

## Does our Faith Hold in Life's Storms?

Mark 4:35-41

*June 27, 2021*

During the dark days of the Second World War the churches in Europe faced difficult questions. All their efforts to form an ecumenical movement and organization were made impossible during the conflict. But in 1948 they were able to move forward and constitute the body we now know. For their identifying logo the organization borrowed the image from our story today of Jesus and the disciples caught in the storm on the lake of Galilee. As you see the church is the boat, tossed to and fro by the storm, but held upright by the mast in the form of a cross.

Individually we too face many storms in our lifetime. Over this past year all of us have experienced the effects of the pandemic on families, businesses, hospitals and the front-line workers. It has been devastating for so many.

The temptation for many, even in our churches, as Tom Wright argues in his book, **God and the Pandemic**, is to ask "why did God allow this, or why didn't God prevent this"? Wright takes us back to Jesus at Lazarus' grave where real tears are shed by Jesus as he faces the darkness of death. The pandemic is not as many have said, he argues, a sign of the end of the world, or a call for the world to repent and believe. It is simply part of the groaning of creation that resulted from the fall and the intrusion of evil into the creation. And the church ought to be, as it always has been in times of plague, on the front lines of those offering healing, mercy and comfort. We have always throughout our history, Wright argues, been the ones who stayed behind during plagues to minister to the sick and dying. While the privileged, elite, powerful and rich fled to safety, the Christians remained to be the hands and feet of Christ to those left to suffer and die. This was true throughout the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages.

But this pandemic has been cruel and far reaching in its reach, unlike anything we have experienced for generations. Unable to mourn properly when a loved one dies, or visit a loved one in a nursing or

long-term facility. Unable to gather with our fellow Christians around the table of our Lord, or to visit with our people in their homes, or to socialize with one another after church. These have been for some of us a difficult storm to navigate. With the same suddenness and threat as that day on the Sea of Galilee we have been confronted with the powers of chaos and disorder. Where is God we are tempted to ask? When we try to wake God up, God seems to be asleep? What is our response?

Let's hear the story from the Gospel.

Jesus has been teaching all day. The day began with a huge crowd surrounding Jesus and the disciples, so huge that Jesus had to get into a fishing boat to find room to talk to the crowd. He told them parables which he later had to explain privately to his disciples. Mark is always telling us how slow witted these disciples are; they never seem to be able to get the point. By evening Jesus is exhausted and wants to go over to the other side of the lake which is about eight miles away. Have you ever been in a small fishing boat in the middle of a large lake or sea and you find yourself being tossed around like a cork in the bathtub when you let the water out?

I will never forget my one and only experience of a night on board a local fishing boat in my home town. I'd been invited by one of my school friends to join him and his father on one of their fishing trips out into the sea. The North Sea off the north east coast of Scotland is cold and grey most of the time, but floating on top of its swell in the middle of the night it suddenly looks black and menacing. As I sat on deck of the small fishing boat, which sank and rose again in the swell, I honestly felt like slipping over into the ocean as I felt so deathly sick. Sea sickness is never a pleasant experience, but on this rolling, tossing little boat it was simply ghastly. They took pity on me and allowed me to suffer in the hold which smelled of oil and fish which, as you can imagine, only made me feel worse. I can tell you that when I finally set my feet on terra firma I felt like a man saved from horrible torture.

So, yes, I can easily imagine just how frightening it was that night on an even smaller fishing boat struck suddenly by a violent storm. These apparently often rose up suddenly on the Galilean Lake. It

would be pitch black, hardly allowing these hardened fishermen to see their nose in front of their faces. The wind whips the sea into a frenzy of huge waves that crash over the boat and blind the men with spray. Soon they fear the boat will be swamped, sink and all of them perish. They are a long way from shore and in danger of losing their lives. They are terrified.

The storms we sometimes face may not be at sea in a small boat, but they are just as frightening. The storms that enter our lives leave us feeling out of control. It might have been a terrible loss, an illness, a crisis in our lives that left us feeling paralyzed and numb. I vividly remember a moment like that in my life.

I had spent four years researching and writing my thesis at Cambridge University. The time came for me to be examined. I had to verbally defend my thesis. I faced two examiners, one from Oxford University and one from Cambridge. It was a grueling two hours of verbal examination and critique. It didn't go well for me! The one examiner was highly critical of my work and my sense was they were going to fail me. On reflection I realized he had come gunning for me because I had been very critical of his student. I remember going home on my bike in a daze. I lay on the couch trying to watch the Wimbledon tennis but my mind was like a hive of angry bees swirling around. It felt like my life was turned upside down and my four years were wasted. The storm passed to be sure, but I lived with this trauma of defeat for a long time.

But Jesus is so exhausted by the teaching of the day that he is fast asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. Don't you love Mark's detail about a cushion? Mathew and Luke both record this event but neither offers this little detail. It's little details like this that authenticate these Gospels and provide a wonderful composite portrait of Jesus.

Mark may have had our Psalm today before him as he wrote this story: **For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress;**

**he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.**

The physical world is not a calm, orderly sphere. It is subject to violent upheavals that threaten life. The demonic forces are still at work seeking to overcome God's rule. Chaos often reigns. This is the dark mystery that hides behind this story of the storm.

The disciples are simply afraid for their life. Why has Jesus brought us here? It was his idea, wasn't it? Why now, why here, why us? Don't you care, God. Jesus wakes up and says only two words. "**Be quiet, be still.**" And all is calm again. He rebuked the storm just like he rebuked the demons. I like the way the Message translates this passage: ***The wind ran out of breath; the sea became smooth as glass.*** He then turns to the disciples and to us and asks the troubling question, "***are you still without faith?***"

Jesus is the one in control of the universe and of our lives. This is what this story is telling the early readers and us today. He says essentially to them and us, "don't you realize that God's rule is present in me?" Mark wants us to realize afresh that Jesus is indeed God's presence in the world. He is God's son. Don't doubt it for a moment, even in the midst of the storms that challenge our faith.

The disciples are left with their mouths gaping open. Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him, they ask one another? I suppose we respond no differently when God steps into the middle of our lives and calms our storm. We are as surprised as the atheist sometimes when God actually answers our prayers, when apparent miracles take place that takes our breath away. Oh, that we could be as full of awe and wonder at the mystery of God's presence amongst us!

**Amen**