

Story and Meditation: Windstorms

June 13, 2021

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

by *Eric Anderson*

I couldn't come up with a better idea for a story this week than to re-tell the story we've just heard... like this.

Hey, Simon. Simon. You. Oh, right. The Teacher calls you Peter. OK, Peter, then. What's that?

I know it's a cloud. But why is it moving like that? Straight for us. Fast. I've never seen a cloud move that...

What are you and Andrew shouting about? Move out of the way? Move where? It's not that big a boat, Peter. And how bad could a storm be out here on this relatively small sea of Galilee?

Oh. That bad. You mean, this bad?

Whoa. What's with all the flying water? Isn't water supposed to stay in the sea and not come flying up into the boat? Bail? What bail? We're in a boat, not trying to get out of jail. Oh, you want me to get the water out of the boat. That sounds like a fine idea. A fine idea.

Is there another bucket? No?

There isn't another bucket, John.

Pull on this rope? OK. I'm pulling on this rope. What do you mean, pull the other way, Andrew? I just got to the end of it.

If you guys who know boats could give clearer instructions this might be easier!

Look, where's the Teacher? What do you mean, asleep? I can barely hear myself yelling you the question let alone your answer? How is he sleeping through all this? Isn't he wet? Isn't the water rising around his ankles?

It doesn't matter. I'm going to wake him up. I don't know what good it's going to do. Peter and Andrew are yelling opposite directions at one another. I can't hear James and John even if their nickname is Sons of Thunder. Half of the rest of us are sick. Maybe the Teacher can bring some order to this chaos. Maybe he can heal the seasick ones. Maybe he'd like to do John the Baptist one better and baptize us all as we sink. I don't know what he's going to do. But who wants to wake up drowning.

Teacher, wake up. I know you're exhausted, but wake up. The boat is sinking. Come on. Don't you care?

Oh. Oh. Oh.

Well. I guess you care.

For Mark the Gospel writer, the story of the storm offered a useful way to illustrate the disciples' slowly growing awareness of Jesus' power, authority, and identity. Say what you like about the disciples – and Mark frequently used them as characters whose slow comprehension made the readers look quick by comparison – the disciples asked precisely the right question in the wake of the storm.

Wake. You know. A wake comes behind a boat...

The disciples asked, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Mark, by the way, had already provided us, the readers, with the answer to that question: Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It's worth remembering that we know what the disciples, in that moment, did not. They knew he was a healer; they knew he was a compelling speaker; they knew he was a teacher. They didn't know that he could command the winds and the waves.

Until that moment.

That left them with some more hard questions hard questions that had been asked for centuries before them and hard questions that have been asked for centuries after them. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneywithJesus.net, "To be fair, the disciples' response to the sleeping Jesus has a rich and storied Biblical history. The Hebrew scriptures are full of such questions and accusations. Where are you? Why won't you save us? How much longer? Rouse yourself, Lord! Why have you forsaken us? I take refuge in this history because it means I'm in good company. It's not a sin to ask God hard questions. It's not unfaithful to wonder 'Why?' or 'When?' or 'How much longer?' It's not wrong to be afraid; God has wired us to experience fear when we're threatened."

The great assertion of Psalm 121, that the one who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep, had to be made precisely because God's deliverance looked... distant. Delayed. Denied. The Psalmist had to declare that God neither slumbers nor sleeps because God so often looks so much like... Jesus on a cushion in the back of a storm-tossed boat, fast asleep and to all appearances without a care in the world.

Father's Day is not a bad time for this story about wind and storms and sleeping – if only because the gift presented to some fathers on this day might be the opportunity to sleep in. It is also true that parental relationships, paternal relationships, are full of stormy weather. The

ordinary conflicts of child rearing bring a great deal of sound and fury to the winds, don't they, as children test the limits of their abilities and their autonomy. There are the storms of the two-year-olds and the storms of the teens, and plenty of storms before, between, and beyond.

And there are other storms. There are the storms of deeper conflicts among fathers and mothers, between parents and children, storms that come with blame and recrimination and broken relationships and too frequently – once is too frequently – violence. There are the storms of loss and suffering, when fathers lose jobs or opportunities, when children fall ill, when members of the family die.

D. Mark Davis writes at *Left Behind and Loving It*, “A storm at sea is the most expressive sense of ‘chaos’ that seafaring people know. There is literally nothing stable to grasp when one’s entire ship is engulfed in wind and waves. Anything that might offer stability – like a large stone cropping out of the sea – is a threat more than a help in this kind of trouble. Truly, everything is in flux. Hence, a storm at sea is perfectly illustrative of a situation when it seems that all of our possible moorings are far away and we are helpless against the elements.”

In these storms, it often feels like Jesus is fast asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat. And that’s where the tiller is. That’s where you steer the boat from. If Jesus were awake, at least somebody would be steering the boat!

Matthew Henry offered this explanation in his early 18th century commentary: “And he slept, to try the faith of his disciples and to stir up prayer: upon the trial, their faith appeared weak, and their prayers strong. Note, Sometimes when the church is in a storm, Christ seems as if he were asleep, unconcerned in the troubles of his people, and regardless of their prayers, and doth not presently appear for their relief. Verily he is a God that hideth himself, Isa. xlv. 15. But as, when he tarries, he doth not tarry (Hab. ii. 3), so when he sleeps he doth not sleep; the keeper of Israel doth not so much as slumber (Ps. cxxi. 3, 4); he slept, but his heart was awake, as the spouse, Cant. v. 2.”

We’ve been living for over a year with a global pandemic. We have refrained from gathering for worship for nearly all of that time. We have been tossed by the storm which has included grave illness, economic disruption, political turmoil, grotesque health disparities based on race, grotesque health disparities based on wealth, international upheaval, and 3.86 million deaths.

That is a storm indeed.

The storm has been marked with, if we’re honest, colossal folly. When I picture the disciples aboard that boat, I imagine a crew of mostly landlubbers with four experts all trying to take charge, and probably half of the non-experts also trying to take charge.

Experts trying to take charge and working at cross-purposes. Non-experts exercising their authority despite their ignorance – or worse, in service of some purpose other than the welfare of the people. There, my friends, is 2020 in a nutshell. Not the perfect storm – the storm that

sinks all boats in it – but a storm that took more lives, caused more suffering, wasted more resources of our spirits than it might have.

That's us. What about Jesus?

That question remains, doesn't it? Granted that this year might have gone better if human beings acted wisely, might it not have gone better if God had acted, well, like God? If the Holy Spirit's wind had blown instead of the pandemic's? If Jesus, for the love of God, had woken up and stilled the storm?

I have no answer.

It's just... I have survived to this moment. I am not the healthiest me I've ever been – my psyche and my spirit have taken a lot of shocks and I'm not recovered by any means. My stress diet has not been good for me, though I have to say that I've never gone this long without a cold. So OK. I'm not in great shape. But I'm here.

You're here.

The boat did not go down.

Jesus has not stilled the storm all at once, but Jesus has been with me, and with you, through each blast of the wind, through each bucketful of spray. Jesus has been with us through the unknowns, as those unknowns became terrifying knowns, as some embraced wisdom and some embraced folly, as some labored toward vaccines to mitigate the suffering and others labored to enrich themselves at others' expense. The boat did not go down. Jesus has been with us, kept us, strengthened us when we didn't think we could go on, and I know that once or twice for me grabbed the tiller when I didn't have any idea which way to go.

There are circumstances in the world where survival itself is an accomplishment.

Debie Thomas continues, "I think I will spend the rest of my life seeking this one grace — the grace to experience God's presence in the storm. The grace to know that I am accompanied by the divine in the bleakest, most treacherous places. The grace to trust that Jesus cares even when I'm drowning. The grace to believe in both the existence and the power of Love even when Jesus 'sleeps.' Even when the miraculous calm doesn't come."

We have had God's presence in the storm, whether we knew it or felt it or doubted it or were sure of it. We have not been alone in the storm and we will not be alone in the calm.

Amen.