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this way forward

STAY IN THE BOAT

Mark 4:35-41

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Jesus wins the prize for asking the most ridiculous and obvious question in all the Bible, “Why are you afraid?”

“Because we are drowning, Jesus!! Because the boat is filling up with water and we don’t know how to do that walk-on-the-water thing! Or breathe like a fish!” I imagine the disciples were not only confused but angry at Jesus’ question. Like the person who screams out in agony while falling down the stairs and we ask, “Are you alright?!” The mere question aggravates us!

And yet, the question comes from our Lord, so there must be something more to it. In fact, Jesus would not have been asking this question to discover the source of the disciples’ fear (anyone, but especially Jesus, could have figured that one out), but rather to invite the disciples to contemplate the question. And since the disciples serve as prototypes for the life of faith, I believe Jesus intends us to do the same.

Why are you afraid?

Perhaps you are frustrated also by the mere asking of the question.

“The polar ice caps are melting, drug epidemic is spiraling, violence in the schools is multiplying, and Ebola, for goodness sake, is rearing its head!”

Why are you afraid?

“Well I don’t know if Social Security will be there when we retire, I am not sure who will care for me when we I am old and infirm. And North Korea does not seem to want to settle down!”

Why are you afraid?

Because they found a spot on my lung. My daughter’s marriage is dissolving. My business is failing.

There are a myriad of reasons. And yet, Jesus knows this. God knows this.

But still the Bible tells us time and time again, “Fear not.” It reminds us, because there is an alternative to fear that we want to avoid, that we won’t even admit to ourselves. Scripture goes out of its way to instruct us, command us, remind us, assuage us, “Fear not”.

...Fear not, for I am with you.

...Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy.

...Fear not, for I have redeemed you.

And yet, we stubbornly persist in fear. We even seek it out. We are strangely drawn to fear. We will pay \$15 to be scared at a movie theater. We will jump from airplanes. We will construct elaborate haunted houses, eat bizarre food, and bungee jump from ridiculous heights. Recently the highest bungee jump in the world was launched. But first you must walk out onto the highest, glass-bottom bridge in the world. It soars 853 feet over a river gorge in Zhangjiajie, China!

So, the Bible must remind us, command us, to “fear not” because, perhaps more than we know, we are comfortable in fear, at times we may even prefer it.

I wonder if what Jesus really meant was, “Why are you still afraid?” You have seen what I can do. You have seen my compassion. You have seen my love and my commitment.

He asked this after the storm had been calmed; after the danger had subsided. I think Jesus saw their faces and not only had the fear not disappeared, but it had taken on a new dimension.

A storm is one thing to fear. But the person who has power over that storm?

At first, I think they were afraid of the storm. But now that they saw what Jesus could do, they were afraid of him.

The disciples continued in fear even after the storm was calmed perhaps for two reasons: lack of trust and, alternatively, complete trust that God was

going to do exactly as God intended. And that is perhaps what truly terrified the disciples.

The first fear is the easier and more obvious to consider. Like the dog that has been beaten when the blender of life has been set to puree one too many times, a single tasty treat is not enough for us to trust our new master. Simply because things have temporarily improved does not mean we instantly have perfect trust in our future.

But we know this part of ourselves, our fear that our trust will be misplaced. We will even pray to God for more courage, for more trust, in God's loving care, for more trust in God's plan for the future. Like this typical prayer I found on the internet,

Dear Lord teach me to trust in you so when the unexpected storms of life come I will expect peace in the midst of those storms. Knowing that you are near, you hear my cries, and you are with me and for me.

What a sweet and reassuring prayer...But unfortunately, the Bible does not do sweet, postcard prayers. When Jesus calmed the literal storm, it did nothing to calm the storm within the disciples. The problem with that sweet prayer about finding peace in the storms of life, is it is all about us and what we want.

When they saw Jesus' power over nature, at that moment, they had complete trust that Jesus would be able to do exactly what he planned to do. And that is what truly terrified the disciples. Mark tells us that act of power, not the storm, is what struck awe in their hearts. But what the Greek actually says is "*phobos megas*" which means, "They fear exceedingly!"

They feared exceedingly because they knew their life was no longer their own. They knew, at this point, things were going to happen according to Jesus' plan not theirs.

And Jesus' plan didn't look so great.

He told them, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head."

I am going to be homeless?! You never said anything about being homeless!

He declared, "Blessed are you when people revile you in my name!"

Reviled! O please Jesus tell me more!

He invited them with this luring phrase, "Take up your cross and follow me!"

There is a cross in this thing! I hate crosses!

And he closed the deal saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last!"

Sign me up Jesus. I can't wait to be at the end of the line!

In truth, they each followed Jesus for their own reasons, like we all do in our lives. We come to church to find comfort; we come to educate our children; we come to receive moral grounding; we come to combat loneliness and give our lives purpose. All of these are good reasons to be here.

But none of them are THE REASON.

Then, every once in a while...

ZAP!!!! God gets us.

And at that moment we realize we are not here because of our choices or our agenda, but God's! And God is the one dictating things, not us.

God zaps our conscience and it can happen anywhere, at any time. It happened to Isaiah in the Temple and to Jeremiah while he was cooking supper. And suddenly, the real fear sets in because you have lost all control.

Liking driving the car in a storm – for a time you may feel in control but when you hit that thin sheet of black ice and the car spins, panic sets in!

Perhaps the real question we should ask ourselves is not, "Why are you afraid?", but "Why aren't you afraid!!!" If you have never had a healthy dose of fear concerning God's agenda, then I just don't think we are paying close enough attention.

Discipleship is terrifying and, if it is not, then we aren't doing it right. At any moment God could demand everything of you. The Bible teaches us that God reaps where he does not sow.

The disciples cried out to Jesus, "Teacher, don't you care?" What they really meant was, "Don't you

care about our plans? Don't you care about our fear?!"

But this was exactly the lesson he wanted to teach them. This discipleship thing is going to be hard and stormy and out of your control and, at times, you will be so swamped it will feel like you are about to go under.

Discipleship is as frightening as a boat in a windstorm; it is going to ask courage, fortitude, and, most of all, trust. That storm was terrifying, but they were even more frightened of the power of the one who could calm it. He would take them where they did not want to go, their agenda was thrown to the wind.

And, so, trust is what he asks of us and what we need. Not the kind of polite trust which manifests itself in sentimental prayers. Not the kind of trust that holds onto our personal plans and dreams. But the kind of trust that has enough courage to truly put yourself completely in God's hands.

Because if we do, then God can truly make something out of us. Not what we want to be – but what God intends. And it will always be something more awesome, powerful, and beautiful than we ever could have imagined for ourselves. It takes guts to stay in that boat with Jesus when the storm hits and the waves threaten to sink your hope. It takes courage and focus and faith. That is what Jesus was doing with them in that boat. Making them into disciples that were worthy of his Lordship.

There are others whose courage has lasted a lifetime. Who, I believe, only get through it because they know that God and Jesus are in their corner in the stormiest times of life. And they are not going to jump out of that boat because they know that God has something truly amazing for them in store, as hard, as impossibly hard, as it sometimes feels.

Teaching is a difficult challenge. Maintaining classroom discipline, juggling the ever-changing curriculum, satisfying needy parents and demanding superintendents is enough to make you quit the profession. And to have a classroom filled with children who have significant behavior problems

multiplies that challenge beyond which many can persevere.

A few weeks ago, I had an amazing, life-altering privilege. I was asked to say a prayer at the McCarthy/Tessler School graduation. It is a school filled with children with various mental and physical challenges. I got the merest glimpse of just how hard it must be for the teachers who must constantly take deep breaths to give them patience. One child stood up and tore off his gown to sit with his mother. Another walked down the aisle filled with fear. Each one had his or her own unique challenge.

I can hardly imagine doing that for a single day, much less for a lifetime. Surely the parents, and the teachers, have had many stormy days in which they felt like they were sinking to the point of going under.

But those teachers stayed in the boat. They had courage through the fear, the hard days, through the self-doubt, through frustration, to stay with these kids and to see them through.

I imagine that most of these teachers did not envision such a career for themselves. Most of us would never intentionally seek out something so difficult, with so little monetary reward or respect from society.

But as these children sang, as they recited, as they walked or rolled to get their diploma, the greatest of all emotions that shown so strongly through the exhaustion and fear, was an overriding sense of purpose and of love. To care for these children as if they were their own, to see them as precious in the eyes of God, to treat them as their own children, and to give them all the love they possibly could.

Discipleship is hard and, at times, fearful. Stay in the boat. Jesus has something in mind for you far greater than you can ever imagine.