

The Gospel of Mark narrates an account of a violent storm at sea. The disciples are terrified, certain that their boat is on the verge of sinking. When they awaken Jesus, who has been sleeping on a cushion in the stern, he stills the wind and the waves and then he puts a question to them: “*Why are you so afraid?*” I’m thinking it seems somewhat of an odd question under the circumstances, because the disciples have good reasons for being afraid.

If I were to write the script for a play that includes this scene, the dialogue might go something 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 convinced we would all 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) 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 Jesus is 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’re 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 have been fearful.

We may have been in a boat in a storm, one that sank, or was about to sink. We 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 us on the tarmac because of a mechanical failure. Or we may have been lost in a mountain wilderness, separated from our party. If we listen to the news reports, that seems 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 an unseen collision. So many things can cause the ship of life to flounder on the rocks: divorce, a job loss, a death, or an economic crisis. We have no way of knowing when we may be faced with cancer or some other dreaded 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 wisdom to choose wisely.” Um, thanks, Woody! We can feel like that in our personal lives and on a national or international level. Fear, dormant or active, is an emotion we live with almost constantly.

The author Stephen King, someone familiar with 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 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 you’re 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 with berating 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 of dealing.

Our Scripture for today contains another story of Jesus calming the fears of the disciples. This time they are in their boat in the midst of a storm, and Jesus calms the storm. Then he asks them "*Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*" The disciples are filled with fear because of the circumstance they find themselves in. Drowning is a real possibility. The disciples are beside themselves. Even though Jesus was right there with them, they were filled with fear. The big storm in front of them overtook their thoughts and they forgot WHO was in the boat with them. Like the disciples we too can get so caught up in our circumstances that we can't see anything else. Interestingly at the end of our Scripture passage the disciples are again terrified, but the object of their fear this time is no longer wind and waves. It is Jesus. They asked each other, "*Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!*" Fear of the Lord, however, is something altogether different.

Let's look closer 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, public speaking, 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 their job give them special privileges—like private

jets for megachurch pastors. 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 the crowds 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.

I have struggled all week with something I found in a couple verses before our passage, in verses 33 & 34, which says, "*With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*" I'm not exactly sure what that means. Was Jesus hiding something from the crowds that flocked to hear him? I've always thought of Jesus as "*full of grace and truth,*" as John 1:14 describes him. Perhaps he was tired or grouchy. Perhaps he was sweaty and dirty from the long, hot day. "*He did not say anything to them without using a parable.*" No clarification. No interpretation. No explanation given, except for the Twelve. Was this an intentional "sleight of hand" by Jesus?

We're often tempted to appropriate a sort of imaginary Jesus for our walk of faith, a 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 Calvinist or a charismatic, an evangelical thinker or a liberation theologian. We want Jesus to espouse our theology and our beliefs, rather than the recorded N.T. teachings of Jesus.

But this much we know beyond a doubt: the storm that came up as he crossed the lake in the middle of the night with his disciples 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, but they rebuked him: “*Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?*” In other words, “Where were you when we needed you?” Just a minute. Both you and I have prayed that prayer, haven’t we? “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 from the disciples has this familiar ring to us because we’ve said it before. We’ve said it, too.

Immediately, Jesus rebukes—not the disciples, but—the wind and the waves. And calm returns. The disciples were in awe, but those of us on the other side of the Resurrection have no difficulty believing this miracle 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 two pointed questions, “*Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*”

As I’ve said before, our faith won’t prevent storms. Storms come into every life, whether deserving or undeserving. When and if we are rescued, the tendency is to vow never to get into the boat again. Unfortunately, we cannot live the life of faith on the shore in a safe place. After we’re rescued, we’re called to move on to the next adventure where we’ll face another storm again.

Like the story about Simon Peter 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 a “*furious squall.*” Then, after Jesus calms the storm he asks his disciples, “*Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*”

It’s not really about a storm, is it? It’s not even about the circumstances. It’s about the faith that overcomes our fear in every storm and through every circumstance that 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.