

“Waterproof Faith”

Mark 4:35-41

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She began to cry when she heard thunder and saw lightning flash across the sky. The parents of this little six-year-old girl rushed to her bedroom to comfort and reassure her. “Everything will be all right,” they told her, “we are close by and God is here with you.”

The third time she was awakened by the storm and told by her parents that God was with her to take care of her, she exclaimed, “I know God is here, but right now I need someone with skin on him!”

The disciples must have felt this way the night they battled a fierce storm, not in their beds at home but in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was asleep in the hull of the ship until they abruptly awakened him when they thought the boat was going to capsize.

“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” they asked. Jesus rose from his resting place, rebuked the wind and then rebuked them for their lack of faith.

This story raises a lot of questions that have no easy answers and each of them could be the basis of a sermon. If the disciples had sufficient faith that night, how would they have handled this situation differently? Would they have slept along with Jesus expecting God to protect them? Would they have rebuked the winds as Jesus did? While this story gives us an example of the lack of faith, it does not give us a clear picture of what a person of faith looks like. As a matter of fact, nowhere in Mark are the disciples described as people of strong faith, holding them up as the standard. Up to this point in Mark’s gospel, the only people that exhibited strong faith were those who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus by lowering him through a roof.

The text itself includes several questions that could be the focus of our attention this morning. “*Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?*” How does God show compassion and mercy? What do we expect of Him when we are in serious trouble?

“*Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?*” Jesus asked them after he calmed the waters. These questions lead us to explore the relationship between fear and faith.

“*Who is this man,*” the terrified disciples collectively ask. This question has led to endless hours of discussion on the identity and mission of Jesus.

Our focus could be directed toward the symbolism contained in this story. There are scholars that see the boat as a symbol for the early church and the rough seas representing the resistance to Jesus’ attempt to take the gospel to the Gentiles. When Jesus told his disciples to cross the lake that night, he was leaving the Jewish side of the lake to go to the Gentile side in order to teach and heal in those communities, too. Was this story Mark’s way of telling the early church to quit playing it safe, get out of their comfort zone, cross to the other side of the lake and fulfill the Great Commission by taking the gospel to everybody? This sounds reasonable to me.

As you can see, there is a lot of sermon material in this story and each one could teach many valuable lessons. However, I want to share an idea with you introduced to me this week by Brian Stoffregen. Borrowing a concept from Rabbi Edwin Friedman, author of Generation to Generation, Stoffregen said that Jesus was the “non-anxious presence” in the boat that night. He brought a sense of order, peace and stability to that chaotic and dangerous situation with his courage, poise and power. When the disciples wanted or expected Jesus to share their panic and distress, he refused to do so. Instead, he calmed the storm and gave them hope.

I like this idea and want to draw our attention to it. It brings this event in the life of Jesus and his disciples into my life in new and fresh ways.

At times, all of us need someone that can bring order, peace and stability to chaotic and dangerous situations. We need someone that can give us confidence and hope by their “non-anxious presence.”

Last Tuesday I visited one of the most beloved coaches in Gwinnett County, Hugh Buchannan, affectionately known as Coach Buck. Up until two years ago, he was the Parkview baseball coach, leading them to multiple state championships with players like Jeff Francoeur and many other fine athletes. I visited his bedside at the St. Francis Hospital in Columbus.

Coach Buck left Atlanta early Monday morning to teach a baseball clinic in Columbus. About twenty minutes into his lesson, he had a heart attack. The major artery to his heart was completely blocked, which usually causes a fatal attack. He is alive today because of the good work of paramedics and his proximity to a cardiac care unit in an excellent hospital. He readily admitted this when I talked with him and Judy.

“I quickly realized how serious this was by the expressions on the faces of the people taking care of me,” Coach Buck said. “I was also comforted and calmed by their ability to bring order and stability to this chaotic situation. They knew what they were doing and I trusted them completely.”

“Did you ever dream Monday morning while driving to Columbus that your world would be turned upside down so quickly and you would be in a cardiac care unit?” I asked him. “No, I certainly did not, but I am grateful to be here under the circumstances and thankful for all of those God used to save my life.”

Who has done this for you? Who has been the presence of Christ in your life when you needed them most, bringing order, stability and peace? You will never forget those people, will you? Thank God for them, for truly they were gifts from Him.

On the other hand, there are times when we need to be the presence of Christ bringing order, stability and peace to others in their times of need. We need to be the “non-anxious presence” in their anxious world, speaking an authoritative, calming word.

Today we honor Dr. Chuck Moates on his last Sunday as our administrator and wish him well as he retires. For fifteen years he has served faithfully and on many occasions he has been the “non-anxious presence” on this staff. At no time was this better witnessed than during the eighteen-month interim before I was called as pastor. During this time, Chuck led this church with his steady hand and wise counsel. For his exemplary leadership, we all owe him a great debt of gratitude. Thanks, Chuck, for calming the waters and safely leading Smoke Rise to the other shore.

Let me tell you from where the title of this sermon comes. On one of John Wesley’s voyages across the Atlantic, a frighteningly fierce storm broke out, pitching and tossing the ship like a toy boat. While Wesley and others clung to their bunks and hid their heads in fear, a group of Moravians, traveling to America calmly gathered together to hold their daily worship service and sing praises to God. Watching these Moravians, so unperturbed by the howling winds and crashing waves, Wesley realized he was witnessing a truly **“waterproof faith.”** From that moment on, Wesley prayed that he would have that much faith and be that kind of calming presence in others’ lives.

How can we do this? How did Jesus do it? He allowed God’s comforting and empowering Spirit to live in and through him and he seized every opportunity to help others walk through their storm.

A little girl was about to undergo a dangerous operation. Just before the doctor administered the anesthetic, he said, ““Before we make you well, we must put you to sleep.” The girl responded, “Oh, if you are going to put me to sleep, then I must first say my prayers.” She folded her hands, closed her eyes and said, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus’ sake. Amen”

Later on the surgeon told his colleagues that he prayed that prayer that night for the first time in thirty years.

How can we be the “non-anxious presence” in others’ lives? Take a lesson from a little girl that knows about love, trust and companionship.