

“Jesus Calms the Storm” Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

I'd have to say **this is one of my favourite Bible passages**. Certainly, it was among the many wonderful stories of Jesus that were repeatedly told and read to my older brother, younger sister and me when we were young.

I've never been particularly afraid of water. Indeed, **I rather like being near or on the water**. I used to enjoy walking with my older brother, Arjen, along **the sandy beaches at Scheveningen**, the fishing village where our mother grew up, in the Netherlands, before we left for Canada. I also remember playing on some herring barrels stacked on the village wharves, and my older brother and I were amazed, one morning, to see a huge ship, stranded on the beach after a violent North Sea storm the night before.

After coming to Canada **across the Atlantic**, in May of 1951, on a ship named the Volendam, we first settled in Brockville, Ontario. There my siblings and I learned how to swim in **the St. Lawrence River**. I took to the water pretty much like a fish; I remember that my siblings weren't as keen. Also, our father (like his father and youngest brother in Holland) was a great fisherman. He frequently enjoyed going out to **many of Ontario's lakes** to fish for bass, pike and pickerel, and he often asked us to go along. I didn't mind going along for the ride, but because I'm don't like hooks and worms, I wasn't as keen about that as my older brother.

And when Colleen and I came to British Columbia, our young, growing family learned to navigate many of **the rivers and lakes near Prince George** for pleasure in a canoe. Over the years, we enjoyed spending time, **on the beaches and waters adjoining Vancouver, Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands and the Oregon coast**.

Being on or beside water has been a big and enjoyable part of my life. Only once have Colleen and I been caught in a storm, on a lake up north. Lightning streaked across a threatening sky and thunder rolled as we made our way to shore in the canoe as quickly as we could, while bending low so the lightning wouldn't strike us. It was a bit of a scare, but we made it safely to shore. Fortunately, **I've never been in a terrifying, “perfect storm”** (remember the film by that name?), **but I must say there's something comforting about knowing that Christ is in our boats with us** and that he will calm the winds and the waves for us.

The point of the story that the Gospel writers want to fix in our imaginations is that **God in Christ will look after us**. Especially in those moments of life when we feel terrifyingly storm-tossed and when the waves threaten to overwhelm us, **Jesus is there for us**. What a comfort this story has been to me as I've sailed through life – not always smoothly or calmly -- raising a family and ministering to the flocks that God has put under my care! **The keeping power of Christ over his people is a truth we all need to grasp and believe**. As we take up the story, this is also what Jesus' disciples needed to understand and to make a foundational part of their lives.

It had been a strenuous day in Jesus' taxing life. It had begun with the blistering criticism and accusation of the Pharisees that he was some kind of evil sorcerer (3:22). Then his mother and brothers had tried to kidnap him and take him back to Nazareth, for they thought he was out of his mind (3:21, 31). Next leaving the crowded house in which he was staying to get away for a bit by the seashore, he was confronted again by the surging crowds who couldn't get enough of him. So vast and bumptious was the throng that he got into a boat and taught the rest of the day from it in the hot afternoon sun (4:1ff). Finally, with the approach of evening, **Jesus, exhausted, gave the order to pull out and sail over to the other side**. "Let us go across to the other side," he said. "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was" (4:35-36a). And Mark adds, "Other boats were with him" (4:36b).

The Greek tense of the verb, "Let us go..." reveals **a note of urgency in Jesus' decision to depart** (Vincent Taylor, p. 273). No doubt, Jesus was so tired by now that that he had "hit the wall"; he knew he couldn't go on. That's likely the meaning Mark intended as he wrote, Jesus went with his disciples in the boat **"just as he was."**

At any rate, in the darkening shadows of dusk **Jesus moved the stern of the boat where he wearily reclined on a coxswain's pillow**. The boat hoisted sail and began the five-mile trip across the lake, **followed by a flotilla of admirers in their "other boats."** They just couldn't leave him alone! Perhaps in this last detail, unique to Mark's Gospel, the writer wants us to know that Jesus' comforting presence in the boat of the disciples, and his subsequent calming of the winds and the waves of the storm, has a saving and calming effect upon many "other boats" besides their own. **What Jesus did that night has an effect on others** far beyond that single moment a long time ago.

I can see the boats with their patched sails moving slowly across the calm Sea of Galilee that evening below the rising stars—**when suddenly, “without warning”** as Matthew tells us (8:24) **they were blasted by a terrific storm!** (Consider the portrayal of it in Rembrandt’s “Tempest in the storm” on the powerpoint.)

1. Learning through the storm (Mark 4:37-38a).

The Sea of Galilee rests at 628 feet below sea level and is surrounded by hills gouged with deep ravines. These ravines serve as funnels to focus whirling winds down onto the lake without notice. The way is often “greased” by a thermal build up in the extremely low valley which, while it rises, invites the cold air to come falling down, violently, from above. In the NIV, our text says, **“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped”** (4:37). The imperfect tense used for the verbs here pictures the waves as repeatedly crashing into the boat. Matthew’s Gospel uses the words “seismos” – meaning seismic, earthquake-like, back and forth action to describe the storm. It was as though the entire lake was shaken to and fro. On port and starboard, great mountains of water rose and fell over the boat. It seemed as if at any moment they’d all be washed overboard into a watery grave. Anyone who has been in a fierce storm on the water and has felt the stern plunge like an elevator out of control in a trough of green water and then rise to the sky like a crazy carnival ride can imagine something of their watery misery.

They had no way at that terrify time of knowing it, but **that miserable storm was a vehicle for teaching them about God and his saving power** in their lives. The storm was essential to their spiritual development. Here is a principle of universal spiritual application: without difficulties, trials, stresses and even failures, we would never grow to be what we should become. **Life’s storms are part of the process of spiritual growth.** Some mature believers believe that every spiritual truth, everything that has enhanced their existence, has come through affliction. They are probably right. The fact is, we would be spiritual pygmies, insufferably self-centred, proud, puffed-up, but essentially empty people without adversity.

This is why the late **Ruth Bell Graham**, who faced many adversities throughout her life as a missionary kid, as Billy Graham’s wife with long periods of his absence, and finally in her own last declining, bed-ridden years, could pray:

Dear God, let me soar in the face of the wind: up, up, like the lark – so poised and so sure, through cold or the storm, with wings to endure. Let the silver rain wash all the dust from my wings. Let me soar as he soars; let me sing as he sings; let it lift me.... Let it buffet and drive me, but God, let it lift [me].

(Sitting By My Fire Laughing, 1977, p.26)

The storm was a “step up” for the disciples, though they may not have known it. Perhaps you have such a “perfect storm” in your life right now. Why not ask God to help you make the most of it?

The storm continued with all its violence. The sails were in rags; everything was awash. And where was Jesus? **“Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion ...”** (4:38a). This was at least as remarkable as the storm! The Lord was calmly sleeping away on the hard boards of the boat, which only his great weariness could have made comfortable. And he remained asleep (he wasn’t pretending) despite the howling wind and the wet spray. He was totally, utterly exhausted.

We see lovely something here about the incarnation. Though in a moment Jesus would calm the storm with an extraordinary, unexplainable display of power, he first slept in his weary, all-too human body. In this grand and yet very human display the opposites of weakness, helplessness and omnipotence do not clash but coalesce in a beautiful harmony, too magnificent to be the product of mere human – that is, the Gospel writer’s -- imagination.

The main point here is that **to the disciples, Jesus Christ seemed to be unaware of their plight.** Of course, while he was with us here on earth, Jesus Christ chose to always live in conscious dependence upon his heavenly Father. Therefore he could sleep a real sleep, knowing that the Father would awaken him whenever it was necessary to do his will. Nevertheless, their perception of Christ’s apparent obliviousness to their misery is a picture of how we often feel whenever we are enduring life’s storms. So often we mistakenly assume that we are alone; that no one, not even God knows what is happening and how we are feeling. How wrong we are! **God knows and cares about every wave that falls upon us.** That tiny, fragile boat carrying Christ and his disciples was the object of his heavenly attention.

And so it is with us through all of life's storms. The storm was necessary for the disciples' spiritual development, just as necessary as the calm that was to come.

2. **Learning through the calm** (Mark 4:38b-39).

Evidently frantic, **the disciples “woke [Jesus] up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’”** (4:38b). Of course, their rebuke of the Lord was unfounded in the light of the care he had manifested to everyone, including his disciples. Certainly, he cared! But **we must not expect measured rationality from people who think they're about to drown.**

Perhaps they shook the Master by his shoulder. Whatever they did, they achieved with their plea what the storm could not do – **Jesus was now fully awake!** **“He woke up,”** said Mark, **“and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’** Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm” (4:39). The verb tense indicates **the wind died down immediately**, and all three Gospels speak of **a sudden, “dead calm” descending upon the sea.** It was amazing! There was **an eerie silence.** It was as if a great hand had brushed away the wind and pressed down the sea. **What a way to get their attention!** There were undoubtedly some deep gulps all around. I should think most of them sat down, dumbfounded and round-eyed, with a stunned “Twilight Zone” expression on their faces. “Whaaaat happened?!”

The truth was there for all to see, though it would take some time, and more miraculous moments, perhaps, for them to process it. But, finally, they got it. **“All power belongs to Christ!”**

Paul would later formulate it more fully, and theologically, in his eloquent Colossian hymn. **Christ is the Creator:** “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him” (1:16). **Christ is our Sustainer:** “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1:17). **Christ is our ultimate Goal:** “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might have the first place in everything” (1:18). **Christ is the Creator, the Sustainer, and the Goal.** Christ is the Saviour of our souls!

If you believe this and rely on this you will weather the storms of life. Consider only the recent case of **Mrs. Rita Chretien** from Penticton, lost in the Nevada remote high desert for 49 days, and found alive. She is a believing Christian; she remained calm; she made smart choices; and she never lost the “will to survive” (Douglas Quan, “Will to survive links humans,” **The Vancouver Sun**, Sat. May 14/11, B1).

The disciples came to learn this well. In fact, **Peter**, who seems to be the principal source for Mark’s information in writing this account, would one day encourage Christians in his own letters to the churches to **welcome trials as friends** because they are sent for the development of one’s soul. Peter had learned his “storm theology” firsthand. It wasn’t theory. He himself had experienced hurricanes of affliction, and he had experienced the gentle presence of Christ in his life, saying, “**Peace!**” “**Be still!**” (4:39b). Peter knew from whence the power came.

3. Learning through instruction (Mark 4:40-41).

The storm and the calm were wonderfully instructive, but **Jesus’ instructions that followed put the finishing touches on the experience.** Observing the disciples extreme fear during the raging of the storm after he was rudely awakened, Jesus now addressed them in the silence that ensued. He asked them: “**‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’** “**And,**” then, Mark notes, “**they were filled with awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’**” (4:40).

I’m sure this was food for much subsequent thought and discussion. **What kind of faith casts out fear?** Well, it must be **real faith** – trusting, risking faith. A **faith that believes and relies** on the Scriptural revelation about the power and ever-present love of Christ will make a difference in our lives. Do you believe in and rely on Christ’s power? Do you believe in and rely on his love? This kind of faith, **a confident, conquering faith will see that he is in the boat with us**, and thus, no matter what happens, everything will be all right.

The early Church picked up on **Mark’s intended symbolism**: Christ in a boat with his followers on a stormy night amid huge waves that threaten to overwhelm them is **a picture of the Church in an unpredictable world.**

Early Christian art often depicted the Church this way in paintings and mosaics. It still is **a symbol used by the World Council of Churches** to characterize churches sailing and working together in the world today. Always, **Christ shares the boat with us.**

Fear is endemic to the human situation. Perhaps today you are fearful about something. Perhaps you fear life in general; perhaps you fear that you may not be adequate for the changes and the challenges that will surely come. It's a sort of amorphous fear, but it is real and continual. Maybe you fear some particular unspoken problem that has no apparent solution. The winds are howling and there appears to be no hope on the horizon.

What should you do?

Understand and believe that it is through the storms, afflictions, hardships, trials and challenges of life that you and I grow. Understand that Christ wants to develop our maturity and spirituality through the storms we face.

Know that Christ is completely capable of delivering us. Christ is in the boat with us. He is the same Christ who calmed the storm.

Exercise this faith and let go of your fear, for when this faith is active, fear will vanish!

Amen

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May 15, 2011