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Sermon: "Are You Gonna' Get in the Boat?"  
June 23, 2024 at Berean Presbyterian Church  
Mark 4:35-41

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4:35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."

4:36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.

4:37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

4:38 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?"

4:39 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.

4:40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

4:41 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?"

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Recently, I met a private charter fisherman who lives down at the End of the World, Louisiana. I can't say I know much about that world, so I was fascinated to learn about the intricacies of living in Venice, Louisiana and the infrastructural challenges lower Plaquemines faces.

This social bubble for these people exists around fishing tourism and supporting the oil rig workers' need for alcohol and food when they come off from the rig after 3 week stints. Food wise there's short offerings- a small marina and a sprinkling of fried food restaurants nearby, but the closest grocery and supply store is in Belle Chasse.

It's a singularly focused social ecosystem, ruled by volatility and false promises of weathermen. It's inhabited by personalities who are in love with the water, and their trade- there's no other way to wrap my head around it. You only live in Venice, Louisiana if you have a passion for the sea. There's a hardened soulful connection between those who choose to live here, and the acceptance of lack of control to external factors- such as the rising waterlines, eroding shores, and volatile tropical storms that threaten to erase the physical away with a simple gust of strong wind or angry wave.

These Louisianian fishermen have a deeply personal relationship with weather.

They have to. Weather is the third party in every relationship.

Weather dictates schedules.

Dinner reservations.

Weather plays her hand, intervening in the mental health as she beats her sun rays down - causing ocular decay, heat illness, skin cancers. Fishermen return to shore, covered in bruises from their days heaving ropes and displeased fish over the boat's rim. Their hands swollen, red and sore from the physical demands of the day.

I wonder at the cruelty of such a love and passion- to remain in relationship with your heart when it is constantly in battle. When your worst day is a storm cloud away.

In Louisiana especially, I felt that that relationship was fraught with the inevitability of the water eventually washing away their fish camps. Eroding their roads.

How much time is left? Dare I give my fears a voice?

How does this group of people- who exist fully on the oil-rig business and private fishing charters plan to survive for the next 50 years fighting against coastal erosion and rising waters?

Or should I sip my drink and hold my inner dialogue down?

During summer season- in this heat- private charter fisherman in Venice often work 20-30 day stretches in a row- making the majority of their income for the year in the span of a few months.

Rain meant no pay. Tropical depressions- like what we're having now- can mean up to 2 weeks of sitting on thumbs- desperately checking the weather- praying for a day of sunshine- for a day of taking clients out in the deep ocean water by the oil rigs-

When the rain came- these fishermen had ample time. I wondered maybe if that's when thoughts bubbled up- memories from the past. Thinking to my own life, it's been the forced stillness that my demons sing the loudest. My own insecurities, the list of wrongs I never righted- that is the mirror I desire to shatter.

Does the unexpected forced stillness of being moored to shore- mean the past bubbles up? I wonder in the midst of this tropical depression- how these people fill their time? Probably the first few days are catching up on sleep and physically recovering. But at some point- there's got to be a moment of anxiety- When will the rain stop? When can he get back onto that boat and start making money again?

When we're forced by weather to be still- we're given an opportunity to face the storms in our hearts. To face the fears our vices and busy-ness have been pushing away. But the thing about storms- there will always be another one. And they are not meant to be weathered alone.

That's where Gospel of Mark segways in. Our faith teaches us that Jesus is the king of surviving storms. And his work on the Sea of Galilee is just as powerful a story as it is a metaphor for the work of faith when we're experiencing thunder.

The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful body of water. But because it is surrounded by hills, and is 700 feet below sea level, it is prone to sudden, violent storms, like the one in [Mark 4:35-41](#). Even with doppler radar and modern technology- fisherman are always at the mercy of the wind and the rain. You could be out on a boat enjoying a beautiful day, and quite literally out of the blue, a life-threatening storm could hit, threatening to capsize your boat, to turn your life on it's head.

The volatility of the sea is at the mercy of the hand of God, or if you're superstitious and love maritime lore- at the mercy of Poseidon, or Triton, or some other sea deity who, pending on his mood, decides the fate of your ship....

Holy God- why do some ships sink, while others are able to safely get home? What kind of Good God, Benevolent Maker- Loving Father- whatever title we slap on it - is there, causing a storm? Where is God when we face the storms that threaten to capsize our spirit?

There's a word I learned through Chaplaincy called "theodicy" which basically means- How could God allow bad things to happen? It's the question that bubbles up alot of times when I'm bedside to someone who is really sick or someone who is going through a hard time. I understand the science of storms, and the unpredictability of nature- El Niño, La Niña, etc.

I don't quite have a handle on how to answer that question.

How could God cause something bad to happen?

How could a God let something bad happen to me?

I recently read *I Dead in Attic*, a gut-wrenching narrative by a reporter named Chris Rose who held it down as a witness of all the post-Katrina rescues, burials, and rebuilding.

My heart feels soft as I talk about storms, Jesus and New Orleans. You all could give this sermon a thousand times over. You've lived it. You've lost, you've survived, but many of you were changed. Author Chris Rose says this in a commencement speech at the Ursuline Academy in 2006:

"Everything we know and love is at risk.

It's like we're all in a big boat right now, paddling for our lives, we've got to be together of one mind to get through this.

Get in the boat, grab a paddle, and get ready for the ride of your lives.

Nothing is more rewarding than a purpose driven life.

A purpose driven life is here. Outside your door. Every morning- or afternoon- when you wake up. Don't miss the boat."

Everything feels so urgent. Our spirits need energy. Our souls need rest. Our hearts need to feel safe and accepted. We need reprieve from the thunder and the lightning, but oh my god, I love the chaos sometimes.

The unpredictability- the power of the rain.

The torn bits of my hearts scattered across the pavement like the jasmine leaves after an April downpour. And I love watching the people who God sends into my life- after I've felt utterly destroyed- the strangers who guided me through my healing. The angels I never saw- sending me energy and love. The emotional rain-jackets of prayer, and protection- and above all- the purpose that I felt in my life- to serve in ministry- after I survived my own storms.

If I am being honest, I have at times felt an addiction to either experiencing storms- or causing them. Because when I am experiencing turmoil, I can place them blame to external factors. Oftentimes what I fear the most is the calm afterwards.

4:39 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.

The dead calm is the worst- God. Pass the prozac. Please anything but dead calm. Don't force me to be still. I need to stay busy. My hands need to be put to work.

When God has helped us work through our challenges- sometimes there's an emptiness as we search our lives and wonder, "Ok so what's next- God?" How do I find purpose from this pain and agony?

In New Orleans got alot of things we need purpose driven people to help with. The 500+ unsolved homicides since 2020 being one of them.

The epidemic of young black men in Angola, and Elayne Hunt.

The epidemic of parentless children.

The racism in our community that prioritizes the white candidate over that of the black.

The violence, shootings, car jackings and theft that we've normalized as a coping method for survival and our own mental health.

Aging communities, that are running out of funds. Health insurance, home insurance, car insurance- wind insurance- we're drowning. We're trying to stay in the boat.

Most folks in this city are just barely hanging on to the sides of the boat- drowning in these waves of socioeconomic injustice- These people need life jackets. They need rescue. They need money. They need time. They need a chance. Just one chance. And God- it's like every time some of these folks catch their breath- boom-

They get hit with another challenge.

And you know- when I check the New Orleans murder map and see the new updates each morning I think to myself- Where you at Jesus. Why you sleepin' at the bottom of the boat?

At the end of the day, spiritually, we need to know there is a divine deity that cares about us. Right? And it can be summed up in the disciples' question to Jesus, when they woke him up as the storm raged around them. Their question is this:

"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

It is human to wonder whether God really cares. To feel alone in your angst.

It's ok to feel like you're facing a storm all alone- and to experience doubt and anger.

The disciples certainly did- and Christ still loved, saved and gave his life for them.

Christ's love for us cannot be washed away. No matter how much we screw it up.

And that brings us to the second lesson in this story from Mark -

Which is that living without faith only works well when the seas of life are calm. Any of us can live on our own just fine when life is going smoothly.

When the seas of life are calm, we don't need our faith. When it's sunny, and we're fishing everyday without a single wave- there's no need for our reliance on God.

We can live just fine without it.

But what happens when life gets difficult?

When the storm hits?

That is when our faith is needed.

Like what happens on the Sea of Galilee- "Even though he sleeps, Christ is in the boat."

There is no storm that we face without God. The most common phrase in the Bible is Do not fear. Did you know that? Bible trivia fun-fact- the Bible says "Do not fear" 365 times.

But Jesus felt fear- the night he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, on his knees in the dirt- begging God if it be your will, take this from me.

To experience fear is healthy at times. It is not to be washed away- or ignored. But fear cannot be the defining ruler of your life. It cannot dictate the roads you choose, or the people you cut out, or keep in. It is a supportive role, in the cast of your life- movie. An anxious guide-offering recommendations, waking up the head and the heart, cautionary tales...

Know your fears. And know that you are not alone as you face them.

Christ is in the boat.

Get in the boat, grab a paddle, and get ready for the ride of your lives.

Nothing is more rewarding than this purpose driven life.

So my question to you... are you gonna get in? Cause it's gonna be the ride of your life.