

# *Peace for the Storm*

by

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Mark 4:35-41

<sup>35</sup>On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” <sup>36</sup>And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup>A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. <sup>38</sup>But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” <sup>39</sup>He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. <sup>40</sup>He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” <sup>41</sup>And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”



Today's celebration of Father's Day happens to coincide with the Summer Solstice, so Happy Longest Day of the year to all the fathers out there. The first day of Summer naturally turns our attention to family reunions and vacation plans so often taken near some big body of water, down the shore, or beside a lake, or the happy sounds of children splashing in a pool. That also means summertime makes us especially aware of the danger of water, particularly for parents of young children. A quick run through the cable channel offerings of old movies at this time of the year shows how the entertainment industry captures our fascination with the dangers of water as they program a loop of re-runs like *Jaws*, *Titanic*, and *The Perfect Storm*. Just last week, it was not even fiction when the news captured our attention with the story of the lobster diver off the coast of Cape Cod who was swallowed by a humpback whale and then spit out to tell about it. That goes to show that real life stories about danger in the water can be scarier than fiction! But whether fact or fiction, we all know how lives are at risk when swept up in the forces of nature, particularly around big bodies of water.

So here we are on this summer morning with a gospel account of the danger of water. With Jesus' increasing array of signs and wonders the crowds were growing large around one of his favorite teaching spots beside the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had the idea to cross over to the other side in the evening, leaving the crowds behind. Now, the Sea of Galilee is actually a large lake surrounded by mountains, but after dark, a wind can come up suddenly out of the west, like a funnel and make the typically gentle lake heave with high waves. Our reading describes terrified disciples and Jesus in the peril of a storm. The text reads as if the disciples are scared to death in the boat, while Jesus is asleep at the stern. They awaken Jesus, who says to the crashing wind and sea, "Peace, be still," and the wind and water are suddenly, miraculously still.

This is one of those gospel stories so well known, its mere familiarity is a comfort. At first blush, it may seem a straightforward echo of other biblical affirmations that God is with us in all the storms of

life. But as is always the case with Mark's gospel, there is more here than meets the eye. So much more in fact, that studying the text, I found myself caught up in a storm of biblical interpretation.

Some biblical scholars say this account is simply a miracle story from a day in the life of Jesus. They argue, why else would each of the four gospels record a version of Jesus calming the sea? These scholars say that a miracle happened as it is told as a piece of history. However, other scholars argue that it's not primarily history but rather allegory. It is a story dense with metaphor, and every aspect of it represents something deeper. They say this is not about a one-time storm, but rather about Jesus' power over all the chaotic, demonic, death-dealing forces of nature. They say that it is a resurrection story; here the sleeping Jesus is really a dead Jesus, and the waking Jesus, the resurrected Christ.<sup>1</sup>

My best guess is that it is a combination of both. It conveys a memory of Jesus' remarkable power, and is meant to encompass all the storms of life. It is good news for us today because it addresses the trauma we continue to grapple with as we slowly emerge from the pandemic. We have lived through a long season of being tossed to and fro, of being afraid of some invisible and yet deadly threat, of being isolated, of living with uncertainty, of worrying about people we love, of grieving people we have lost, and of skipping or delaying the kinds of celebrations that buoy us through life.

It is safe to say that Jesus calming the sea is meant to provide a word of comfort for folks like ourselves who are coming out of a long season apart, without a map for the future. It is as if we have been in a little boat, with a chosen few, and while I'm not sure I'd put it this way without the story before us, I imagine I am not the only one who has wondered if God were asleep. When natural disasters happen, some of

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Blount and Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, p. 60-75. I am grateful to Brian and Gary for their outline of the complexity of interpretation and for Gary's fine sermon in this chapter.

us want to comfort ourselves by thinking God is in control, and everything happens for a reason. But then, how do we explain God's involvement when innocent lives are swept up in the wind and the waves?

New Testament scholar, Sue Garrett, poses the question this way: What does it mean to claim that "Jesus is Lord" in a world where so many bad things happen? When the New Testament authors tried to explain why things happen as they do, she says, they often referred to unseen forces at work in the world. Terms they used for these forces included *principalities, powers, rulers, angels, demons, thrones and dominions, even spirits*. Garrett says that at the beginning of Creation, even as God gave human beings freedom, which opened the doorway to all kinds of sin, God also relinquished some measure of freedom over the world to these other powers, which now determine the outcome of many earthly events, both natural and human-caused catastrophes.

The Apostle Paul, she notes, is clear that God does not directly will bad things to happen though God does *allow* the powers to have their way. Sometimes they work against God, just as we as individuals, or societies, sometimes work against God. But Garrett points out God does promise eventual redemption. God looks ahead to a final Day of Resurrection, when Christ's lordship over the powers – initiated at his resurrection – will be complete. How does that comfort us in the meantime? Garrett writes: When we affirm God's providence we announce our confidence that "God provides for the world by bringing good out of evil, so that nothing evil is permitted to occur that God does not finally bend to the good."<sup>2</sup>

You know, the thing that interests me most about this story is where Jesus' power and their fear show up in the text. At first it appears they are most afraid of the storm, but if you pay attention to the order of things, you realize their fear is not given voice until after Jesus calms the

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Garrett, "The Problem of Evil," *Presbyterians Today*, March 2005.

storm. Jesus rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ Then Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Only after he calms the water and wind, are “they filled with great awe and said to one another, who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”” They sense that there’s something about Jesus’ power that is dangerous. As another preacher put it, “if Jesus can do what he did with that storm, then what might he have in mind to do with them?”

Coming out of the fearful storms of this past year, what might Jesus have in mind for us? Where can we expect Jesus’ dangerous power to be a comfort for us? Did you know the word, comfort, did not always have the “soft” connotations of physical ease, contentment and well-being that we think of today when we yearn “*to be comforted.*” A compound of two words, it actually means, “with strength;” it means *to strengthen, to fortify, to encourage, to give power.* The comfort Jesus gives is strength for surviving the storms of life and leaning upon his power to help us. Jesus comforts us with dangerous power to help us work for peace, and do justice, to risk promoting fairness, equality, and wellbeing for all of humankind.

Near the coast of Massachusetts, in the harbor of Gloucester, there is a Roman Catholic Church called Our Lady of the Good Voyage. The steeple bears a statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus looking out to sea, with a fishing boat cradled in her hands. It is an image of tremendous power for this community because Gloucester is a fishing village. In its three-hundred-year history, more than thirty thousand fishermen – many of them Portuguese and Italian immigrants – have lost their lives at sea. Even today, fishing remains one of the most dangerous occupations, and one of the poorest. When the storms come and the radios give out, there is nothing to do but pray. For generations, fishermen have carried the statue of Mary cradling the boat down to the harbor for the annual blessing of the fleet.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, our Lady of the Good Voyage. She herself offers no miracles. She cradles the boat as it puts out to sea,

as she once cradled her child who grew to have authority over all the storms of life, even death. There on that church steeple, she stands as a reminder that God is ever in pursuit of cradling us, of giving us peace and comfort and strength in the midst of our storm tossed seas. “Peace,” Jesus says, “Be still.”

AMEN.