

“Are You Keeping Your Head Above Water?”

Mark 4:35-41

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I wonder how long they fought that storm before they awakened Jesus. I also wonder what the disciples said about him sleeping through this storm while they frantically battled those waves and bailed water out of their boat. After all, crossing the lake after a long, hard day was his idea, not theirs. They were merely following his bidding, even though the four fishermen on board knew how risky this was.

Their frustration and anger boiled over when they woke Jesus up, didn't it? They cried out in unison, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

How did Jesus respond to their insensitive plea? He rebuked the wind as if it were a demon, calmed the sea and then rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith.

“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Mark 4: 40. It appears that the storm did not disturb him as much as their unbelief. No wonder they looked at him with awe and wondered if he was more than a teacher.

There are many ways to approach this text, which is a combination of a nature miracle and divine epiphany, because there is no shortage of questions in it and about it. My attention was drawn last week to the first question in this passage, the one asked by the disciples while fighting the waves. “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Is this the cry of your heart today? Can you relate to the disciples who feared drowning that evening?

Mark's readers certainly could, and no doubt this was why he included this story in his narrative. Mark's readers were facing many threats, including persecution, and wondering where God was. Did He not care for them? Was He unaware of their plight or indifferent to it?

This also parallels the story of Jonah, where the captain of the ship he was on charged the prophet with not caring about the fate of him and his passengers (Jonah 1:6).

What about you? Do you feel like you are on a sinking ship and all your efforts to keep afloat are in vain? I know many who feel this way and it breaks my heart. You may be one, and if so, what is rocking your boat?

Have you lost your job in this tough economy or has your income been severely reduced? Have you been asked to do more work on your job because others have been laid off and not replaced? Are you struggling with a rebellious child? Is your marriage on the rocks? Is your health declining? Are you struggling with an addiction and losing the battle?

How are you coping? What is sustaining you? Do you need help? Where can you turn to find it?

This text underlines the importance of faith during a crisis. What caused panic in the disciples should have caused Jesus to panic, but it did not. Why? Mark connected their different responses to faith. “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” Jesus asked the disciples.

When fear and faith collided in Jesus' life, faith won. When they collided in the disciples' lives, fear won. The difference is startling in this story.

How does faith help us get through a storm? To begin, it gives us permission and courage to confront our fears. Storms are real and so is fear. Denial is deadly and so unnecessary.

“Fear and faith, faith and fear. It can be so easy to give one of them room in my mind and body,” writes Carolyn Wohlforth, Associate Editor of *Bible Workbench*. When fear overwhelms me like a giant wave, I first try to fight it back all alone. Then, when fear gets too big and dark, I think about reaching out to someone else, and the internal battle ensues. ‘I don't want to bother him! I can't admit to anybody that I am so weak, and maybe there is nothing wrong.’ ”

Ever felt that way? Who hasn't? Faith helps us to be honest about our need for help and seek it, especially when our boat is rocking.

It then connects us to others who can help us—God, family, friends, Sunday school class members, wise counselors and sometimes even strangers. Faith lets us know that we are not alone because help is available and then nudges us to seek it.

I also think that faith brings the best out in us. Contrast the disciples' response to this crisis to that of Jesus. Fear brought the worst out in them. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" That remark was more than insensitive. It was ugly and cruel.

On the other hand, Jesus did not respond to their personal attack, but calmed the sea. Faith brought the best out in him. He was more concerned about their welfare than his feelings.

It is through faith that God keeps us focused and gives us strength, courage and confidence to meet life's stiffest challenges. This is why it has been said of many during a crisis that "this was their finest hour."

During our time of quiet meditation this morning, Kathy encouraged us to identify our biggest struggles and ask for God's help to deal with them this week. I hope you took advantage of that opportunity and others that come your way each day.

Doubts about God emerge in times of crisis and panic can make us feel that we are separated from Him. According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, this is dangerous because "a suspicion that God does not really care what happens to us will corrode our religious life."

Allow your faith to remind you of God's love and faithfulness. Let it awaken the sleeping Christ in you so that you can face life's challenges with courage and confidence.

I also hope you will allow your faith to awaken you so that you can hear the cries for help from those around you. Do you think there are people near you who are perishing? I do. Can you hear their cries for help? I fear that far too often, we do not. Why?

Perhaps we are preoccupied with our own struggle for survival or we have grown indifferent. Maybe we don't know what to do and how to help someone who is drowning in a sea of problems. That's understandable.

How do you help someone who is crying out for help? What do you have to offer? What could you say or do that would lighten their load and give them hope? What difference could you make in their life?

Think back to a time when you thought you were drowning. What did someone do for you? How did a family member or friend help you in your hour of greatest need when the waves were buffeting and your life almost capsized? Pass it forward.

Last Sunday's text was the one that precedes this week's. It was Mark 4:26-34, a passage that contains two parables about sowing seeds. You recall that one of the parables mentioned the mustard seed, one of the smallest known to man at that time. What was the point Jesus was making in these two parables? The kingdom of God, the world as God envisioned it at creation, will be built upon the accumulation of small deeds that only faith notices.

In the sermon, *Urban Gardening*, I wrote, "No deed is too small or insignificant in God's eyes. Growth will occur if seeds are planted. This is why Jesus used the mustard plant as an example. On average, mustard shrubs in the Mideast grow to be about eight to ten feet in height. This seems almost impossible since it sprouts from one of the smallest seeds known to man.

Just as a tiny seed can produce a large bush that is a reliable source of food, medicine and shade, so can small deeds done in Christ's name make a big difference in the lives of people. Good deeds don't have to come in big packages. Small ones are just as important. Our job, then, is to plant seeds in the fields that God gives us, sometimes intentionally and at other times, spontaneously."

How do you help someone that appears to be drowning in a sea of problems? I think it begins by responding to the question that is on their mind. "Do you care that I am perishing?" The first seed you plant is the word yes. When you utter that word, I believe the one who rebuked the wind and calmed the sea for the disciples will show you what you can do to help.

