

WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

Steve Zeisler

The staff at PBC is planning an off-site day together this week for bonding and morale-building. We are going to go on a white-water raft trip. And, El Niño snows have made the white-water rapids faster than normal. I was thinking of leading a devotional for our staff before we left, and one of the passages that occurred to me was the one that is before us now, Mark 4:35-41:

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 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?"

(That was the line I thought would be good for our staff trip.)

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

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

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

We're on a course of study in Mark's gospel, stopping at places where Jesus asked questions of those before him. The questions not only were meaningful in their context, but they have application for us today. The question for consideration in this message is the first of the two he asks in verse 40: "Why are you so afraid?"

STORM-TOSSED LIVES

The question Jesus asked is preceded by one that was asked of him, and it too is a provocative question. The disciples on the boat woke the Lord and asked him, "Don't you care if we drown? This story not only describes an incident that happened in history on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and his disciples almost two thousand years ago, but it also illustrates conditions of life that resonate with most of us. There are times when life is overwhelming and treacherous for us, when there are anxious and threatening circumstances. We petition God, we seek out friends, we read the Bible, we fast and pray, hoping to penetrate to heaven. And it seems as if our Savior and Lord is asleep. The thing we're most aware of is the hardship, and the thing we're least sure of is his love.

You may know of our men's Bible study group called the Road Crew. It meets on Wednesday mornings at 6:30 a.m. It's an ordinary, no-frills event; we meet for an hour, eat a muffin, drink some coffee, study the Bible, pray, and leave. But the fellowship is honest, and the wrestling with God is real.

Last week at the beginning of the meeting, one of the brothers told us that he and his wife had just returned from Santa Barbara, where they had gone to bury their only child, who had taken his own life at age twenty-four. So we gathered around and prayed for this man and his wife.

After we prayed, I looked around the room and considered some of the other stories that have been shared. Death of a loved one isn't a weekly occurrence, but it isn't infrequent, either. We have men in the group who have battled with clinical depression in themselves and in members of their families. There are men who are in twelve-step programs for addictive behavior. Some have very hard health conditions or financial turmoil. Some suffer with children whose way of life is heartbreaking. Others have difficulty blending families in remarriage. One of the men there last week had just gotten out of jail, and the week before we read a letter to the group from one of our members who is in jail currently.

Human beings live storm-tossed lives. The most difficult question that non-Christian skeptics ask is the question of suffering. How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and allow his people to live in fear and anguish?

The place Jesus ended in this story is the place that everybody who believes has to come to in theology and experience. He asked the disciples, "Do you still have no faith?" In the long run, the problem of human suffering is the problem of faith. It requires that we be persuaded by One whose presence mitigates the need to have our questions answered.

WHY JESUS SLEPT IN THE BOAT

Let's observe the details of the story. Verse 35 starts out, "...When evening came...." A long day of demanding public ministry preceded this account. Jesus was exhausted. "...He said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side'...." They set out across the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, leaving the region of Galilee where Jews predominated and going to a region that was mostly Gentile, the Decapolis area. "Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him." The words "just as he was" remind us of how tired he was, and indicate why he quickly fell asleep.

It's helpful to see Jesus unable to keep his eyes open. Have you ever felt that way? We struggle with our weakness and weariness. We wish we could be better parents late in the day, and often we're too tired to be. Weary husbands and wives have little to offer each other. Making it through the day becomes a major accomplishment. But it's encouraging to see Christ in that very same condition, because the words of Hebrews 4:15 come back: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin." He knows what it's like to be human. He's been in every human place, been pressured by every human pressure, even such a simple thing as weariness from a day's hard work. The next time you feel that way, remember you have a high priest who will minister to you with sympathy and understanding.

Another observation that's worth making from this scene is that after a day of teaching, the Lord decided to leave, precisely because the day of teaching was over. It was useful to those he had taught for him to leave. To hear Jesus speak for an entire day, to fill a notebook full of the themes of the kingdom of God, to be given instruction in the truth in wonderful and creative and picturesque ways, and then for him to leave, suggests to us that there comes a point when learning should lead to obedience. Rather than allowing these people to spend the next day in another seminar, and the next, as if more information were the key to everything, Jesus realized, "I've taught them more than they can handle. And it is thinking harder about what they have already been told, deepening their experience with the truth they already have, that this group in Galilee needs. So I'm going elsewhere for a time." Similarly, the majority of us in this church have more information than we have experience with the truth, we know more than we

believe, we've been told more than we act on.

THE PROBLEM OF OVERREACTING

Moving farther into the story, we ought to consider the nature of the storm. Mark records this, probably from Peter's telling of it, as a "furious squall," as the New International Version translates it. On the Sea of Galilee, which is roughly the size of Lake Tahoe, there are seasons when gusts of wind blow down off the Golan Heights. It's set in a valley between hills that form a corridor for the winds. This was not a supernatural event; it was a storm of the type that still happens on the Sea of Galilee. It was a very serious storm. It was at night, which made it even more dangerous. The text is very clear that the disciples faced a treacherous set of circumstances.

But the question that we might ask is whether this was the zenith of testing that these disciples thought it was. Were they in the most extreme of conditions? Were they at their wit's end, completely overcome, with nowhere to turn? Is that what the passage is telling us? Or was this a storm like storms they had seen before? After all, these were fishermen who had spent their life on this lake. I believe the disciples were overreacting, and we can learn why as we hear Jesus' question to them.

Jesus was never worried about the storm. When he was awakened, he wasn't shaken by an awful storm-wracked sea. He rebuked the storm the way you would rebuke an overzealous puppy: "Quiet, stop! Calm down!" One translator renders it, "Pipe down!" And he stopped the storm not because he felt lives were threatened, but so he could have a conversation. He was calming noise and confusion. Jesus treated the storm as a difficult test, a demanding set of circumstances, a hard lesson, but not as if all were about to be lost at any moment.

Many of us conclude at times that we are in emergency situations when we are not. Many of us feel overwhelmed by pressures and demands and stresses. We give ourselves permission to throw up our hands and tear our clothes and wail and feel sorry for ourselves and expect others to come rushing in to help. We declare ourselves to be at the end of our rope and rail at the unfairness of it all. That is essentially a declaration of immaturity.

This was a hard storm, but the disciples' sense that their lives were momentarily to be forfeit was an overreaction. Rather than grab Jesus and accuse him of lovelessness in this out-of-control way, they had the opportunity to face the storm with faith, bail out the boat, and work together with the sailors in the other boats in case someone fell overboard. They had the opportunity to trust God and strengthen each other in very trying conditions.

Young Christians often have the mistaken notion that coming to the Lord means the end of life's troubles. Did you ever think that? And for many, in the earliest months of Christian life there is wonderful provision. Doors open at just the right moment, the sun comes out just when the clouds seem to be gathering, and wonderful possibilities abound. Then the storm strikes. Maturity comes from trusting God when there is no evidence of his presence. Storms are the school in which we learn faith. Emotional overreaction to demanding circumstances is one indicator of how much we have left to learn.

It was, of course, completely legitimate for the disciples to awaken Jesus. A faithful response in waking him up would be to say, "Here's a bucket-you need to start bailing," or, "What do you think we ought to do?" or, "These kinds of storms are nothing to trifle with, and we need all hands on deck." The problem with their response was that they had concluded that Jesus had stopped loving them, and they had given way to panic.

THE WORST FEAR OF ALL

Let's consider the struggle that elicited their question and Jesus' question in response. They grabbed him and said, "Don't you care? How could anyone who loves us treat us the way you're treating us?" The sleeping Savior, who had performed miracles for others, was unresponsive to their plight.

Job wrestled with some of the same issues: a God who didn't respond to the suffering of his loved one. What we usually say to God when we're hurting is this: "I need you to wake up and change the circumstances. If you really care for me, you'll do something to get me out of the mess I'm in. But at a minimum, if you don't change the circumstances, at least explain them." The Lord could act if he chose to. We know his power is great enough, but the fact that we are still struggling, anxious, uncertain, confused, and weighed down is evidence that he doesn't care.

It is not physical danger or even the prospect of death that we fear the most. The deepest fears are about eternity and the character of God.

The disciples had placed ultimate hope in Christ. They had seen him release sufferers from the power of demons. They had heard him tell them truths that no one else had ever spoken before. They had heard him pray as only he could pray, with a Spirit-given intimacy with God in his prayers that they had no experience with. They had seen him challenge fleshly religion and declare the love of God. They believed that he was a source of hope, that he could be trusted, that life would make sense with him at the center. But now he was asleep in their hour of need, and they were beginning to say to themselves not, "I fear I am going to die," but, "I fear he is not who he claims to be."

I have trusted my life to Jesus of Nazareth who lived as no other has and died as no other has and is now seated at God's right hand. I would be shaken to the core if these things proved to be a hoax. The disciples on the lake were not most afraid of physical death (by drowning). They were deeply shaken by the possibility that Jesus would put them in extreme circumstances and then ignore their plight—that he was not who he claimed to be. "Do you not care...?"

Ray Stedman preached one of the most famous of his sermons on this text ([Why Are You Afraid?, Discovery Paper 3309](#)). I've heard it referenced many times, and I've quoted it myself. He used one sentence to summarize what is being taught here: "The boat won't sink, and the storm won't last forever." The gospel won't "sink"; it will bear all the weight you put on it. The hope of the gospel doesn't dim over time or fail under pressure. The Lord will supply our needs for every day of this life and for eternity.

But the second phrase is important, too: "The storm won't last forever." It is not true that being a Christian is to be assigned to suffer forever and ever. The end of the story is not more suffering. The end of the story is joy, glory, the approval of God, being made like Christ, fellowship with other people who believe, the end of evil.

A HEALTHY FEAR OF GOD

This account has a great ending. "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" A moment earlier they had been terrified by the storm; now they were more terrified! They saw the one who, with a word, banished wind and waves.

That's what it means to have faith: to be more impressed with Christ than we are with the problems, to have a fear of God in the proper sense. This is no one to be trifled with, and when he engages our

enemies, they will fall. However we evaluate our circumstances, whatever our feelings tell us-and very often they are negative and hurtful, with no reason for hope-against all these is the word of Christ. We ought to be more impressed with him than we are with our analysis of our circumstances.

Moses preached a wonderful sermon in the book of Deuteronomy. He stood before the children of Israel at the end of their wilderness wanderings. He was at the end of his life, he knew, and he would not be with them much longer. He preached of law and covenant, of the past and future, of blessings and curses. At the end of the sermon, this great patriarch, this great man of faith, the friend of God, used one of my favorite metaphors for thinking about God's love. Deuteronomy 33:26-27:

**"There is no one like the God of Jeshurun,
who rides on the heavens to help you
and on the clouds in his majesty.
The eternal God is your refuge,
and underneath are the everlasting arms."**

Always underneath everything is the embrace of God, the one who holds on to us. His arms are everlasting; they will not fail. Storms, problems, pressures, failures, inadequacies, anxieties, confusions-underneath them all are the everlasting arms of God. He will embrace us and hold us up.

"There is no one like the God of Jeshurun...." That's what Jesus helped these men in the boat see. Faith that believes that underneath everything are the everlasting arms of God will give us the courage we need, whatever the circumstances.

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Catalog No. 4571
Mark 4:35-41
Third Message
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July 5, 1998

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