

**Mark 4: 35-41**

**HOW GOOD AND PLEASANT IT IS, O GOD, TO BE HERE, TOGETHER, ON A BEAUTIFUL JUNE MORNING. HOW GOOD TO TURN TO YOU ON THIS FIRST DAY OF A NEW WEEK SO FULL OF PROMISE AND OPPORTUNITY. YET, WE CONFESS, BENEATH THE SURFACE WE ARE CONCERNED, WORRIED, ANXIOUS ABOUT ASPECTS OF LIFE THAT FEEL OUT OF CONTROL AND THAT THREATEN US OR PEOPLE WE LOVE. AND SO WE HAVE COME TO HEAR A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND PEACE. REMIND US AGAIN OF YOUR LOVE THAT WILL NEVER LET US GO, IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.**

**JESUS' STILLING THE STORM ON THE SEA OF GALILEE IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMILIAR STORIES IN THE GOSPEL. PERHAPS SOME OF YOU CAN RECALL THE EVENT IN CHILDREN'S STORYBOOK BIBLES OR PICTURES ON THE WALLS OF SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS. JESUS STANDING ON THE EDGE OF THE BOAT WITH HIS ARMS OUTSTRETCHED OVER THE WHITECAPS OF THE RAGING SEA.**

**PASTORS ARE OFTEN ASKED IN A GOOD-NATURED WAY IF WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE WEATHER ON THE DAY OF A CHURCH PICNIC, FOR INSTANCE, OR FOR AN OUTDOOR WEDDING. IT'S HAPPENED MORE THAN ONCE WHEN THE FATHER OF THE BRIDE APPROACHES ME AFTER THE REHEARSAL ON A RAINY FRIDAY EVENING AND SAYS, "PASTOR, YOU MUST HAVE SOME PULL UPSTAIRS. CAN YOU ORDER A SUNNY DAY FOR TOMORROW AT 4:00?" AND OVER THE YEARS I'VE LEARNED TO SMILE AND RESPOND, "I'M NOT SURE I CAN HELP IN THAT AREA." I KNOW AND THE BRIDE'S FATHER KNOWS THAT THE WEATHER...WIND AND RAIN...SUN AND FOG...IS PRODUCED BY HUGE ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS, TROUGHS OF HIGH PRESSURE AND LOW PRESSURE SYSTEMS WE SEE ON THE EVENING NEWS.**

**OR CAN GOD INTERCEDE IN NATURAL PROCESSES? IS THAT WHAT GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY MEANS, AND IF SO, WHY DOESN'T GOD DO IT MORE CONSISTENTLY? OR DID GOD SET IT ALL UP AND THEN SIT BACK TO WATCH STUFF HAPPEN? IT'S A BIG QUESTION, BUT FOR NOW LET'S THINK ABOUT THOSE MEN IN THE BOAT AND THE STORM.**

**WE HAVE THESE MEN...THE DISCIPLES..IN A BOAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A RAGING STORM, HARD-WORKING MEN WHO KNOW ABOUT PHYSICAL CHALLENGES, WHO AREN'T AFRAID OF MUCH IN LIFE, BUT AT THE MOMENT THEY'RE SCARED TO DEATH. THEY THINK THEY'RE GOING TO DIE. SOME ARE FURIOUSLY ROWING, SOME ARE BAILING BECAUSE THE SEA IS COMING OVER THE TOP EACH TIME THEY HEAD INTO A WAVE. THEY THINK THIS IS IT. WHY ARE THEY SO TERRIFIED WHEN JUST LAST WEEK WE READ IN MARK'S GOSPEL THAT JESUS EXPLAINED HIS PARABLES TO THEM PRIVATELY?**

JESUS IS ASLEEP. ASLEEP? I'M SORRY BUT HOW IN THE WORLD DOES A MAN SLEEP IN THE STERN OF THAT LITTLE BOAT? SO THE DISCIPLES SHAKE HIM AWAKE. "DON'T YOU CARE THAT WE'RE ABOUT TO GO DOWN? HOW ABOUT HELPING OUT A LITTLE BIT, DOING WHAT YOU CAN?" AND HE DOES—"PEACE! BE STILL!" AND IT STOPS. CALM, ORDER, PEACE IS RESTORED.

IN THAT WORLD, OVER 2,000 YEARS AGO, THE WATER THE LITTLE BOAT WAS FLOATING ON WAS THE HOME OF DEMONS. WATER MEANS CHAOS AND THREAT. BEFORE THE BEGINNING, THE BIBLE SAYS, "THE EARTH WAS A FORMLESS VOID" AND IT WAS ALL WATER AND GOD CREATED BY BRINGING ORDER, BY SEPARATING THE WATER. SOME OF THAT PRIMAL FEAR IS STILL IN US. TWO MOTION PICTURES TAPPED IN THAT FEAR. *THE PERFECT STORM* AND BEFORE THAT, *JAWS*, HAS MADE MANY RELUCTANT TO SWIM IN THE OCEAN.

BUT WE DON'T BELIEVE THERE ARE DEMONS IN THE WATER ANYMORE. WE DON'T JUMP OFF THE HIGH DIVE SHOUTING, "LOOK OUT FOR DEMONS!" SO IF OUR DEMONS AREN'T IN THE WATER, WHERE ARE THEY? PERHAPS OUR DEMONS ARE LOCATED WHERE ARE FEARS ARE. FEAR MAY BE THE DEMON, THE ENEMY OF ALL THAT IS GOOD AND RIGHT AND HOPEFUL. WHEN WE ACT OUT OF FEAR, WE DO SAD AND TRAGIC THINGS. FEAR OF LONELINESS FOR EXAMPLE CAN CAUSE US TO ESTABLISH UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS. FEAR OF INSECURITY CAN MAKE US TIMID, CAUTIOUS. FEAR OF WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN CAN CAUSE US TO LOWER OUR SIGHTS, PULL IN OUR HOPES, AND LIVE A FRACTION OF THE LIFE TO WHICH WE ARE CALLED.

THE EARLY CHURCH LOVED THIS STORY. IN FACT, ONE OF THE EARLIEST SYMBOLS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS A SHIP HEADING INTO A STORM. THE EARLY CHURCH KNEW WHAT IT MEANT TO BE IN A LITTLE BOAT IN A STORMY SEA. SMALL, INSIGNIFICANT, A TINY MINORITY IN EVERY CITY, AND THEN TORMENTED, PERSECUTED, HUNTED DOWN, ARRESTED, TORTURED, EXECUTED BY THE MOST POWERFUL ENTITY IN THE WORLD, THE ROMAN EMPIRE—THE EARLY CHURCH LOVED THIS STORY OF THE DISCIPLES IN THE BOAT AND JESUS CALMING THE STORM. THEY HAD EACH OTHER AND THEY HAD JESUS, WHO WAS VERY MUCH IN THE BOAT WITH THEM AND WHOSE COMMITMENT TO THEM PRODUCED CALM AND COMFORT AND PEACE EVEN IN THE MIDST OF THE MOST VIOLENT OF STORMS.

I FIND IT INTERESTING THAT JESUS NEVER SAYS, "THERE IS NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF." THE GALILEAN STORM WAS INDEED FEARSOME, AS ARE THE WINDS AND WAVES THAT THREATEN US. RATHER, JESUS ASKS, "WHY ARE YOU AFRAID? HAVE YOU STILL NO FAITH?" TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, IMAGINE THIS SCENE: A LITTLE CHILD AWAKENS IN THE DARK OF NIGHT, TERRIFIED BY A DREAM THAT HAS DISTURBED CHILD-SLEEP, FRIGHTENED BY SOME MONSTER HIDING IN THE BEDROOM CLOSET. A MOTHER RUSHES INTO THE BEDROOM AND SCOOPS THE LITTLE ONE INTO HER ARMS AND SITS IN A CHAIR. SHE WIPES AWAY LOCKS OFF HER

CHILD'S FOREHEAD, CARESSES HIS HAIR, ROCKS HIM GENTLY, AND THEN WHISPERS WHAT A THOUSAND MOTHERS HAVE WHISPERED SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME, "HUSH NOW, THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF." THE QUESTION THESE COMFORTING WORDS RAISE IS SIMPLY THIS: IS THE MOTHER TELLING THE WHOLE TRUTH TO HER CHILD?" IS THERE REALLY NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF?

ALTHOUGH WE OFTEN CONFUSE THEM, SAYING "THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF" IS A VERY DIFFERENT THING FROM SAYING, "DO NOT BE AFRAID." THE HARD TRUTH IS THAT FEARSOME THINGS ARE REAL: ISOLATION, PAIN, ILLNESS, MEANINGLESSNESS, REJECTION, LOSING ONE'S JOB, MONEY PROBLEMS, ADDICTION, FAILURE, AND DEATH.

WE'RE ALL IN THE BOAT, FRIENDS. IT'S CALLED LIFE. SOME OF US ARE ROWING, SOME ARE BAILING, SOME ARE PULLING AT THE SAIL, SOME ARE PRAYING. WE CAN WHISTLE AND SING. WE CAN GIVE PEP TALKS TO EACH OTHER, "WE'VE GOT THIS, WE CAN DO IT." WHICH HELPS A LOT, BECAUSE AFTER ALL WE ARE IN THE BOAT OF LIFE TOGETHER.

BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? THERE'S SOMEBODY ELSE IN THE BOAT WITH US, BACK THERE IN THE STERN. QUIETLY WITH US BUT PRESENT WITH ALL THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE AND PEACE OF GOD IN HIM.

AS WE GROW IN FAITH, WE COME TO UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH SUCH FEARSOME THINGS ARE VERY REAL, THEY DO NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD. THEY DO NOT HAVE ULTIMATE POWER OVER US, BECAUSE REIGNING OVER THIS WORLD OF FEARSOME THINGS IS A GOD WHO IS MIGHTIER THAN THEY. TIME AND AGAIN IN SCRIPTURE THE WORD IS "DO NOT BE AFRAID." IT IS, YOU MIGHT SAY, THE FIRST AND THE LAST WORD OF THE GOSPEL. IT IS THE WORD THE ANGELS SPEAK TO THE TERRIFIED SHEPHERDS AND THE WORD SPOKEN AT THE TOMB WHEN THE WOMEN DISCOVER IT EMPTY. "DO NOT BE AFRAID." NOT BECAUSE THERE ARE NO FEARSOME THINGS ON THE SEA OF OUR DAYS, NOT BECAUSE THERE ARE NO STORMS, FIERCE WINDS, OR WAVES, BUT RATHER, BECAUSE JESUS IS WITH US.

INSTEAD OF SAYING, "THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF," THE WHOLE TRUTH WOULD BE FOR THE MOTHER COMFORTING HER FRIGHTENED CHILD TO SAY, "DON'T BE AFRAID, BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT ALONE." THE EASY PART OF THE TRUTH, WHICH EVERY CHILD FIGURES OUT SOONER OR LATER, IS THAT SOME THINGS THAT FRIGHTEN US ARE REAL AND SOME ARE NOT. BUT THE REST OF THE TRUTH, THE DEEPER TRUTH THAT ONLY FAITH IN THE GOD WHO RAISED JESUS FROM THE GRAVE CAN TEACH, IS THAT EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE REAL AND FEARSOME THINGS IN THIS LIFE, THEY NEED NOT PARALYZE US; THEY NEED NOT HAVE DOMINION OVER US; THEY NEED NOT OWN US, BECAUSE WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THE BOAT.

THE CHRISTIAN GROUP, CASTING CROWNS, HAD A HIT ENTITLED "VOICE OF TRUTH" AND I WAS REMINDED OF THIS SONG AS I WROTE MY SERMON. THE OPENING LYRICS: 'OH, WHAT I WOULD DO TO HAVE THE KIND OF FAITH IT TAKES TO CLIMB OUT OF THIS BOAT I'M IN ONTO THE CRASHING WAVES. BUT THE WAVES ARE CALLING OUT MY NAME AND THEY LAUGH AT ME; REMINDING ME OF ALL THE TIMES I'VE TRIED BEFORE AND FAILED. THE WAVES THEY KEEP ON TELLING ME TIME AND TIME AGAIN "BOY, YOU'LL NEVER WIN! YOU'LL NEVER WIN." BUT THE VOICE OF TRUTH TELLS ME A DIFFERENT STORY..THE VOICE OF TRUTH SAYS, "DO NOT BE AFRAID! AND THE VOICE OF TRUTH SAYS, "THIS IS FOR MY GLORY". OUT OF ALL THE VOICES CALLING OUT TO ME I WILL CHOOSE TO LISTEN AND BELIEVE THE VOICE OF TRUTH."

WE'RE ALL IN THE BOAT.....AND AT TIMES THOSE WAVES CALL OUT TO US...LAUGHING, TAUNTING. WAVES OF CONFUSION, FEAR, SECOND-GUESSING OURSELVES. WHAT STORMS ARE ROCKING YOUR BOAT?

A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN SHORTLY AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA STRUCK NEW ORLEANS IN THE FALL OF 2005 SHOWS THE DEVASTATION OF A CEMETARY IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT OF THE CITY, WITH TREES TOPPLED, DEBRIS COVERING THE GROUND, AND SEVERAL BURIAL VAULTS BROKEN AND SMASHED. BUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DEVASTATION, UNTOUCHED BY THE STORM, STANDS A STATUE OF THE RISEN CHRIST, ARMS EXTENDED WIDE, OFFERING A BENEDICTION OF CALM AMID THE CHAOS. SUCH IS THE IMAGE CONVEYED BY OUR GOSPEL: THE IMAGE OF CHRIST WITH ARMS EXTENDED WIDE OVER THE CHAOS OF OUR PERSONAL LIVES AND WORLD, SAYING, "PEACE! BE STILL!"