

PROPER FEAR

Mark 4:35-41

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 4, verses 35 through 41. 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.

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

This gospel lesson is a lot of fun. And the basic reason I think that is that I wasn't there. It's an “A-ha moment” for the disciples. You know what those are, right? Those are little epiphanies that we have from time to time. It's when you didn't know something, or it might be some problem or question you've been trying to figure out. But there's a sudden moment when it all becomes clear to you. Maybe you take a step away from your problem and the solution comes to you when you're not even thinking about it. Or it may be something that you've just wondered about for a long time, and in an unexpected moment, you hear something that just makes sense of everything. They're those quick and unexpected moments when you instantly go from confusion or ignorance to a full understanding. Those are “A-ha moments.”

The disciples have one of those moments here, but instead of calling it an “A-ha moment,” they would have called it an “Uh-oh moment.” And the difference between an “A-ha moment” and an “Uh-oh moment” is that “Uh-oh moments” are not so desirable. It's when you didn't know there was a problem, but then, in an instant, the problem becomes clear to you. An “A-ha moment” is when the answer instantly becomes clear. An “Uh-oh moment” is when the problem instantly becomes clear. And that's what happens to the disciples.

It's the same thing that happened to Job in the Old Testament lesson (Job 38:1-11). These two readings are about as good of an Old Testament and Gospel lesson combination as you'll ever see. In both lessons, God's people come to an immediate understanding of who God is, and not only that, but that he is right in front of them, talking to them, and it terrifies them.

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For Job, his experience comes after thirty-five chapters of him complaining about God and his friends giving him bad advice. Then, and I suppose this was quite unexpected, the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me” (38:2-3). That’s the Old Testament way of saying, “Put your man pants on, Job. We’re going to have a talk.” The LORD does all the talking, and by the end of it, the only thing Job can do is confess his sin, and confess that the LORD is God.

In the Gospel lesson, it’s an “Uh-oh moment” when the disciples learn who they should really fear. This is perhaps one of the most commonly misunderstood or misapplied passages in the Bible.

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

Usually, the Bible only becomes challenging when we overthink it or 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 your 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. 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. The basic point is that Jesus is really powerful. 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.

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. Paint this picture in your mind. The boat is probably a fishing boat, just big enough to hold all thirteen of them. 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; that’s what the text says (4:38). But Jesus is sleeping 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 must be soaking wet from the waves, but Jesus is just sleeping. That's probably a miracle 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 really 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. But Jesus helps by talking 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. But the wind and the sea actually obey. The sea obeys the voice of God.

We also heard this in Job. God asks, "Who shut in the sea with doors ... and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?'" (Job 38:11). At creation, the LORD separated the land and the sea by his powerful Word. And in the Gospel lesson, that same LORD, Jesus of Nazareth, rebukes the wind and the sea. And they actually obey. "The wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (4:39).

This is actually kind of eerie. 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. Really big waves might go on for miles. 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 some time. But that's not what happened when Jesus calmed the storm. He rebuked the wind *and* the sea, and they both ceased. This is kind of eerie. 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. If you have the text in front of you, look at it. At what point were the disciples most afraid? Consider this question: *When were the disciples most afraid?* It wasn't during the storm. Jesus rebuked them for being afraid of the storm, so we know they were afraid, but they were filled with a *great fear after* Jesus calmed the storm.

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 to the sea in creation and answered Job from the whirlwind was sitting in their boat. This is their "Uh-oh moment."

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.

When we talk about fearing God, sometimes we have a tendency to soften the commandment. We redefine fear as merely respect. And respect is certainly part of it, but if all God wants is for us to respect him, he could have said that. But the Bible uses 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. 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. This is their “Uh-oh moment.” And this is actually an appropriate reaction. This is what Jesus is going for. This is part of what Jesus is teaching them.

But this passage is not only about fear of God. It’s also about faith. Fear and faith go together. We should have both.

This is a good place to remember the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther asks what that means. Answer: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” That’s what it means to have a God. “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” It’s not just fear. It’s not just love. And it’s not even just faith. Fear alone is despair. Love alone is impossible without faith. And faith never exists without also having fear and love. All three of these go together, and today we’re especially considering the connection between fear and faith. Faith is knowing that the one we fear is not against us, but for us.

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).

When Jesus rebukes them for being afraid, he does not rebuke them for fearing *him*. He rebukes 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. I suppose they still would have been concerned about it, 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.

I should pause and clarify something here. 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 every human being, to some extent, still 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. 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 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 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. 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

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both fear and faith in that boat. Faith is when you learn that the one you fear is not against you, but for you.

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 Jesus 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. 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 no greater power. And trust in Jesus, for there is no one more merciful. He is your Savior. Amen.

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