

Mark 4:35-41
"Why Are You Afraid?"

35That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."
36Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. **37**A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. **38**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?" **39**He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.
40He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" **41**They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

There is the story of a young man who slipped from a narrow trail and saved himself from falling into a deep chasm by clinging to a branch growing out from the side of the cliff.

Looking down fearfully at the distance he would fall he cried, "Lord, save me!"

"Okay," came a voice. "Let go of the branch."

He raised his head to the voice but took another look at the distance far below. Again he cried, "Lord, save me!"

"You heard me. Let go of the branch!"

Slowly he turned his gaze once more to the length he could fall and weakly asked, "Is there anyone else up there?"

In this morning's Gospel we have the simple story of the stilling of the storm --- a favorite story of Christians and one that has inspired more than one artist. Though simple and short it is easy to overlook its power and why Mark would include it.

Let's begin with its author. Mark wrote the first gospel for first century Christians, who were beginning to build the church as followers of Christ. They were laying a foundation upon which Knife River Lutheran would begin building 90 years ago. He wrote deliberately and with a purpose. His gospel was the Good News --- the good news of what Christ taught --- and just as importantly, of what he did. Prior to this passage, Christ is seen teaching; now Mark describes the awesome power of what he could do.

As Jews, the disciples knew God as the Creator and as the One who ruled over chaos with the power to bring order from disorder. They had heard the words of the psalmist read in their synagogues: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me . . . from the deep waters." (Psalm 69)

So, with that background, let us take a deep look at this story and its reason for inclusion in Mark's gospel as well as its meaning for our lives this morning. Let's start by going back and getting into that boat.

It is easy to see this as just another ordinary weather system, but Mark clues us that this is a great storm --- a whirlwind. For Mark this is an eruption of evil and we are smack in the middle of it, while imprisoned in a boat.

Jesus is summoned in panic to do something! And he does. Jesus talks to the storm as one might to a pet dog: "Sit down! Be quiet!"

Everything becomes calm and the disciples do not quite know what to make of their leader who has just exhibited the most remarkable show of authority of power ever witnessed! In the aftermath of the storm, the disciples are even more afraid of what they have seen. Notice Jesus' sharp words to his disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Ouch! He is not being sarcastic or condescending; he is genuinely concerned about the disciples' incapacity to trust God at a crucial moment. This is not just about fear, but about confidence as well.

Think of all the healing and teaching these disciples have witnessed leading up to this storm! Yet it took no time for doubt and fear to set in and throw their collective faith overboard.

Yes, fear lurks just under the surface of a lot of the difficult moments in our lives. But is it unfaithful to fall into it?

Why are you afraid?

I ask that because I have a hunch that we're rarely aware of just how significant a role fear plays in many of our decisions, actions, and conversations.

Perhaps it's an argument between spouses about whether or not to spend money to take a summer vacation. Except it's not just about the money to go to the beach, it's about the fear that there might not be enough to cover the bills when they get back.

Maybe it's a heated discussion between a teenager and parent about how late to be out with the car. What's behind the conversation again is fear: the teenager's fear of missing out, of being left behind by some peers who will definitely be out late, and a parent's fear about all the things that could harm her beloved child while being with them.

A few years ago I was entrusted by the synod to work with two churches, both declining in attendance and financial resources --- both understanding the need for each other; but beneath the discernment process to merge and behind all the good reasons on both sides to become one was the fear of each of losing its identity.

Fear paralyzes, making trust --- and the confident action that trust makes possible -- very difficult, if not impossible.

Think of faith primarily as trust, not simply as belief, but the kind of trust that motivates you to action: the trust that a Marine has with the others in his platoon in a battle; the trust that a firefighter has in her fellow firefighters as she enters a burning building. Action overtakes the fear when someone has one's back.

So maybe the issue isn't that the disciples are understandably afraid because of the storm, it's that they allowed their fear to overtake them so that they don't come to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we need your help," but rather come already assuming the worst, "Teacher, don't you care that we're dying." This isn't a trusting or faithful request; it's a fear-induced accusation.

And to be near death or told of impending death, there is the uncertainty in one's confidence of how well one is prepared to make the passage to eternal life.

A year ago, a doctor looked at my tests, took out a pencil and began some calculations based on them. Looking up he said, "Lyle, I estimate you have three years!" As I walked from his office, "Yea, though I walk through the shadow of death. . ." played in my head. I walk today in the faith this pronounces and the comfort it provides.

You don't have to have perfect faith for God to respond; indeed, you can even be paralyzed by fear, assume the worst about God, and still receive God's mercy and grace --- and God's invitation to greater faith!

The disciples thought they knew Jesus, and now they have to wonder if they really did. I think that's the invitation for us as well: to bring our fears, anxieties, and concerns to God as best we can and watch as they are transformed and we are amazed once again at this God who never, ever ceases to surprise us.

So I wonder if that's part of the nature of our life in Christian community: to remind each other that God may be so much bigger than we'd thought, and that while the life of faith may be at times much harder than we'd bargained for, God will not abandon us.

There is a painting titled "Peace" which many of you may have seen.



It depicts waves crashing against jagged rocks. It portrays the violence of a mighty storm. It seems, as you view it, to be anything but peaceful. The title would appear to be an oxymoron. But then we look carefully --- very carefully --- we find tucked among the rocks in a small corner of the painting a little bird sitting on her nest totally oblivious to the raging storm that is all about her.

Life is not a stationery experience.

Neither in the tempestuous storms of life, nor even to the gale-force winds of our fears, are we abandoned. Rather, God comes, stilling wind and wave, calming the fear-ridden heart, telling us again that we are his own beloved children, and calling us to greater faith.

And when we do that -- comfort each other with the news of God's steadfast love -- we are playing one of the great roles described assigned throughout Scripture. For at critical moments across the biblical drama, apostles, angels, and prophets will be sent to the people of God with these four powerful yet simple words: *Do not be afraid*.

"And each time we say and hear these words we join all those saints before who, caught up in the Spirit of God, find the courage not just to survive, but to flourish; not just to live, but to live with abundance; and not just to get by, but knowing the favor we enjoy in and through Christ. To dare great things, expect great things, ask for great things, and share great things." (David Lose)

So Christ speaks to us this morning, "You are My Father's beloved children; do not be afraid." It is a small thing, I know, but it gives us a chance to practice one of the important elements of the Christian faith: bringing through word and deed hope and faith to each other. For these --- hope and faith --- are not only at the heart of the Christian life but ultimately fear's antidote.

There are times when we must be still and stand in trust. Sometimes the consequences of our choices cannot be altered or avoided. When that moment comes and it seems there is nothing left we can do, faith comes in the belief that Our Savior is not asleep nor is he unconcerned. Amen.

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