermon with the rest of that prayer. Please join me:

Almighty God,

People of faith and prayer, slain after extending Christ's welcome in God's house, have left a legacy that cannot be gunned down. Their lives of love and grace have begat love and grace. The gifts of the Spirit that you gave them – gifts of love, joy, peace, gentleness and goodness – appeared defeated on Wednesday night, but on Thursday when people came together and sang, "We Shall Overcome," and on Friday when words of forgiveness were spoken and a vigil packed a coliseum, and on Saturday when crowds gathered in solidarity to say that symbols have consequences, and today as we and countless others pray for peace and commit to being peacemakers, we recognize the gifts you gave those nine are unstoppable, exponential, inevitable and victorious.

God of justice and compassion, you sent your Son for the sake of the world you love. He was murdered; his last words a prayer for forgiveness. Three days later he rose from the dead, his first words were ones of reassurance, telling us not to be afraid because even death had been defeated.

Today we remember and proclaim: Violence and hate do not have the last word. The love of God made known to us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, always has the last word. The Spirit's crop of goodness and love and joy and peace and gentleness will not stop growing. Now is the time for us – people of faith, brothers and sisters of every race and background – to recognize these unshakable truths and in the midst of the storm, trust the power of the One in the boat with us. Amen.