

Don't You Care?

Mark 4:35-41

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June 24, 2012

During the spring of my freshman year at Princeton I took a course in sailing to satisfy a Phys. Ed. Requirement. Fortunately, it was a pass-fail course. I felt more like Gilligan than the Skipper. We met for class every week at a small man-made lake on the edge of the campus. An upperclassman would give us a few tips and let us try them out in little two-person boats.

One afternoon there was a stiff wind when we got to the lake, and the surface was choppy. Our teacher thought twice about sending us out on the water, but in the end he told us to go on out. My partner that day was a girl who knew even less about sailing than I did. I had learned from my uncle who had a 26' Ranger how to tack back and forth and sail into a wind. You have to move the sail from one side of the boat to another in order to go toward the wind at a 45 degree angle. Moving the sail is called "coming about." Well, on that windy afternoon we tried to come about and the sail swung wildly to the other side, tipping the boat over just enough to let water come in over the side. Once the boat got a little water in it, it sat that much lower in the water and even more water came in. By the time I got the boat upright, it was too late. We couldn't do anything but watch her fill up with water and sink to the bottom. It was only then that I discovered that the lake was about four feet deep. We stood with our clothes and our shoes on in the muddy water and dragged the boat to the nearest shore. The teacher had to come in another boat to rescue us. We left that poor boat where she was. I suppose they salvaged her somehow. I never got a bill.

Jesus' band of apprentices went through something a good deal scarier than that. They had a bigger boat—a commercial fishing boat—on a bigger body of water, the Sea of Galilee—although it's not much more than a large lake. That lake is surrounded by hills and sits several hundred feet below the level of the Mediterranean. Cool winds from the Mediterranean come rushing down the hillsides into that basin full of warm water and you get sudden storms. It still happens today. But on this one day it must have been some storm. It was too much for the professional fishermen who'd been dealing with these storms all their lives. The boat was taking on water and it looked like they would sink. Even if you've never been in that situation yourself, you've seen enough paintings of this scene to imagine it. You've probably seen movies about sailing in a storm, like *The Perfect Storm*, *Master and Commander*, or *White Squall*.

This story from Mark's gospel is at least as familiar as it is exciting. We tend to read it all as a metaphor for the emotional storms we face in our own lives. But is that what Mark is getting at? I want to suggest that Mark is telling the story to answer two basic questions, which are recurring themes in the gospel: First, "Who is Jesus?" and second, "Does Jesus care?"

Between these two, I think Mark's interest is mostly with the first, while our interest is mostly with the second. From the very beginning of this gospel, the question of Jesus' true identity is a major focus. Nobody seems to understand who he is—except the demons. The disciples do not understand who Jesus is, even *after* they see miracles like this one. Hardly anyone "gets" Jesus until he is crucified and resurrected; *then* they see who he was all along.

Mark wants us to see that Jesus is the one who has power over the wind and waves. In the Old Testament, who is that? It is Yahweh, the Lord, the creator who brought people through the sea to freedom. Who is Jesus, then? None other than the everlasting God. For the Hebrew people,

the sea was a fearsome thing. They avoided the ocean altogether and did not build their cities along the coast. Beaches held no attraction for them, and they were happy to leave them to the Philistines and other peoples. For the Jews, the sea represented the forces of chaos in the world. Several psalms reflect this sense that the deliverance through the sea in the Exodus was a defeat of the sea-monster, the personification of the forces of chaos and destruction. Even the creation story is told in terms of God separating the waters, which were already there, and bringing order and life out of them. The only body of water the Jews fished in was the relatively small lake they call Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberias, which we call the Sea of Galilee.

For those of us who routinely look at the sea from the safety of our decks or while lounging in our beach chairs, it may be hard to think of the ocean as something to be afraid of. But ask the real fishermen. I remember Todd Tremble coming back on his second or third day as a mate on a commercial fishing boat, telling us that it was a lot more work than he'd imagined, and more dangerous. There he was trying to stay on his feet in ten-foot waves with a sharp knife in his hand gutting the fish. When you're in a little boat like G. Willie Makeit—probably the size of the boat Jesus was in—and the waves are ten feet tall, you have a little taste of the power of the sea and a little taste of fear.

In his book *The Perfect Storm*, Sebastian Junger, tells about the 1991 “storm of the century” and what happened to one fishing vessel. “The crew of the Andrea Gail entered the storm of the century the way we walk into a room: one minute all is calm with light variable winds and the next minute, the sea boils, churning up winds that begin at forty knots and then grow to exceed ninety knots. In just one hour, the barometric pressure dropped 996 millibars and the waves were over seventy feet high” [Cited by Sarah Jackson Shelton http://day1.org/1326-the_sleeping_jesus].

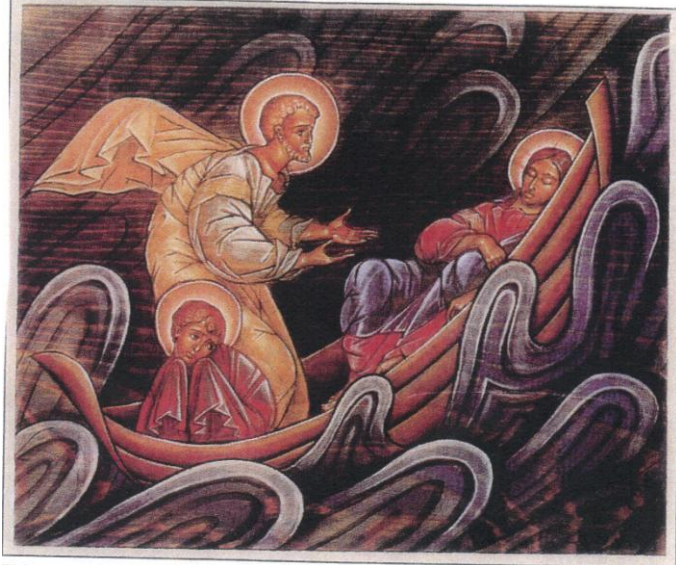
What happens when Jesus faces chaos like that? Jesus sleeps like a baby. No doubt he is exhausted from a day of preaching, but it was a common idea in Egyptian religion that the gods sleep because they are the only ones who don't worry. Jesus never seems to worry. When the frightened disciples wake him up and he sees that the storm really is about to sink the boat, Jesus rebukes the wind like a naughty child—or as he rebuked the demon in the first chapter of Mark. Then Jesus talks to the water. If you think of him saying, “Peace, be still,” it sounds all mellow, but the force of the Greek is that Jesus is annoyed. He says something like “Quiet down, you!” One scholar suggests we should translate it using pirate talk: “Avast, ye scurvy elements!” [D Mark Davis, *Left Behind and Loving It* blog] The word can mean “Be muzzled!”—as I would tell Percy to stop barking. Shut up, storm, Jesus says. Something like “Stifle yourself, Edith.”

And what happens? The storm stops just like that. All of a sudden there is a dead calm. Of course we've heard this story since we were little so it's lost its shock value, but can you imagine being there the first time? What the---? Jesus turns to the disciples and rebukes them, too. “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” But I'm interested in the disciples' response to that: “They were afraid with a great fear.” When Jesus calms the storm, the disciples are more afraid than ever. Why? Because they are afraid of Jesus. They ask one another, “Who *is* this guy?” One translator renders it (I think correctly) as “Who the hell is this guy? The wind and the sea obey him.”

That's the question we are to ask as readers. Who *is* Jesus? As moderns, we are more comfortable with healing miracles, because we know about the placebo effect. We can deal with exorcism stories because we read them in terms of mental illness. But we have no way around a story that says explicitly that Jesus has authority over the laws of nature. “Ruler of all nature,” we sing, but few believe it. Do we ever seriously pray for Jesus to do something about global warming? Do we ask him to save the rain forests? But what Mark wants us to see is that Jesus is

the same God who brought creation out of the waters of chaos, the one who defeated the waters of the Red Sea when he used them to defeat the Egyptians. Who is this guy? Omg, it's God in my boat. Not the storm God far away, but this guy sitting right here. What if God were one of us, and were still God?

But if Jesus is God, it still leaves open the question "Does he even care that we're dying here?" That is the question on the disciples' mind in the midst of the storm. They are upset with Jesus as their rabbi, their mentor, because he is not helping to solve the problem. He's sleeping. Hey Jesus, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Wake up and help us! Bail! Jump out. Do something. No one expected him to calm the storm. They just thought he should be helpful, and he wasn't helping.



That picture in the bulletin is a modern icon by Claude Lane, a Benedictine monk near Portland, Oregon. It's a very simplified picture of this story, but I like it because it portrays our two responses to Jesus when we are in a storm. The smaller figure cowering in the boat is John, who is usually shown as younger. His response is just fear. The larger figure standing up, with his clothes blowing around, is Peter. He says to Jesus, "Don't you care?" His response is accusation. Most of us are a little John and a little Peter.

When we face the storms of life—events like losing a spouse, losing a job, a serious illness, facing rejection—most of us give into fear like little John and cower a bit. But most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, also stand up to Jesus like Peter and accuse him: "Don't you even care?" Perhaps that is what Jesus means when he asks "Do you still have no faith?" Maybe he isn't asking so much "Don't you believe I have superpowers?" as he is asking "Do you still not trust me?" Do you have no faith in me, no faith that I wouldn't let anything happen to you that would completely destroy you? Do you not yet understand that nothing can separate you from my love?

The fact that we don't yet have faith does not mean that Jesus won't help us. He helps the faithless. He helps those who are merely afraid, and he helps those who accuse him of falling down on the job.

I won't say that we are all in the same boat, because while we share some of the same problems, the truth is that each of us is in his own boat. We are a little self bobbing up and down at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control. But the truth of the gospel is that Jesus is in the boat with you. Jesus is able to help. Nothing that can destroy you is beyond his power to

limit. And Jesus has every intention of helping, of calming down those forces that threaten to swamp you—just in the nick of time.

I like the lyrics to the song by Scott Krippayne from five years ago:
All who sail the sea of faith/ Find out before too long
How quickly blue skies can grow dark/ And gentle winds grow strong.
Suddenly fear is like white water/ Pounding on the soul,
Still we sail on knowing/ That our Lord is in control.
Sometimes He calms the storm/ with a whispered peace be still;
He can settle any sea/ But it doesn't mean he will.
Sometimes He just holds us close/ And lets the wind and waves go wild.
Sometimes He calms the sea/ And other times he calms His child.

Horatio Spafford was a lawyer in Chicago who was a friend of evangelist D. L. Moody and musicians who worked with him. In 1873, on the advice of the family physician, for his wife's health, he planned a trip to Europe for his whole family. At the last minute, some business problems developed and he had to remain in Chicago, but he sent his wife and four daughters ahead on the S.S. *Ville du Havre*. He expected to follow on another ship in a few days. On November 22, the *Ville du Havre* was struck by another ship and sank in twelve minutes. Mrs. Spafford was saved, but all four daughters drowned. On December 1, the survivors came ashore in Wales and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband in Chicago, "Saved alone." Soon after that, Horatio Spafford left by ship to meet his wife, and when he came to the place on the high seas where his four daughters had died, he wrote this hymn:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*