

Why are You Afraid? — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 4:35-41

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What are you afraid of?

Are you afraid of the dark? Are you afraid of the unknown?

Perhaps you are afraid of the way things seem to be going in this world. Perhaps you are afraid of losing your job, or someone you love dying.

There are many things that we could be afraid of today.

I invite you to listen as I read our New Testament reading today from Mark, Chapter 4, verses 35-41.

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"ⁱ

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

My question to you before I read the text was, “What are you afraid of?”

That was not the question that Jesus asked the disciples. Jesus knew their fear – the storm. Remember, among the disciples are four experienced fishermen, accustomed to sailing the Sea of Galilee. This must have been some storm for them to be this afraid.

Jesus did not ask them what they were afraid of, he asked them “Why are you afraid?”

Do you hear the difference?

Sometimes we hear this passage as Jesus being critical of the disciples. Perhaps he was but we hear the question much more critical than I think Jesus intended. Jesus asked the disciples “why are you afraid” and that question is significant as to the identity of Jesus.

Today’s text and the passages from Mark over the next couple of Sundays are all about who Jesus is.

The end of today’s text gives us that clue about that theme of the passage.

The disciples ask in verse 41, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

You may see a simple miracle story in today's passage. However, there is more to the story than just a miracle. Today's story, which is about who Jesus is, has echoes all the way back to Creation and to the Psalms.

When you think back to the beginning of Genesis, what do we learn about God from the Creation story? One thing we learn is that God has power ultimate power over the natural world.

God spoke and creation – by whatever process God used – came into being. God separated the waters from the dry land and called forth rain and plants and animals. God is the creator and holds sway over God's creation.

This idea of God's power over the natural world is also found in the Psalms. Psalm 107 says,

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;

²⁴ they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.

²⁵ For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea

....

²⁸ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;

²⁹ he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Jesus, in demonstrating **HIS** power over the natural world by speaking into the storm and creating calm, tells his disciples, tells the readers of Mark's Gospel and tells us that Jesus is God.

Jesus possesses the same creative powers as God the creator – because he is God.

The audience of Mark's Gospel would have presumably been familiar with the passage in Psalms – and the similarities with Jesus calming the sea would have been unmistakable.

The revelations we find in this miracle story are not limited to Jesus demonstrating the same power over creation as God the Creator.

A moment ago, I shared with you parts of Psalm 107. I want to reread the last two verses I shared and continue on another couple of verses.

²⁸ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;

²⁹ he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

³⁰ Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.

³¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

Pay attention to verse 30: Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.

Keep that verse in mind and look at verses 40 and 41. I'm going to read it from the NIV as it renders the Greek more accurately.

⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" ⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

The Greek says that the disciples "feared a great fear".

What is the difference between the people of the Psalm and the disciples in our story?

The difference is gladness versus fear.

The disciples are afraid. They are afraid of the storm and then they fear what they do not understand about Jesus and his power.

Dr. David Schnasa Jacobsen reminds us that,

Discerning readers of Mark know that the disciples are slow learners and that the outsiders are usually the ones to confess faith. Here, ... it is left up to the readers to discern who Jesus is when his own disciples fall short or fail.ⁱⁱ

We should not be too judgmental regarding the reactions of the disciples. I think we might just have been as afraid.

It is one thing to imagine the power of God, it is quite another to see it in front of our eyes.

Dr. Jacobsen shares another insight into today's passage, Mark's Gospel is committed to writing about the time of the destruction of the Temple around 70 CE.

There are storms and there are storms. But this one is huge. The center of worship is destroyed; the cultural and religious center of the people no longer holds. Identities among Jewish Christians and other Jewish groups are all in play—and at a time when the tide of gentiles is rising. In the midst of all this chaos when the world-as-known is ending, here this Jesus is revealed not as one more therapist or miracle worker but as a revelation of God's extraordinary cosmic purpose in the person of this ordinary Jesus, "just as he was" (verse 36) and even amenable like you and me to a good nap (verse 38).ⁱⁱⁱ

The people to whom Mark's Gospel was originally written were in the midst of great, political, social and cultural upheaval. Sound at all familiar?

We may look around our world and feel like the people of Palestine and the known world in 70 AD.

What message does this passage hold for us?

Who do we look to when we are in the midst of storms? Who do we call on when we are afraid?

The disciples were afraid – even despite the fact that Jesus was with them on the boat.

This event is recorded rather early in Mark's Gospel. Perhaps the disciples had not yet come to believe **IN** Jesus, even though they had come to know Jesus, the miracle-worker.

I started today's sermon with asking you what you were afraid of.

While the question to the disciples IS still relevant to us – “Why are You Afraid?” We cannot answer that question until we come to terms with naming the things of which we are afraid.

That is a highly personal question.

I hope you will consider that question seriously.

When you know what it is that you fear, you then have the option to face those fears with Jesus or to remain afraid.

Why are you afraid?

Jesus is seen in today's passage as completely human (he is resting, taking a nap – he came on the boat “just as he was”). Jesus is seen in today's passage as completely divine – he has power over nature and calms a storm at sea.

Jesus is with us. **Jesus is with you.**

Jesus wants to help you in your storms – but realize that not all storms are external.

Jesus is able to calm the storms – if we let him.

There is a song from 1995 written by Scott Krippayne. It is entitled, *Sometimes He Calms the Storm*.

The chorus of this song says,

Sometimes He calms the storm
With a whispered peace be still
He can settle any sea
But it doesn't mean He will
Sometimes He holds us close
And lets the wind and waves go wild
Sometimes He calms the storm
And other times He calms His child.

I don't know the things of which you are afraid. I don't know if your fears are about things in the physical world around us. I don't know if your fears are things within your beliefs and being.

I do know that Jesus, that the Holy, Triune God we Worship this day is with us. Because of that, perhaps you can claim this day that you have no need to fear.

Sometimes He calms the storm and other times He calms His Child.

Please pray with me.

Mighty God, who speaks a word of peace to calm our
troubled sea;

Caring God, who nudges us away from fear and toward
faith;

Ever-present God, who fills us with awe
but also raises many questions
without easy answers;

Open our eyes to see you in our boat—today,
Strengthen our hearts for the challenges that lie ahead,
[May we keep open our ears to hear your word speak to
us when we leave this place.]

This we pray, In Jesus' name. Amen.^{iv}

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-5>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-5>.

^{iv} <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper%207%20B>. Posted on the Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren website. <http://rockhay.tripod.com/>.