

WHO IS SLEEPING

Mark 4:35-41

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Pent 4

The story of Jesus calming the storm has always been a favorite story of the church. It has prompted the writing of many hymns, such as "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me" and the Navy Hymn. The story has also provided the church with a vivid symbol of who we are. When the World Council of Churches was formed, leaders sought a logo to identify the whole family of Christ. They drew a fishing boat with the cross as its mast. It was a good symbol. Christians are people who are in the same boat with Jesus. Our destiny is intertwined with his. Through baptism, we have been fished out of a sea of despair and destruction. Now we belong to Christ. We put our hands in the hand of the man who stilled the water.

Yet as familiar as this story is, it still has a mysterious quality. Try as we might to get its full meaning, the story is difficult – it brings us into deep and murky water, to the line between faith and fear. Like the disciples, we must ask, "**Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?**"

Jesus had begun to criss-cross the Sea of Galilee, teaching and healing on different shores. He finished a full day of telling parables and told his followers it was time to leave. It is typical, in Mark's Gospel, that Jesus will teach for a while and then withdraw. He will perform some kind acts of mercy and then he will disappear. If someone discovers who he is, or learns what he is up to, Jesus asks them not to speak about it. **According to Mark, Jesus Christ is a mystery.** He will not be captured by a title or a nickname. He simply acts, then disappears, leaving people to wonder, "**Who was that Masked Man?**"

This time, the disciples are with him in the boat. A fierce storm sweeps in, threatening their lives. As the twelve wake up Jesus, yelling for his help, there is no question what he does. **This may be the only time in the entire Gospel of Mark when Jesus directly helps his disciples.** (Once in chapter one, he relieves Peter's mother-in-law of some pain, but that doesn't count). Apparently, the disciples never **asked** for help, or he **never offered**, or he was too busy preaching to the multitudes and healing the crowds.

Now, however, Jesus' safety was at stake, which meant they were in trouble, too. Those in the boat grew nervous. They poked Jesus, shook him, and said, ***"Teacher, we're in trouble here. Aren't you going to wake up?"*** With that, a tired Savior awoke, and calmed the wind and the storm - the water was like glass. The disciples then grew nervous. ***"Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"***

We know about the storms, don't we? Not just the little storms inside us, but the furious, full-scale storms out there. Even in a temperature-adjusted, climate-controlled world, there are bursts of fury within the natural world. Earthquakes shake our world. Rivers swell beyond their banks. Wind smashes our windows. Creation seems strangely indifferent to creature needs and comforts. **A storm can explode with rage and remind us how powerless we are.**

On June 9, 1953, a tornado system came through the Greendale section of Worcester. The wind whipped at 300-500 miles per hour, tossing trees like matchsticks, throwing automobiles into the air, and killing 94 people – injuring 1500 – destroying 700 homes – damaged 3300 others – and left 10,000 people

homeless. What should have been a Thursday afternoon of relaxation turned into days of horror. Ten years later a resident said, "Whenever I see a black storm cloud coming, I fall apart inside. You can't know quite how that feels unless you have been through it yourself."

No wonder that people in the first century saw the unpredictable powers of nature as **demonic powers**. A storm, particularly a storm at sea, seemed every bit as irrational as the forces that drove people out of their minds. You cannot reason with a tornado. You cannot negotiate with the wind and waves. It is true that the earth is nourished by rain sent from heaven above. But lightning bolts and furious winds are something else. So, they awaken, Jesus (who seems to know how to sleep), and he calms the storm. The wind and the waves were strong, but he was stronger. The disciples wondered: If wind and sea should plot to destroy, who is this that grants us safe haven?

*Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea;
Unknown waves before me roll, hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
Chart and compass come from thee: Jesus, Savior, pilot me.¹*

We know the storms, don't we? Not just the uncontrollable storms of life out there, but the storms that are within us. Outer destruction breeds inner despair. A storm outside can provoke fear. When a safe, predictable world comes unglued, so do we. We need some assurance to hold us together. We listen for a voice to silence the anguished cries for help.

A pastor had a tumor removed before Thanksgiving. He bounded back, went to work, and immersed himself in Christmas preparations. By New Year's Eve, however, he found himself in New York's Sloan-Kettering Hospital, scheduled

for a second surgery. As nurses came to prepare him for surgery, family members were asked to leave. When the family had gone, and the nurses finished their work, suddenly the storm descended upon this pastor's soul. Up to this point, he had kept a stiff upper lip and taken everything with a kind of clinical detachment. Now he began to weep uncontrollably. He was terrified of a demon called cancer, a sinister force of nature over which he had no control. And he was afraid to face it alone. He said, "As I sat there on that hospital bed, weeping like a fool, I felt a hand on my shoulder. And then another, and another. My brother had come back with the others. He began praying for me, and all of a sudden, as quickly as the storm had come, it vanished. It was as if Christ commanded, 'Peace! Be still!' And I was ... like I'd never been before." Throughout eight days of recovery in the hospital, this pastor had plenty of time to reflect. What came to his mind again and again were all those verses of scripture that he had memorized in Sunday School. "God is my refuge and strength, an ever-present help in time of trouble" (Psalm 46:1). "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me" (Psalm 23:4). These verses were more than comforting assurances; they became the means for conveying to him the presence of Christ.

"Sometimes I hear the distant rumblings of the storm," he says. "But I know two things. First, I'm not the only person in the boat; there is Another called Christ. Second, no matter how terrible the storm, I have not been set adrift."

The Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt put it this way:

*Give to the winds thy fears; hope and be undismayed:
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears, God shall lift up thy head.²*

We know the storms outside. We know the storms inside. **"Why are you afraid?" asks Jesus. "Tell me, why are you so fearful?"**

If I were one of the twelve, I would say, ***"Look, Lord, isn't it obvious? We are surrounded by powers we cannot control. This is a world of tornados and cancer and fear."*** Jesus continues by asking, ***"Have you no faith?"*** Again, I would respond, ***"Sure, we do. We cling to stories like this one. We trust there is a Savior who can overcome every force to hurt or destroy. We affirm he has the power. But when the One in whom we have the faith is sleeping in the back of the boat, we wonder if faith in him will pull us through."***

Who is this, who falls asleep while wind and wave pound into the boat? This may be the most disturbing question. Whatever the storm, we want everything to always turn out okay. We want a happy ending for every disaster. We want a God who can remain accountable for our damages. After Hurricane Hugo, a radio commentator interviewed a man who lost everything in the storm. At one point, the man said, **"If God's in charge, I'm angry. But if God's not in charge, I'm worried."**

Yet Mark tells us that the God we meet in Jesus Christ will not be controlled by our assumptions or bound by our requests. Jesus has the great capacity to be in charge, as He calms the storm. But He does not prevent the storm from happening. Neither does he abolish all storms everywhere. Instead, the disciples have to shake him awake as waves splash into the boat. When Jesus finally stirs, he seems annoyed. It is not clear for a minute if he is shouting at the storm (***"Peace!"***) or the disciples (***"Be still!"***). Who could this

be? The scriptures say, ***"He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep"*** (Psalm 121:3-4). Yet if you see Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat, the very sight pushes our faith to the edge. **Maybe the Gospel writer thinks of this story as an object lesson for the sermon that Jesus had just given to that great crowd of people.** In the language of his sermon, Jesus is like a sower casting seed upon the mixed soil of his audience. After a demanding day, he tells the disciples to push out to sea. **He drifts off into slumber, and the scene looks suspiciously like one of the parables he told that day: *"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed and go to sleep"*** (Mark 4:26-27). **The sower sleeps and trusts the result to an unseen power at work within the fertile soil.** At the crucial moment he awakens to see what kind of crop has taken root among his disciples?

So can you picture Jesus waking in the back of our boat. A weary Savior awakens and looks at us – searching to see if faith had taken root.

"Who then is this?" Who is this, who insists that we trust him as brutal storms of life pound against the boat? It is Jesus Christ. He is the One who reveals that nothing in all creation shall separate us from the love of God – And in the end the sea will be calm.

1. Edward Hopper, "Jesus, Saviour, Pilot Me," *The Hymnbook* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Church, 1955), p. 336.

2. Paul Gerhardt, "Give to the Wind Thy Fears," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 286.