

The Storm Is Over—Now What?
Mark 4:35-41
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I will admit right from the start that this sermon is as much or more for me as for you. Sometimes we preachers need to follow our own advice, or at least Jesus' advice, and I think he might be calling my name. I'm not sure yet just what I am going to do with this advice, but as I prepared for tonight, I became convicted of it. I think we have some suffering to do. That's God's advice to me, and my advice to you.

Now, when we look at tonight's passage, there isn't much suffering. There is some panic, some fear, some faith, and some awe, but the only one suffering is Jesus—from being awakened from his nice little nap. Jesus has had a long day of teaching and healing and as his little band makes its way across the Sea of Galilee over to introduce Jesus to the Gentiles, he decides to get a little well-deserved rest. Only it doesn't last long. Those famous Sea of Galilee squalls kick up and the boat and all its passengers are threatened. To call the Sea of Galilee a "sea" is overstating the case by a little. It's a lake really. But it would also be overstating the case to call the changeable weather patterns on that lake mild. In fact, the Sea of Galilee lies 680 feet below sea level, and is very shallow, only about 200 feet deep. And because it is bounded by hills, especially on the east side where they reach 2000 feet high, the temperature difference created by these extremes results

in strong winds dropping down to the sea, funneling through the hills. And since the Sea of Galilee is small, the winds may descend directly to the center of the lake with violent results. When the contrasting air masses meet, a storm can arise quickly and without warning and small boats caught out on the sea are in immediate danger. As I said, this is a shallow lake and a shallow lake is “whipped up” by wind more rapidly than deep water, where energy is more readily absorbed. And so you have the reason for a swamping boat and panicked disciples, and more energy spent on anxiety than was carried in the wind itself. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

And then the one who created the very winds in the first place ordered them to stop: “Peace! Be still!” And they were, and then the real anxiety began, for the disciples then had a better idea of just whom they were dealing with, especially when on top of it all, he questions their faith. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” It was not enough that he should save their lives by exerting his control over nature. No, Jesus goes on to put their lives in peril by making them come face to face with their faith. And that should put the fear of God into anyone. You see, just like everyone else who asked Jesus for something, whether it was to be free of demons or to see again or to stop a twelve-year hemorrhage, the disciples too got what they asked for, and would have to face the consequences, would have to factor that into the divine equations in their hearts to see what that would mean for their lives and loves. Oh, they’d seen it happen to someone else, but now it had

happened to them. And isn't it interesting what Jesus says to them — "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" He doesn't say that to anyone else. Not to the leper, not to the paralytic, not to the man with the withered hand, all people healed by Jesus in these first few chapters of Mark, all people who came to Jesus asking for his help, just like the disciples did, each in their own desperate, storm tossed, boat sinking way. But Jesus saves his in your face comment for the disciples, whom, we must believe, he thought should have known better, seeing all the rest.

Many people say this story was included in the Gospel of Mark not to try to win new converts to the faith by showing them the power of Jesus, but to encourage and motivate those who already believed by making them confront the terrible fact of their faith. You see, at one level, you can read this story as a salvation story, a healing story, a miracle story, and it is those things. And it is easy enough to see that Jesus saves them from death. But you can also read it as an invitation to ask yourself *for* what am I saved, in addition to *from* what am I saved. Those who would have first heard this story, at least those who would have heard read along with the rest of the stories in the Gospel of Mark, were already saved, already believers, already assured that God had stilled the storm of sin and chaos in their lives. These would be people who had already proclaimed their faith, but whose faith was being tested, who had discovered that saying yes to Jesus doesn't take away all the storms of life. The people in that boat along with Jesus weren't just any of the other unnamed people in the story who had a run-in with Jesus and

lived to tell about it. No, these were the disciples themselves, the founders of the church, who needed Jesus' help, and who gave into fear and despair, and whose faith got questioned. And if it could happen to the disciples, it could happen to the next generation of believers, and the one after that, and even to us today. "Why are you afraid, people? Have you still no faith?"

I hope it has been true in your life that knowing that God has your back has been of comfort to you. Indeed, that is another very important aspect of this story, to remind us that Jesus is still in the boat with us, that we are safe and taken care of, that despite our faithful lack of faith, Jesus does still make the wind and the sea obey him. It was for good reason that when the World Council of Churches was formed to give witness to the unity of Christians and the Church in the midst of World War 2 that it chose to use as its logo a storm-tossed ship with a cross for a mast. Even in the midst of war, and genocide, and ethnic cleansing, God is still with us, still with you, still with the Church. God didn't leave us to perish even in the storms of our own making, but continues to say to us and for us, "Peace! Be still." And that is good news.

Nevertheless, I think it would be a bad idea to make comfort the last word on this story, even as wonderful as it is to have the assurance of that good news, and here's where the suffering comes back in. You see, I don't think that God sent Jesus Christ into the world so that we could all feel comfortable. But I do think Christ came so that all could have peace. Maybe you've never thought about the

difference between comfort and peace, but God has. Comfort is propping up a nice fluffy pillow behind your head. Peace is sleeping well and deeply even when your pillow is a rock. Comfort is knowing that you have health insurance that will cover you even if you land yourself in the hospital on a mission trip to Costa Rica. Peace is knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ even when you are in that hospital, and that your brothers and sisters in the faith will be holding you in their prayers. Comfort is not needing a visa to travel almost anywhere in the world because you have a blue passport that says United States of America or Canada. Peace is not needing to rely on your country of origin to give you your identity. The biblical word for peace is shalom, a word which means so much more than the absence of war, but which means fundamental well-being in mind, body, and spirit. Shalom has to do with completeness and integrity, welfare and safety. Now it is true that when Jesus says to the storm, “Peace! Be still!” he is not saying to the wind and the water, “Peace be with you,” but rather, be calm and silent. But what he is bringing to that moment is shalom, the precise opposite of which is the desperation and fear and anxiety those in the boat were experiencing.

But here is where I want to remember again Jesus’ question, “Have you still no faith?” I said earlier that even while Jesus saved their lives by exerting his control over nature, he also put their lives in peril by making them come face to face with their faith, and that you can read this story as an invitation to ask yourself *for* what am I saved, in addition to *from* what am I saved. You see, when we really

come face to face with our faith, that meeting should convict us to go beyond comfort and seek shalom. It should make us ask ourselves “What’s next?” rather than stop at “I’m glad that’s over.” When we really come face to face with our face, we realize that we cannot simply stop at being reassured of God’s presence, but that we must accept the challenge of being God’s presence, of being the ones who don’t stop at giving thanks the storm is over, but who command the rest of the world’s storm to stop in the name of the Jesus Christ who is in that boat with us. Is your faith about you? Or is it about God? And if it is about God, it can’t be about you, but about God in you, and that should fill you with more awe than if you had seen the storm subside on the Sea of Galilee that day.

OK, I’m getting around to my suffering, and yours. As the early church soon found out, the storm on the lake was the least of their problems. A lot more treacherous was what they found once they made it back to shore. It was there they had to deal with people who don’t like to admit that God is in anyone, much less in the way they run their business or their government or their family. They had to deal with people who were more interested in their own comfort than with God’s shalom. And every time they tried to make it their business to remind the world that God says, “Peace! Be still!” to all those situations which threaten God’s people and God’s creation, every time they tried to say to suffering or injustice, “Peace! Be still!” there were consequences. The book of Acts is filled with stories of the jailing and the beating and the murder of the first believers, every time they

tried to claim that God and God alone can still the storm, that God releases from captivity not only those held in bondage to sin, but those held in bondage to other human beings, that in Jesus Christ there is no “in” crowd” and no “out” crowd but only God’s crowd that must care for one another as God cares for them. But thank God the jailing and the beating and the murder of believers didn’t stop there in the first century. Thank God that through the centuries there were people so provoked by Jesus’ question, “Have you still no faith?” that they too took the cry, “Peace! Be still!” to the streets and suffered the consequences for it. It is almost cliché now to recall Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, but what a great example of God’s people seeking not only comfort for the afflicted, but peace for the comfortable. Here’s the good news of the Gospel, that the hundreds of thousands who marched in the streets and suffered beatings by police and were knocked down by fire hoses and hauled off to jail and even shot in the back in their own driveways did it not only for themselves and their rights under the Constitution of their country, but for the very same people who beat them and jailed them and even murdered them, for those who may have gone home to the comfort of a cushy pillow but without peace in their hearts or their communities.

I suppose I should thank God that my life is not threatened. And actually I do from time to time thank God for my comfort. But what I ought to be doing is pondering ever more deeply Jesus’ question, “Have you still no faith?” and coming face to face with what little faith I have. The disciples were paralyzed with fear in

their swamping boat. But what difference would Jesus stilling the storm make if they just went on being paralyzed once they got to shore? I hope you don't misunderstand me about suffering. God doesn't call us to suffer. God calls us to have abundant life in Jesus Christ. But that abundant life will only be abundant when it is lived so that others do not have to suffer, and sometimes that will mean suffering ourselves. Maybe you remember my description of why the storms on the Sea of Galilee were so sudden and so fierce. It was because of the difference between the height of the mountain and the shallowness of the sea. That's the way it will be with us as long as some seek their comfort at the expense of the peace of others. We may feel small in our little boat in the midst of a storm, but we're not out there alone. Jesus said, and always says, "Peace! Be still!" Amen.