

*Mark 4:35-41*  
*June 20, 2021*  
*Fathers' Day*  
*"Why Are You Afraid?"*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

A little over 30 years ago, I wrote a little piece for the cover of the Sunday bulletin at our first appointment, to Aldersgate UMC in Rock Hill. It was a short reflection on the **relationship of trust** our firstborn, Rebekah Clare, had with her parents over the earliest years of her life. What I wrote about was how, whenever mom and dad announced we were going somewhere, she would allow us to get her ready, and put her into her car-seat in our 1988 Dodge Caravan -- with all the necessary equipment, and things to keep her amused -- and off we'd go. She had no idea, really, of where we were going, or even why. She was happy to go anyway.

And what struck me about this, after a little while, was **just how trusting** Rebekah was: as long as mom and dad were with her, along for the ride, she was without a care in the world. And then it occurred to me -- and I know you may think that the comparison is a little silly -- but it occurred to me that this is -- at least *something* like -- how **our relationship with God** -- at its best -- is supposed to work.

It obviously *wasn't* working that way for Jesus' first disciples in the famous story we read this morning from the Gospel of Mark. It's still early days in their relationship, of course. Until this point in the story of their ministry together, they have really been **spectators**. They have *heard* Jesus **announcing** that the kingdom of God was breaking into the life of the world -- apparently in and through Jesus himself. They have seen him *expose* people with diseased spirits (e.g., the apparently civil man in the congregation at the synagogue -- Mk. 1:21ff.) and then **free** them from those spirits. They have seen Jesus **heal** the sick. And, across the whole of Mk. 4, until they get in the boat and set sail across the Sea of Galilee, they have heard Jesus **teaching** about the kingdom of God.

It is at this point, however -- when Jesus tells them to travel with him across the Sea -- now they become **personally** involved. Now they will have some real skin in the game. Jesus is taking them on what will in effect be their **first "mission" trip** -- taking the ministry out of their home area, the *Jewish* region on the west side of the Sea over to the *Gentile* towns on the east side of the Sea. Remember, they are living in a world in which Jews and Gentiles do not mix. To do so is, from the Jewish perspective, dangerous: Gentile religious ideas and practices were, after all, all over the map. To be exposed to them could "contaminate" your own religious ideas and practices.

Long before a violent storm blows up on the Sea of Galilee, i.e., Jesus' first disciples are **already anxious**, already on edge.

Their journey across the Sea presumably started out calmly enough. And the Sea of Galilee is not that wide across -- just a little wider than Lake Hartwell at its widest point. You can see from one side to the other. But there is something about its **geography** that has always made it *notorious* for sudden storms arising -- just as it does on this occasion. Suddenly, their boat is taking on water, and the first disciples of Jesus are -- understandably -- fearing for their lives. Jesus, meanwhile, is not only undisturbed, but is sleeping through it all.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

This is the *first* of the **two pivotal questions** asked in this passage. What they ask Jesus has got to be one of the most *basic*, and *enduring*, **questions** in the Christian life. **Does God care?** Does God *really* care about each of us? In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus at one point tries hard to reassure that God really *does* care for each of us. In Mt. 10, he asks his audience, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted (vv. 29-30).

The first followers of Jesus are **terrified** because they are in a situation in which they **cannot exercise** any **control whatsoever**. They are professional fishermen. They know these waters like the back of their hand. But when the wind and waves do what they are doing, they are helpless. No amount of *experience, knowledge* or *skill* can help them. When we are out of control in the situations we face in life, feeling **helpless**, it is just *naturally terrifying*. A trivial example: the other day, as I was walking up the brick steps from the parsonage driveway, onto the brick walkway to the front door, I tripped and fell, **completely out of control** of *how* or *where* I would land. Thankfully, even though I landed hard, I broke nothing and suffered only a bad scrape. But it was terrifying, just to experience being out of control, only for a moment.

Light years *away* from trivial, on the other hand, is the **helplessness** you experience as you watch over a loved one, lying in a hospital bed with some dread disease, and all you can do is wait, and pray. And that's all. It's in those situations that some people experience the **utter absence** of God, while others come experience the **presence** of God in a way differently than they ever have before in life.

But, of course, the disciples, there on the sinking boat, are not worried about whether God cares for *each* of them. It's the "we" who are perishing. Does God really care about the life-together, and work-together -- *viz.*, the ministry -- of the "we" who have responded to Jesus' call to follow him by getting with him in the "boat" with him, and journeying with him to wherever he calls us to go. Does God care about **us**? Does God really care about **the Church**?

Until we get into the boat with Jesus, to go where he wants to go, the question of whether God **cares**, for all of us together, is ***not all that important***. But when we've sailed out into the middle of the Sea -- when we've gone *out on a limb*, laid it on the line, for Jesus -- **now** this matters. A lot.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Being in mission with Jesus almost always means moving beyond the familiar and the comfortable, and maybe even beyond safety. Cf. Abigail's multiple mission trips with MSN, from Ecuador to Malawi, learning first-hand how little others have, and how little she needs; cf. Beth C., Joan M., et al., at LRUMC, and their prayer-walking/driving the drugs-infested neighborhood just blocks from the church.

Finally, Jesus wakes up and, answers the question his terrified disciples are asking by saying, "Peace, be still," and the wind and the waves were suddenly at **peace**, once again **still**. And then he asks the **second** question posed in this text: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

So, are we supposed to understand that, if we have enough faith, we are never to be afraid?

Hardly. Jesus never says that -- in following him, especially together, as his Church -- there's nothing to be afraid of. Actually, if we as his Church are only ever doing things which ***don't*** make us afraid, we're not being the Church.

But the **important word** here for us today is not that we need to strive to be more courageous for God. It's that we need, as the Church, to **understand**, to ***envision*** our life and ministry together, **trusting** in the **faithfulness of God**, rather than ***limiting*** either our vision ***or*** our ministry to what we believe to be only humanly achievable. Jesus tells the disciples to not be afraid, ***not*** because the storm isn't dangerous, but because God **is with them**.