

## MASTER OF WIND AND SEA

Mark 4:35-41

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

June 24, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 4, verses 35 through 41. It is on page 710 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us what we should really fear. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 4, beginning at verse 35, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>35</sup> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, **“Let us go across to the other side.”** <sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup> And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. <sup>38</sup> 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?” <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> He said to them, **“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”** <sup>41</sup> 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?”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This gospel lesson is perhaps one of the most commonly misunderstood and misapplied passages in the Bible. That's my perception anyway. I hope it's not really misunderstood as often as I think it is, but I've heard it misapplied multiple times, and I suspect some of you have as well.

Now when I say that about this text, or when I say it about other texts, I hope I don't give you the impression that the Bible is too difficult for lay people to understand. It is not too difficult to understand. Sure, there are historical differences between then and now, and some passages are rather difficult. Some of the parables are meant to be challenging. But, in general, most of the Bible is actually quite easy to understand, especially the historical accounts. And this passage, I hope you will see, is an example of that.

One of the things I want to prove to you today is that most of the Bible is quite simple, and it only becomes challenging when we overthink it and try to get something out of the text that isn't really there.

First I'll show you the common misunderstanding. And this is the stereotypical application of this text. It goes like this: “Jesus can calm the storms in my life.” The idea is that Jesus can make the bad times go away, or at least help us get through them safely. Now that's not totally untrue. Jesus can calm the storms of our life. But he doesn't always do it. There is one storm of life that only two people have ever escaped. It's called death. Those two people, by the way, are Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). And I wonder what Job would have said if his friends had said to him, “God can calm the storms of your life.” He probably would have said,

“Yeah; I know. So why doesn’t he?” And when we encounter people who are experiencing great suffering and sorrow, it just doesn’t work to say, “Jesus can calm the storms of your life.” *What if he doesn’t? And if Jesus doesn’t calm the storms in my life, what does that mean? Does it mean that God doesn’t love me? Does it mean that God is still angry with me?* This teaching, which sounds comforting at first, can actually lead to great despair.

And furthermore, it’s just not the point of this text. I remember this old song we used to sing at Bible camp when I was a kid. It goes like this: “With Jesus in the boat I can smile at the storm, smile at the storm, smile at the storm.” Then it repeats itself. Then there’s a chorus. Then it repeats itself again. Then the whole song is repeated eleven times, replacing one word with “mmm” every time, until everyone is basically just humming by the end of it. It’s a little bit goofy, but the real problem with the song is that it misapplies this historical account of Jesus calming the storm. Try to find the part of the story where the disciples smile. They don’t. They go from fear to great fear. The entire experience, even after Jesus calms the storm, is downright terrifying.

So if you’ve heard this passage taught before, when I ask you what it means, you might say, “It means that Jesus can calm the storms in my life.” And the only reason you would answer that way is because someone told you that’s what it means. But that application treats this historical account like a parable. It makes the storm a metaphor for the problems in your life. But it’s not a parable. The storm is a storm, the sea is the sea, and the boat is a boat. There’s no metaphor, no parable; it’s just history. So let’s pretend you’ve never heard this passage taught before. You just read it once, then I ask you what the point is. And think about this. If you had never heard this passage before, what would you say the point of it is? You would probably say something like, “That Jesus guy is really powerful.” And you would be right. That’s the point. That’s the very simple point of this text. Jesus is powerful. He is so powerful that even the wind and the sea obey him (Mark 4:40). Inanimate objects that are just driven by the physics of the world are subject to the authority of Jesus. He speaks, and they obey. That’s power. And that is the simple point of this passage. Jesus is really, really powerful. We can say more about Jesus based on this text, and we will, but the simple and central point is that Jesus is really, really powerful.

And so I hope you see how simple the Bible can be. You don’t need to have a seminary education to understand passages like this. All it means is what it says. So don’t turn history into a parable. It’s history, and that is valuable, because it reveals to us the nature and character of Jesus. Perhaps the most important skill in reading the Bible is simply the ability to read a book honestly, that is, the ability to read something simply for what it says.

So let’s do that. Let’s look at this text and make some simple observations. Jesus is in a boat with his disciples. They’re on the Sea of Galilee. Now the title “sea” is a bit misleading. It’s not an oceanic body like the Mediterranean Sea. It’s really just a big lake.

And the boat is probably a fishing boat. That’s because some of the disciples were fishermen. Archaeologists found one in that region that was just big enough for thirteen people (Voelz, 331). The sides of it were about four feet high. And that seems to be the kind of boat we’re talking about here. So imagine being in a boat that size when the waves start coming up over the side. I’ve been in a canoe when the waves were high enough to come up to the side—about eight to ten inches. You don’t want to get sideways to the wind when it’s like that.

Now imagine being in the fishing boat, and the waves are a few *feet* high. That would take a lot of wind. And you're out in the middle of a big lake at night. That would be terrifying. The disciples believed they were perishing (4:38). But Jesus is just sleeping away in the back of the boat. The boat's being tossed around by the storm, and the disciples are probably screaming at each other as they try to bail water. They're probably all soaking wet from the waves, but Jesus is just sleeping away. That's almost miraculous in itself. But the disciples could use some help, so they wake Jesus up and say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (4:38) And I'm not really sure what the disciples thought Jesus was going to do. I don't actually think they were expecting a miracle, because when everything is said and done, they don't act like they expected one. They probably just wanted some help bailing water out of the boat. When you're in a storm like this, it's all hands on deck, even religious teachers. But Jesus is no ordinary teacher. He speaks not only to his students, but also to the weather. "He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, '**Peace! Be still!**' " (4:39) Now who does that? The only kind of people who talk to the weather are lunatics, jokesters, and God.

Remember, this is what we read in the Old Testament lesson from Job. At the end of the book, after thirty-five chapters of Job complaining and his friends giving him bad advice, God finally speaks. And this is what he uses to assert his authority over all creation. He's the one who tells nature what to do. He says to the sea,

"Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (Job 38:11).

And in the Gospel lesson Jesus rebukes the wind and the sea. And they actually obey. "The wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (4:39). And I want you to imagine this. What would happen if, during a great windstorm, the wind suddenly stopped? The waves would keep going for a while. Water needs some time to settle down. You see this when motorboats speed around a lake. Their waves travel all the way to the shore. And if a boat goes round and round in a circle, it stirs up big waves, and when the boat speeds away, the waves keep going for a while. Now if the wind is kicking up waves that are a few feet high, and the wind suddenly stops, the waves are going to keep going for quite a while. But that's not what happened when Jesus calmed the storm. He rebuked the wind *and* the sea, and they both ceased.

Now if the wind had just stopped, and the waves took some time to settle down, it would still seem like it was probably a miracle, but someone might be able to argue that it was just a coincidence. Maybe Jesus had some insight into the weather and knew when the wind would stop, so he timed his rebuke just right to make it look like a miracle. But that's not what happened, because the sea stopped too. So imagine this great storm instantly ceasing. Both the wind and the sea just stop. That would actually be kind of spooky, wouldn't it? When nature does stuff that it's not supposed to be able to do, that's a bit spooky. But the disciples were more than just a little bit spooked. It says, "They were filled with great fear" (4:41). And this is important: it wasn't during the storm that this fear filled them. Jesus rebukes them for being afraid during the storm, so we know they were afraid, but they were filled with a *great* fear *after* Jesus calmed the storm.

Now why would they be afraid *after* the storm ceased? It's because they realized something far more powerful than a deadly storm was sitting in their boat. That same powerful force that spoke from the whirlwind, silencing Job and his so-called friends, was sitting in their boat.

So this account of Jesus calming the storm isn't so much about driving away our fear. Instead, it's about redirecting our fear. Jesus is teaching them—and us too—who we should really fear. It reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 10, **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell.”** (Matt. 10:28) Now who is it that can destroy both body and soul in hell? I'll give you a hint: it's not the devil. The devil will not be the master of hell; the devil will be a prisoner of hell (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10). Over and over again the Scriptures teach us to fear God (e.g., Lev. 25:17; Deut. 6:13; Eccl. 12:13; 1 Peter 2:17; Rev. 14:7), and in this account of Jesus calming the storm, he teaches us that he is that God whom we should fear. Jesus is the one we should fear, and the disciples got that message loud and clear.

Now when we talk about fearing God, sometimes we have a tendency to soften the commandment. We tend to redefine fear as merely respect, and I think I'm probably guilty of this, so I'm correcting myself too. Now respect is certainly part of it, but if all God wants is for us to respect him, he would have said that. Hebrew and Greek have words for respect and reverence. But God chose to use the word “fear.” God is worthy of our fear, because he is powerful and just.

As sinful people who break God's commandments on a regular basis, we should fear God. It's kind of like the kid who's been naughty all day until he sees daddy's car pull into the driveway. It's time to shape up. And if we actually feared God the way he commands us, I'm pretty sure we would all sin a little less. We wouldn't quit altogether, because that's just not possible to do. But if we gave serious consideration to the fact that the God who has authority to cast us into hell is watching, there are probably some things that we just wouldn't do anymore.

This is the kind of fear the disciples have when Jesus calms the storm. They already know they are sinful and deserve God's wrath. Every person knows this, but we tend to push this fear down when God is out of sight and out of mind. But when Jesus calms the storm, God is not out of sight. God is right there, sitting in a fishing boat. And the disciples are probably thinking, *I'd rather take my chances with the storm*. Their uncleanness comes to mind when confronted with the God of heaven and earth, and they are filled with great fear. And this is the appropriate reaction.

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But this historical account is not merely about fear of God. It's also about faith. And we should remember that fear and faith are not mutually exclusive. We should have both, and this historical account teaches us to both fear and trust Jesus. Right after Jesus calms the storm, and before Mark mentions that the disciples were filled with great fear, Jesus says to them, **“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”** (4:40)

Now when Jesus rebukes for being afraid, it's not that he rebukes them for fearing *him*. He rebuked them for their fear of the *storm* and their lack of faith in him. Had they feared and trusted in Jesus appropriately, they would not have feared the storm. They still would have been concerned about the storm, and they may have still believed they would perish, but faith believes that nothing, not even death, can thwart God's intention that we should live. So faith fears nothing, not even death, because faith trusts in the one who has died for us and risen victoriously.

Now when I say that faith fears nothing, not even death, you may think to yourself, *Well, I must not have faith then, because I fear death.* I think that every human being, to some extent, fears death. That's just natural because death is bad and not part of God's original creation. Even Christians still have some fear of death. And our faith is always mixed with doubt. That means that even when you have faith, your fallen and sinful nature still fears death. This isn't good, because Jesus has removed the cause of that fear, but it is normal.

We always live with both doubt and faith. Sometimes we think, *Oh, if I just had more faith, then I could get through this.* But you can't quantify faith. You really can't measure how much of it you have. And you don't have to either. The effectiveness of faith really doesn't depend on how much you have. If you think that what you need is more faith, that's not really faith in Jesus. It's faith in your faith, which is not faith in Jesus and really amounts to nothing. Faith in faith can't save you. But when it comes to faith in Jesus, it's not really the amount of faith that matters, but the object of your faith. It's really about the person you trust in and whether or not that person is able to save you.

So when we say that we are saved by faith, we don't mean that faith is the actual power that saves us, because faith has no power of its own. The power of faith is all in the person we trust in. So when we say that we are saved by faith, all that really means is that Jesus saves us. Our faith doesn't actually do anything. Jesus does all the work.

Consider the disciples in the boat. They didn't have any faith. Jesus has to say to them, **"Have you still no faith?"** But they were still saved. Why? Because it wasn't dependent on their faith. It was dependent on Jesus. And this actually teaches the disciples to trust. They learned both fear and faith in that boat.

Even though they found themselves in the presence of a power far greater than the storm, they were not destroyed. Instead they were saved. That's because this great power had not come to destroy them, but to deliver them. And he came not merely to deliver them from the storm, but from death itself. This he did by dying and rising again. This great power turned out to be unbelievably gracious.

The disciples ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41) This is the God of heaven and earth who has come down to save us. We fear him because of his power and justice. And we trust him because of his power and mercy. When we fear and trust in God, we have nothing else to fear, because "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31), and Jesus is most certainly for us. The storms of life—whether they're literal storms or metaphorical—are still just as stormy as ever. And they might overtake us. When you get sick, you might die. That's the truth. We have no guarantee that Jesus will calm that storm. You might get a thousand people praying for you. You might muster up every ounce of faith you can. And you might still die. But if the God who calmed the storm and passed through death is for us, then we have nothing to fear, not even death, because this Jesus raises the dead by the same word he used to calm the storm.

So fear Jesus, for there is not greater power. And trust in Jesus, for there is no one more merciful. He is your Savior. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.