

The Gospel of Mark gives us an account of a violent storm at sea. The disciples are terrified, certain their boat is on the verge of sinking. When they awaken Jesus, who has been sleeping on a cushion in the stern, he puts a question to them. “*Why are you so afraid?*” It seems somewhat of an odd question under the circumstances. Don’t you think? Let’s read about it in Mark 4:35-41...

*Obviously, the disciples have a few good reasons for being afraid. If I were to write a script for a play that includes this scene, the dialogue might go like this:

JOHN: Sir, I don't think you have any idea what's been going on while you were sleeping. It was terrifying.

JESUS: Nevertheless, why are you so afraid?

MATTHEW: Master, water was coming into the boat. We were certain we would drown.

JESUS: But why are you so afraid?

ANDREW: Some of us can't swim, Jesus. If the boat sank, we'd surely drown.

JESUS: And why are you so afraid?

PETER: (interrupting excitedly) I think I understand what you're saying. If we have faith in you, nothing bad can happen to us. Isn't that why you're telling us not to be afraid?

JESUS: (emphatically) No. Don't you believe it! Terrible things will happen to me in just a short while. They will happen to you as well in the coming years. Bad things can and will happen, in spite of your faith. Nevertheless, why are you so afraid?

It's a question he's still asking his disciples. Those of us who have experienced the power of his presence in our lives *need not fear*, whatever the circumstances. And yet, under duress, we are so quick to feel abandoned and powerless. Most of us, like his disciples in that storm, have been faced with forces over which we had no control, and we too were fearful. We may have actually been in a boat in a storm, one that sank, or was about to sink. You may have been on a plane that hit an air pocket, or had engine failure, and the end seemed inevitable. Perhaps emergency vehicles were waiting for you on the tarmac because of a mechanical failure. Or you may have been lost in a mountain wilderness somewhere, separated from your party. If we listened to the news reports last fall, that seemed to happen to skiers or backpackers with some regularity.

Statistics indicate that most all of us have been in an out-of-control situation in a car—because of icy roads, brake failure, or a collision. So many things can cause the ship of life to flounder on the rocks: divorce, a job loss, or an economic crisis. We have no way of knowing when we may be faced with cancer or some other dread disease. Being human means that from time to time there will be frightening circumstances over which we have little or no control.

Woody Allen, trying to sound like a philosopher, once said, “We are at a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness; the other to total extinction. I pray we have the wisdom to choose wisely.”

We can feel like that in our personal lives and on a national and international level. Fear, dormant or active, is an emotion we live with almost constantly.

Stephen King, someone who deals in human fears, wrote in the introduction of one of his books: “Fear makes us blind and we touch each fear with all the avid curiosity of self-interest, trying to make a whole out of a hundred parts, like the blind man with an elephant. We sense the shape...The shape is there and most of us come to realize what it is, sooner or later. It is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear. We’re afraid of the body under the sheet. We’re afraid it’s our own body.”

Let’s set up an imaginary scenario. You are driving in a car over a mountain pass in the dead of night. For some reason, you left your cell phone at home, you’ve left the main route and are on a side road. The engine sputters briefly and then conks out entirely. You are out in the wilderness, miles from anyone or anything, and you’re completely out of gas. What would your first reaction be? I’d probably start to berate myself. “McDonald, this is a monumentally stupid thing you have done. You’ve done stupid things before, but this time you’ve outdone yourself.” That might be true, but it’s not very creative. You might start rewriting the script. “If I just hadn’t started out at night. If only I’d stayed on the main route. Why didn’t I watch the gas gauge? Why didn’t I bring my cell phone?” Those “if only” thoughts are unproductive, to say the least, when you’re living through a real crisis.

Some of us would simply be reduced to whining, “Why me? What have I done to deserve this?” Then there’s the “blame someone else” response: “I told my son to put gas in this car. It’s his fault I’m in this mess.” Getting angry and laying blame is another way of dealing with our fears. It’s counterproductive, of course, but it’s a way.

Let’s look again at the account of the storm at sea that so terrified the disciples, and at the events that preceded it. Jesus had been teaching all day long, and if you have ever been a teacher, or in a similar situation, lecturing or answering questions, up to your ears in the press of the crowd, you know how exhausting that is. There was no rest break or time-out for Jesus. I don’t think he expected one. Part of the problem with some Christian leaders today is that they believe the demands of the job give them special privileges—like private jets for televangelists. They figure they’re doing so much for the Lord they’re entitled to the best. Give me a break! Jesus ministered to the crowd without interruption, but at the end of the day he left them unapologetically. He said to the disciples, “*Let us go over to the other side.*” He was not trapped by his own success. He was able to walk away from this enthusiastic, perhaps even adoring crowd. He left at the peak of a successful meeting to strike out for the unknown. We need to follow his example more in that respect. None of us should feel trapped forever in God’s work if God is calling us to a new work. Jesus was free to say good-bye and move on. He had no way of knowing who or what was across the lake, or what kind of reception he would find there.

As events unfold in Mark’s Gospel, we find he has left the multitude to help just one person, a demoniac, possessed by a demon. God’s strategy seldom makes sense from the world’s point of view. The Christian life is not a matter of cost differential. We all try to hear God’s call and respond. Ministry among a huge crowd is not necessarily better than ministering to one person. The Kingdom of God has its own economics, and this particular story bears that out.

Mark's Gospel describes their departure in this way: "*Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat*" (Mark 5:36). One of the surprising parts of that sentence is "*they took him along.*" We might expect to read, "He took them along." An old favorite hymn claims, "Where he leads me I will follow." That's a noble sentiment, but it is also true that he goes where you go. Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). If you go to the right place, he is with you. If you go to the wrong place, he is still with you. Livingston, the great missionary to Africa, was once asked, "How can you walk miles, year after year, all across Africa?" "Because I know I'm not alone," was his reply. "Jesus has said, '*Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.*' I have the word of a gentleman of the strictest honor that he is with me."

On this particular night, Jesus was with the disciples, going wherever they went. But the sentence we are examining continues with another strange twist. "*They took him along, just as he was.*" Others can tell you that I have struggled with that phrase all week. I'm not exactly sure what that means. How else could they take him except as he was? Perhaps he was tired or grouchy. Perhaps he was sweaty and dirty from the long, hot day. That phrase, "*just as he was,*" could very well have a wider meaning. We are often tempted to appropriate some imaginary Jesus for our faith walk, some cardboard cut-out Jesus, a Jesus more amenable to our own predisposition and prejudices. We want to make him a liberal or a conservative, a fundamentalist or a charismatic, an evangelical thinker or a liberation theologian. We want a Jesus who espouses our theology and our beliefs, rather than the historical Jesus of the New Testament.

The storm that came up in the middle of the night was severe enough to strike terror into even seasoned sailors. Men who had made a livelihood on the Sea of Galilee all their adult lives were panicked. They not only woke Jesus, they rebuked him. "*Teacher, don't you care if we drown?*" In other words, "Where were you when we needed you?" You have prayed that prayer, and so have I. "Lord, how could you have allowed this to happen to me, or to my mother, or to my child? How can I be in a mess like this? Don't you care?" The rebuke of the disciples has a familiar ring to us, because we have said it too.

Immediately, Jesus rebukes, not the disciples, but the wind and the waves and calm returned. The disciples were awed, but those of us on the other side of the resurrection have little difficulty with the story. The God of creation who made the sea and wind can certainly still them. But it's at this point in the story, when the danger has passed, that Jesus turns to them with his question, "*Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*" As I've said before, our faith won't prevent the storms. They come into every life, deserving or undeserving. When and if we are delivered, the tendency is to vow never to get into the boat again. Unfortunately, we cannot live the life of faith in some safe place. Even after we are delivered, we are called to move on to the next adventure where we will face storms all over again.

Like the story about Simon sensing fear after his fishing boat nearly sinks from the weight of a record catch of fish in Luke 5, here in Mark 4 Jesus again calms the fears of the disciples. This time their boats are caught in the midst of a "*furious squall.*" After Jesus stills the wind and calms the storm, he asks his disciples, "*Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*"

It's not about the storm. It's not about the circumstances of life. It's about the faith that we have in the midst of every storm and every circumstance we face.

Like the disciples, it's easy for us to lose faith. Like the disciples, it's easy to forget who is in the boat with us.

Amen.

*I am indebted to Bruce Larson's book, *Living Beyond Our Fears*, chapter 2, for much of this sermon.