

Windows on the Word: Calming the Sea

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 8:22-25

Our next window in our Windows on the Word series is on the west side of the church. It's in the last bay, up in the top corner closest to me. It's a picture of Jesus calming the sea. Again, if you can't see it from your seat, look at your bulletin cover. It's nice and clear there. You can see the waves churning underneath the boat. One of the disciples – it looks like it might be Peter – is trying to hold up the mast of the boat. The boom of the mast appears to have snapped in the heavy winds. Jesus stands in the middle of the boat, his hand is raised and he looks like he's about to rebuke the winds and the waves. Let's hear the story as Luke tells it.

In many of the gospel stories we find ourselves shaking our heads at the disciples. The gospel writers depict the disciples as something like bumbling. They are knuckleheads. They are chronically slow to catch up with what Jesus is doing. They argue about who's the greatest and we shake our head. They try to shoo away the children and we shake our head. We see James and John ask if they can have the places of honor when Jesus comes into his kingdom and we shake our heads. *'Oh my goodness, those disciples! When will the disciples ever learn?!'* That's often our reaction to the disciples' behavior, and it's an appropriate reaction. We're meant to have that reaction. Remember these stories originate from the disciples themselves. They are telling these stories on themselves. They admit their own knuckleheadedness.

Is this a story where we shake our heads at the disciples? After all, Jesus rebukes the disciples. "Where is your faith?" he asks them. Is this another picture of bumbling disciples? I don't think so. I actually have a lot of sympathy with the disciples in this story. I think their behavior is pretty reasonable.

Why? First of all, they are in real danger here. They are in the middle of the lake, far from shore, when the storm comes upon them. Luke says that the boat was being swamped. Water is pouring into the boat. They are close to sinking. Luke, who's been in a storm or two himself, explicitly says they were in "great danger." Second of all, in the middle of this great danger Jesus is fast asleep. So the disciples try to wake him. "Jesus wake up! Don't you see what's happening to us!? Don't you care about our troubles?! Don't you see that we're about to die here!? We need you!" Are the disciples wrong to be scared? I don't think so. Would you be scared in that situation? I would. Are the disciples wrong to wake up Jesus in that situation? I don't think so. If I were in that situation I would do the same thing! If a storm was about to sink my boat and I was going to drown and Jesus was sleeping I would cry out, "*Jesus help me! Help me! Please. Please. Please.*" Not only would I do that, I do cry out like that when I feel as though my boat is getting swamped. Maybe not out loud, but in my heart I'm saying, "Please Jesus! Please!" To me, the disciple's reaction is totally understandable.

And yet when the waves calm and the winds die down, Jesus says to them, "Where is your faith?" He rebukes them. Granted we don't know how Jesus said it. He could have shouted at them, "WHERE IS YOUR FAITH!!!!!" Or he could have smiled, put a re-assuring hand on Peter's shoulder and said, "Where is your faith?" But even with that softened delivery, it's still a rebuke. Jesus is calling them out. Why does Jesus do that? What was he expecting from them? And what is he expecting from us?

I've come to think that when Jesus calls out the disciples, he's not calling them out so much as calling them up. The disciples' reaction may be understandable, it may be the same reaction we would have in that situation, but Jesus is challenging them to something higher and better. Jesus is challenging *us* to something higher and better.

The disciples' reaction is a normal stress reaction. They have a high degree of anxiety – something bordering on panic – and they focus on survival. That's typical. If you've ever seen the movie Titanic, you know that when the ship sinks, only one of the life boats comes back to rescue the people in the water. In the movie, even though there were desperate cries for help, and even though many of the lifeboats weren't full, only one boat goes back to help. This is true to history. The lifeboats on the Titanic had a capacity of 40 persons each, and many of them had far fewer in them when they were lowered. Life boat 2 only had 17 people in it. Yet they refused to go back for survivors. Lifeboat 1 only had 12 people in it. They refused to go back for survivors. The only life boat to go back was lifeboat 14 which had 40 people in it. Even though it had reached capacity, it went back and took on some of the desperate swimmers. You can be outraged at this, and back when these facts were first reported, people were outraged. But they were reading about these events in the comfort of their living rooms eating tea and crumpets. They weren't under pressure. Under pressure, this is what most people do. They panic and they focus on survival. Fear overwhelms us that all we can think about is staying alive. "Master, Master! Master, Master! We're going to drown!!!" For the record, that's also the reaction of the disciples when Jesus gets taken into custody by the Romans just before the crucifixion. Panic and survival. They all abandoned him and fled. Peter denies that he knows Jesus. Typical stuff.

Jesus is merciful. He is patient with his panicky children. He knows we are weak. He knows our form and he remembers that we are dust. So he stands ready to save and help us in our panic and our fear, just as he saves and helps the disciples here. But he wants more. He is looking for more than typical from his people. He's looking for something stronger,

That stronger something begins when we see and know who he is. "*Who is this that even the winds and the waves obey him!?*" ask the disciples after the miracle. That's not just a question that the disciples ask amongst themselves, that's a question posed to us. And the miracle tells us the answer. This is the eternal Son of God. In Genesis 1, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters and then with a word God brings forth the creation – "Let there be light!" Now Jesus stands over the waters of the Sea of Galilee and with a word he brings the storm to heel. The creation power of God is in the hands of Jesus. In Exodus 14, the Israelites are trapped at the edge of the Red Sea, and God commands the waters and they part. Israel is rescued and her enemies are destroyed. Now Jesus too commands the waters and the disciples are saved. The saving power of God is in the hands of Jesus. He's not just strong, he loves us, he knows us by name, he's made promises to us. And this strong loving Jesus is with you in your boat.

When you walk through your life with both the power and the love of Jesus in front of you, if your faith is in this man, when the storm comes you will be focused on more than survival. You might be afraid in that storm, but you will not panic. Your lifeboat might be at capacity, but that doesn't stop you from helping the people around you who are floundering in water and crying for help. The waves may be pounding against your hull, but you keep doing small, mustard seed things. Getting that card in the mail. Taking the phone call of that anxious friend. Volunteering at the shelter. Praying through all the names on the prayer list. Visiting that homebound person. The wind may be whipping your hair, but you keep your eyes on Jesus and you feel his promises under your feet, you take a deep breath and you go out and love. You break off little pieces of yourself and give them to people. 'Here you go. God bless you. Jesus loves

you. Don't be afraid.' "Where is your faith?" In this story Jesus is calling us up, to a higher standard of discipleship.

I said earlier in the sermon that the disciples' reaction seems perfectly normal to us, because not only would we have that reaction if we were in that situation, we have had that reaction. We've been in that situation. We've all been in a place where it feels as though we are sinking and it seems as though Jesus is sleeping and so we cry out, "Jesus! Jesus! Please help!" But in the interest of honesty there is one difference between this story and many of our experiences. In this story, Jesus woke up and immediately calms the storm. And for many of us, that's not how it seems to go. Some of you may be thinking, 'This is a great story Peter, and I appreciate what you've said so far, but here's the truth. I've been feeling like I'm drowning for a long time. The waters have come up to my neck and I've been trying to wake up Jesus for a long time, and nothing seems to have changed. The waves keep washing over me. The wind keeps blowing. And it's wearing me out. It's wearing my faith out. Why doesn't Jesus wake up and calm my storm?'

This is a really hard place to be, and if you are in it, let me show you something that Tim Keller helped me see. Bible nerds, does this story remind you of an Old Testament story? It should. It should remind you of the story of Jonah. In fact, Jesus' position in this story is similar to Jonah's. In both stories a boat is caught on the sea in a storm. In both stories the main character is sleeping. In both stories the sailors cry out for help. In both stories God calms the sea and the sailors are saved. In both stories the sailors are filled with awe at what they see.

There is however one big difference between the stories. In his story, Jonah is thrown overboard. He's chucked in the water and he sinks down to the depths. That reminds us that Jesus story isn't done. This squall on the sea of Galilee isn't the storm that Jesus has come to calm. He has come to calm a storm far more powerful and terrifying. He has come to calm the storm of human sin and misery. He's come to calm the storm of human hatred, of injustice, of prejudice, the storm of human violence and greed and pride and unbelief. He has come to swallow up death forever. To calm that storm, Jesus will not simply get up and speak a word, he will be tossed overboard. He will let himself be thrown into the jaws of death and he will sink down, down, down all the way to the bottom. He will descend to the bottom of death and hell, and by his grace he will blow the place to pieces.

You see, Jesus rescues the disciples here, but there will come a time for each one of those disciples where their boat will sink and they will go under. Peter will be crucified in Rome upside down as tradition tells us. James will be executed by Herod not so long after Pentecost. John will die a natural death, but he too will find himself in a bed, surrounded by friends, his breaths shallow and ragged, his body sinking beneath the waves. And when the storm overwhelms them, when they sink beneath the surface and go down into the depths, who will they meet there? Jesus. Jesus who went down into death and was raised up Lord of life. Jesus who is Master of all the storms.

Someday our boat will capsize and we too will go down. It will be scary. We will be afraid. We've been trying to avoid this our whole life! But just at the moment when the waters overwhelm us, Jesus will be there. He will lift us up out of the waters and to himself. What will he say to us? Maybe he will say, "C'mon Peter. What were you so afraid of? Where's your faith!?" But these words won't feel like a rebuke; they will feel like the best words we've ever heard.

