

“God in the Boat”

Mark 4:35-46

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Follow along with me and Mark chapter four, verses 35 to 41. This is God's word.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, let us go across to the other side. And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was, and other boats were with him, and a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boats, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him and said to him, teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, peace be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear, and said to one another, who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

This is God's word. You may be seated.

The story that lies before us is perhaps one of the most familiar stories from the Gospels. Most of you probably remember it from Sunday School. As a child, and your teacher probably drew this lesson from the passage. Jesus calmed the storm on the sea, and he can calm the storms of your life. Now, there is certainly truth to that, and that can be a very good application. But it is, I think, a little bit simplistic, and I would suggest to you that it actually misses the primary point of the passage, which isn't so much about what Jesus does. As extraordinary as that is, but it's about who Jesus is. If you have your Bibles with you, I would encourage you to keep it open and follow along. But I want you to take a look at the text and observe here with me in verse 37. We read, *and a great windstorm arose then* in verse 39, *and there was a great calm*. And lastly in verse 41 and *they were filled with great fear*. As you notice, the word great appears in each of those verses. The Greek word there is *megali*, from which we get the English word *mega*. And it's through that word that Mark communicates for us the enormity of this story.

It was most definitely a memorable episode for the disciples, and so it's not surprised that we find it in all three of the synoptic Gospels. And as we go through our passage this morning, I'd like to use those three adjectives as the points in our sermon.

And so, point number one will be a great or mega storm.

Point number two a great calm.

And point number three, a great fear.

All of which serves to underscore the great God in the boat. But before we get to the first of those points, let me draw your attention to verses 35 and 36, which provide for us the setting of our story.

Let me read this for you again. Verse 35. *On that day when evening had come, he said to them, let us go across to the other side. And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was, and other boats were with him. At the beginning of chapter four, a very large crowd had gathered around Jesus to hear him preach and to have him heal them of their infirmities.*

And this crowd was physically pressing in on him, so that they threatened to crush him and suffocate him. And so in order to create some distance and barrier, Jesus got into a boat alongside with his disciples, presumably just the 12, and they rode out a couple of yards from which he continued to preach and teach.

Here's a fun trivia fact for you.

The boat was likely perched within a place called the Bay of parables, which you can visit today. A bay which created a natural amphitheater so that Jesus could project his voice with ease to the hundreds or even thousands of people who were gathered along the shores. The very first phrase of our passage on that day seems to suggest that everything that transpired in chapter four all happened within the same day.

And so Jesus has been teaching all day, and now he says to his disciples, let us go across to the other side. We're not given any more clues as to the motivation of Jesus's departure, but it seems reasonable to conclude that he must have been exhausted. And so he retreats in order to get some rest. After all, as we'll see here in just a moment, Jesus falls fast asleep and he stays asleep.

Even in the midst of this unruly storm. Now, in these opening verses, there are several details that seem to serve no other purpose than to testify to the fact that Mark's source was an eyewitness. That eyewitness probably being the apostle Peter. Let me just point out these details for you very quickly. First, we're told not only what Jesus took place on, but also the time of day.

We're told when evening had come. Then we're told that Jesus was taken straight from the boat that he was already in, just as he was. And in verse 36, we're told that other boats were with him. But we're not told anything more of them. We don't know who was in them. And quite frankly, we don't know how they fared in the ensuing storm.

These are all details which, from a storytelling point of view, are superfluous. But it seems like Mark includes them here to signal to us that what we are about to read is not some sort of epic tale. But in historical events, that's important, I think, because of the extraordinary nature of what's about to happen. And that brings us now to our first point, a great storm.

Verse 37, and a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boats so that the boat was already filling. I can't speak from personal experience, but the Sea of Galilee, so I am told, is one of those places that you really do need to visit at least once in your lifetime, not only because so many of the stories in the Gospels take place on that sea, but also because the sea itself is absolutely majestic and unique in several ways.

First of all, the Sea of Galilee is actually not a sea at all. It's not composed of saltwater, but it has some of the cleanest and freshest waters in the country of Israel. Even today, a portion of Israel's drinking water comes from this lake. What's relevant for our story is that the Sea of Galilee lies about 700ft below sea level.

That makes it the lowest lake on the Earth in terms of elevation. The lake is then surrounded by hills and mountains, so that if you can imagine this, the lake basically forms a big bowl or basin right in the middle of these hills. The hills get especially precipitous on the eastern side, because about 30 miles north east of the Sea of Galilee, Mount Hernan rises about 9200ft above sea level.

And so what that creates is a sudden and dramatic change in air temperatures. There's a constant exchange between the cold upper air that sits atop the mountain, which comes down to meet the naturally warmer air that rises from the lake. And whenever those two collide, they can produce rather violent weather conditions. In fact, the Sea of Galilee is famed for its turbulent storms.

So it's not surprising that we might see a storm in our story. But this was no ordinary storm. This was, Mark tells us, a great windstorm. The word he uses there is like lapse. More literally. That's a tempestuous wind. It's inclusive of things like hurricanes or even whirlwinds. I like how one Greek lexicon defines it. A line lapse is never a single gust, nor a steady blowing wind, but a storm breaking forth from black thunder clouds in furious gusts with floods of rain swirling, everything topsy turvy.

Keep in mind that, at least for the disciples, were experienced fishermen and they'd probably encountered dozens, if not hundreds of storms during their careers. And yet we read that the waves were breaking into the boats of the boat was already filling. In other words, the water was coming in faster than they could bail it out. Now, normal storms.

The waves can get anywhere from 5 to 10ft tall. But since this is clearly not a normal storm, we're talking about waves that are at least and over ten feet tall. And to add to the terror of it

all, it's evening and with the added rain clouds, it must have been pitch black. Based upon what Jesus says in verse 40, why are you so afraid?

It is evident that all the disciples, including Simon, Andrew, James and John, the fishermen were afraid. I want to pause here in order to help you reflect upon this particular moment in the story, because there's a question here worth asking, I think, and that's this.

Why did the disciples find themselves in the midst of this life threatening situation? Was it because God had abandoned them? Or conversely, was it because they had abandoned God like Jonah? Was this storm some sort of punishment or consequence for their disobedience? And of course, the answer is neither. In fact, they were there. They were in the midst of that storm because they were following Jesus.

He's the one who said, let's go across to the other side. So it is you could put it like this obedience that has led them into the eye of this storm. You know, we make much of the fact that Jesus calmed the storm as we should, but we must not forget that the same God who calms the storm is also the God who caused the storm.

Take Psalm 107, verse 23, for example. Some went down to the sea and ships doing business on the great waters. They saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy sea 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 evil plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men. And were at their wit's end.

You need to understand that God marches his people straight into the heart of turbulence. And when you find yourself in the midst of trials and difficulties and sufferings, you may discover that you are overwhelmed with fear, anxiety, and doubt that you don't quite have the sea legs, but you thought you did. And you may wonder to yourself, do I have any faith at all?

Perhaps some of you are in the midst of such trials and wrestling with that very question. I have no doubt that there's at least one person in here who's been having some very long nights, unable to sleep because of the waves that keep them tossing and turning in bed. But here's a word of encouragement if only you have the ears to hear from time to time.

God deliberately leads us into such circumstances precisely to have us ask that question and, like Jacob, to wrestle with our faith and to wrestle with God.

So that was point number one, the great storm.

And now, point number two, the great call. Now, I'll make a confession to you. I think myself to be a little bit clever with this second point, because I am intending it to be a double entendre

meaning referring to two different things. Now, obviously it refers to the great calm in verse 39. But even before we get to verse 39, I want you to take a look with me at what might be described as the calm before the calm or the calm in the midst of the storm. Verse 38 but he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. That's a dramatic contrast, isn't it? Between the disciples and Jesus, if you imagine the scene, it's almost comical.

The disciples are trying to frantically bail the water out. We can picture some of them. Perhaps the ones who weren't fishermen, wrapping their arms around the mast of the sails and screaming at the top of their lungs for their lives. And while all of this is happening, there's Jesus asleep on the cushion.

As I pointed out earlier, Jesus had been teaching all day. And not just all day, but during his public ministry, Jesus was teaching and traveling virtually all day and every day. And so to say that he was tired would be an understatement. Only exhaustion can make the hard wooden planks of a boat feel comfortable. But that's not so much the point.

Rather, it's through this dramatic contrast that Mark portrays for us both Jesus's complete trust in his father and his complete control over the situation. To spell that out for you, let me suggest that there are actually two instances in our passage when Jesus demonstrates his strength and his power. You see, the great calm is a result of great power.

Again, the first is obvious. It's when Jesus calms the storm, but the second is right here in this very moment when Jesus is fast asleep. For those of you who may indeed be going through something that is keeping you up at night, perhaps it's your children. Maybe they're unbelievers. Maybe they're in a season of rebellion. Or perhaps it's unemployment.

Or perhaps you're in a job that feels like a dead end. Or maybe it's broken relationships with friends, or a shaky marriage, or an illness like cancer, or the recent loss of a loved one. Then I think you'll know what I'm talking about, because there's nothing that you want to be able to do more than to simply cast your cares upon another so that you can sleep.

In the midst of storms. There is great strength in simply having the ability to lay your head on your pillow and to fall fast asleep. It demonstrates your control over the waves of your emotions. And for believers, it demonstrates something far deeper. It demonstrates your trust and your confidence in the Lord. In fact, Scripture repeatedly points to this power and this faith that is expressed in our ability to simply sleep.

Take Psalm three for chapter three, verse five. For example I lay down and slept. I woke again. Why? For the Lord sustained me. Psalm chapter four, verse eight. In peace I will both lie down and sleep. For you, O Lord, you alone make me dwell in safety. Your Proverbs chapter three, verse 24. If you lie down, you will not be afraid. When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden terror, for the Lord will be your confidence. What's the secret to a

good night's sleep? It is to embrace that you're weak. But as the Apostle Paul says, God's power is made perfect in weakness. It's to embrace that you're not in control, that you don't have the power to change your circumstances, and to know that that's okay, because there's someone else who does.

Our ability to simply sleep in spite of troubles reflects our trust and confidence in God.

So can I invite you to do this tonight? If you find yourself pacing well, either literally or in your mind, to just close your eyes, to lay your head on your pillow, and to rest in the arms of your father. Look away from yourself. Look towards God. Do you need an example? Look at your children and see how they sleep so soundly, knowing that their parents are near.

Do you need an example still? Look to Jesus and see him there asleep in the boat. Is it not comforting to know that when you are in a state of panic, Jesus is completely at peace?

Some of you will still say, not really. In which case you are in good company because neither was it comforting for the disciples. Continuing on in verse 38. And they woke him and said to him, teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? If you compare Mark's version of this story with Matthew and Luke's, then you'll see that Mark's version is the most raw.

And Matthew's version the disciples say, save us, Lord, we are perishing. In Luke they say, master, master, we are perishing. But in Mark's version, not Lord, not master, but teacher of the three. It is the least honorific, the most direct, and therefore probably the most literal in terms of how things actually went down. This is not a respectful address.

This is fear, frustration, anger. They don't care about formalities here. They just want him to help them. And they're upset that he's so calm while they're so desperate. So they wake him up. And before Jesus stands up to rebuke the storm, it's almost as though the disciples rebuked Jesus and they say to him, teacher, don't you care? Do something.

How can you be asleep at a time like this? Can't you see that I am in need? Don't you care?

That sounds like us, doesn't it? That sounds like the attitudes of our hearts when we're forced to endure difficult periods. But if only the disciples knew. Don't you care? The reason why Jesus is in that boat is because he cares. The reason why they're in that boat is because he cares. In fact, the reason why they're in that storm is because he cares.

Jesus had every right to respond in anger. But before he turns and rebukes the disciples, he first rebukes the sea. And now we get to the second calm. Verse 39. And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. It's kind of odd, isn't it, that Jesus rebuked the wind and the sea as if they were animate beings?

That word to rebuke occurs several times in the gospel of Mark. Most often in cases when Jesus is rebuking the demons, the reason why Mark writes that Jesus rebuked the sea is not to suggest that there's some sort of demonic power behind the waters, but it's to show that Jesus's authority extends now not only to the spiritual realm and his exorcisms, not only to the human realm and his healings, but now to the natural realm.

What's important to note is that this miracle places Jesus on another level. There are other men, great prophets and apostles who cast out demons, healed the sick, and even raised the dead. But no one can command the forces of nature like this. And so if you could pick one miracle that most clearly attests to the omnipotence of Christ, this would be it.

In other words, our passage unnamed, vigorously portrays Jesus as the Creator God who with His Word brought about the existence of all things and with that same word can subdue all things. And so we read in Psalm chapter 65, verse five, by awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation, the one who by his strength steals the roaring of the seas and the roaring of their waves.

Psalm 89, verse eight. O Lord, God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, you rule the raging of the sea, when its waves rise, you still them. Psalm 107 again, verse 28. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Do you get it?

Well, the disciples don't. As evident in their question at the end. Who then is this? But Mark deliberately echoes the words of the Psalms to make it plain to his readers, to make it plain to you that Jesus's ability to speak a word, and to still the seas as a clear sign of his deity. So Jesus is not only the man in the boat.

He is also the God in the boat. He's not just the example of how we weather the storm, but he's also the God who delivers us from the storm. And so be still and know that the one who can save you is never far from you.

In the midst of the disciples panic, Jesus calmly stands up. And I do imagine that he says this calmly. He says, peace, be still. And then still in verse 39, we read, then the wind ceased, and there was a great calm in the Sea of Galilee. Storms can abate just as quickly as they arise. But again, this was no ordinary storm.

And we know that this was no ordinary calm, because the disciples sensed something unnatural in the way the winds and the waves instantaneously respond to Jesus's command. And so

picture this with me. It's pitch black, the boats being tossed about like the toy. The waves are towering over the deck. The water is pouring in, the boats starting to sink.

Then Jesus gets up and says, be still! And instantly. Not a single ripple disturbing the waters.

A great storm, a great calm. And lastly, a great fear. Verse 40. He said to them, why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear, and said to one another, who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? First the disciples rebuked Jesus. Then Jesus rebuked the storm, and now he turns the disciples and rebukes them.

Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? Jesus. This question here might seem a little harsh to us. Why are you so free? They were about to die. That's why they were afraid. But Jesus's question reveals for us the key points of application. First, we learn that the storm was a test of faith. Have you still no faith?

But second, we learned that the disciples fear in the midst of this storm exposed their lack of faith. Earlier, I'd said that God often time marches us straight into the eye of the storm. Well, here's why. So as to test and strengthen our faith. There are no shortage of passages that clearly teach God's sovereignty over our difficulties, and those difficulties being the very instrument by which God strengthens and sanctifies his people.

But it is not enough to simply experience difficulties. It may not feel like it, but you will get through them one way or another. Rather, what God desires is that when you experience difficulties, that you endure them in trust, meaning without fear, without anxiety, without complaining, without losing hope, without doubting in the goodness of God and our inability to endure trials in that manner exposes our lack of faith.

Have you still no faith? This is what Jesus says to you when you're agitated in the midst of storms. Have you still no faith? It is a rebuke, but it's also an invitation. Have faith. Trust in me, for I am trustworthy. Now, some of you may be wondering, is that even possible? Is it possible to be placed in a high pressure situation without feeling fear, anxiety, and doubt?

And I can confidently say to you that yes, it is only because I've seen it. You know, the most interesting thing about me is not about me at all, but it's about my parents. My parents have been missionaries in different parts of West Africa, which is arguably the most difficult and destitute part of this entire world for almost 40 years now.

Not by choice then. I also grew up in West Africa. Well, about ten years ago, my mother experienced a stroke while she was in the field. To make a long story short. She suffered permanent brain damage so that she is partially paralyzed. And her cognitive capacities, even to this day, is that of a toddler. And that's obviously very difficult for my father.

But to add insult to misery, as a lifelong missionary, he didn't have a lot of fun saved up, and whatever he did have was spent on the mountain of medical bills that he incurred over the course of the next several years. And to put it mildly, he's found himself between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he needs to be by my mother's side to care for her.

On the other hand, he needs to continue his ministry overseas if for no other reason than so that he can continue to receive support so that he can pay for the ongoing bills. Now that is a high pressure situation. But you know what makes me marvel is that when I have conversations with my father about finances, about the future, about retirement, I can honestly say to you that he does not seem all that stressed.

He does not worry, and he certainly does not doubt in the goodness of God. And perhaps it's because I find myself frequently worrying and losing sleep over my own finances that I walk away from our conversations thinking to myself, how does he do that?

But of course, I know how. My father's faith was not formed overnight. It was formed over a period of 40 years in the field, during which time my parents encountered desperate situations again and again and again and again and again. And what they had witnessed again and again and again, was that God was always faithful to protect and to provide that God can still their storms, so that through many trials and many difficulties, God had strengthened his faith, so that by this point in his life there's very little that can shake that man's face.

It is one thing to know the concept of God's sovereignty. It is another thing entirely to behold God's sovereignty as he stills the seemingly insurmountable waves of your storms. To ask the question, who then is this? And to be able to answer that with full conviction? This must be the son of God.

Here's another question that, once again, I think our passage invites us to ask as we approach the end. What was it that dispelled the disciples fear of the storm? And you might turn that question by way of application to yourself and ask, what is it that will dispel my fears, my worries, my doubts in the midst of my storm?

And you might initially answer. Well, it's faith that dispels fear. And while that's a true statement, that's not the right answer, at least not in this text. And at least not immediately. The disciples lack faith, and it's not more faith that suddenly dispelled their fear. There's actually something very specific that takes place, and here it is. The disciples become aware of the presence of the great God.

Back in our passage, verse 41. Immediately after, Jesus rebukes the disciples for being afraid of the storm. Mark tells us, and they were filled with great fear. But of course, he's not talking about the same fear, because the disciples fear of the storm and fear for their lives has now given way. It has been dispelled. It's been eclipsed by an even greater fear.

Hence, this is described as a mega fear. It is the fear of knowing that the Creator God of the universe is sitting in your boat. See, when the disciples witnessed the great calm, it's as though lightning struck in the darkness, and there was this brief moment of absolute clarity where they saw Jesus for who he truly is as the Almighty God.

El Shaddai, a lion God most high. And so this is how one commentator puts it presently. Jesus's nearness is not something that reassures them. Rather, it is something that is profoundly unsettling to them.

And their final question, the question that ends our text is quite striking. Who then, is this? The disciples are shocked that they do not fully know this man whom they thought they knew. His extraordinary demonstration of power has left them reeling in terror at the realization that this Jesus cannot be contained in their puny minds. This is the fear that filled Job when God appeared to him in a whirlwind and Job said, behold, I am a small account.

It's the fear that filled Isaiah when the Lord shook the foundations of the threshold and Isaiah cried out, woe is me, for I am lost. My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. One more. It's the fear that filled the sailors in the story of Jonah, isn't it? Jonah's hurled into the stormy sea, and immediately the sea ceased from its raging.

Just like in our passage. Then we read that the sailors feared the Lord exceedingly. And what's the very next thing that they did? They worshiped.

This kind of fear leads to worship.

Did you know that the more theological and the more doxology cool worship is, the more intensely practical it becomes. Worship dispels fear not by giving you more faith per se, but worship dispels fear precisely because in worship, even as we sang, we behold God. And so let me ask you, have you encountered this God?

We all have our personal storms, but it's true, isn't it, that as a church, as a body, you could say that we've also been in the midst of a storm, in the midst of a rather long season of mourning and uncertainty and instability. But praise God that, as Billy Joel announced, we now have a name. We have our.

Dr. Scott Redd, and I certainly didn't plan for this. But in God's omniscience, how appropriate that this text would be preached today. Because in a real sense, in the pulpit committees announcement, we're getting to observe in real time God sovereignly stilling the storms of Brightwood Presbyterian Church. Isn't that remarkable? So, beloved church family, here's my request to you.

It's hard, but steward your sufferings well. Learn to rest in his strong arms, and may your calm and steady faith in the midst of your unruly storm be a testimony to the majesty and the power of our great God.

Let's pray.

O creator God of the universe, you are sovereign over all things. You brought about the existence of this universe by a word. You sustain it by your breath, and all things are under your fatherly care. We thank you so much that we can turn to you in the midst of our storms. Yet, in the same breath, Lord, we want to be able to say in faith that we also thank you for those storms. For we understand that in your goodness, in your sovereignty, you use those things to sanctify us, to mold us into the image of Christ who we observe sleeping in the boat. In this text. Continue to strengthen us. We pray by the power of your Holy Spirit. Lord, I know even from conversations after the first service, that there are people in our congregation who are suffering greatly in the midst of great angst, great sorrow, great difficulties. Or would you be so kind and gentle to draw their gaze upwards towards your son Jesus Christ? And we also lift up to you, Dr Scott Redd and his whole family. But we thank you so much for sovereignly superintending the process of this search for being with each member of the Pulpit Committee, for being with Dr. Doriani, and for allowing us as a church to grow even as we waited. And yet we recognize that for this family, they'll be faced with a period of transition. We heard that they had five daughters, some of whom are still in school. And we know that uprooting your friends and moving to a new location can be tumultuous for children. So we just ask that you would be with them in the midst of their storm. That she would show your kindness and goodness to them. That she would strengthen them and establish them in faith. And Lord, we do thank you that you give us your word that reminds us week after week of your strength and your power. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.