

When the Storms Come

Mark 4:35-41 (ESV)

September 22, 2002

“Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” This is the question of the day. This is the question of our lives. “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” People who have read the book of Genesis know that God created heaven and earth and all that is in them by the sheer power of his word. People who have read the book of Job know that the LORD controls the wind and waves by the sheer power of his word and that no mere man could do so. People who have read the Psalms know that the LORD commands the wind and waves to both storm and calm by the sheer power of his word and that the LORD also delivers his people by the same means. So the scriptures are clear that wind and sea obey God and that they obey God alone. God commands them through his word. If Jesus does the same, then at the very least he acts in the place of God. And at the very most, could it possibly be that God is in Jesus, that God was with the disciples in the boat, that God is with us yet today, and even that Jesus is God?

The ancient truths of scripture may not have been at the front of the disciples' minds, but apparently they were deep enough in their bones that at least the disciples were asking the right question: “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” They knew that when Jesus spoke “the wind ceased, and there was a great calm,” so that by his word he saved them. Who alone has that power of the word? The disciples were asking the right question, and it continues to be the right question for us. We have the advantage of knowing the right answer, but that does not let us off the hook. Instead, the question becomes for us a matter of whether we will receive, accept, believe, embrace, proclaim, and live and die for this one great truth, that Jesus Christ is the Lord God Almighty. And if he can command wind and sea, what does he ask of us?

So now we have two questions: Who is Jesus? And what does he ask of us? Who is this Teacher, as the disciples called him? Who is this preacher, this healer, this wonder worker who slept through the storm and then commanded wind and sea with a word? Who is Jesus, who continues to speak to us today?

The answer to this first question is not a piece of information we can file away somewhere like other information. It is not the kind of knowledge that leaves us unaffected. It is, instead, good news. It affects everything about who we are and what we do. It demands a response from us, one way or the other. Hence the second question, what does he ask of us?

Who is Jesus? He is a teacher. He gathers followers. And wind and sea obey him! That is startling. We know that only God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, can command the wind and the waves. And yet, Jesus did not even pray to God for help. Instead, he spoke in place of God. He acted in place of God. He commanded with the authority of God. He saved his disciples with the power of God. They did not understand this at the time. It raised more questions for them than it answered. The miraculous calming of storm and sea did not help the disciples at that moment understand who Jesus was and is. They did not fall down and worship him. Yet, the point of the story is that they should have! Who is Jesus? Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord of nature, Lord of life, Lord of history, Lord of the universe, and Lord even over the storms that come into our lives. Jesus is in charge. Jesus is in command. Jesus is in control. And Jesus makes absolute claims on our lives.

All of this leads to the second question: What does Jesus ask of us? We can start with what he asked the disciples: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” These questions tell us what Jesus asks of us: faith and fearlessness, faith and courage, faith and the willingness to follow Jesus Christ all the days of our lives and beyond. This is what he asks of us, and this is what he gives us.

The disciples do not give us a good example in today’s reading. They do not believe, they do not understand, and they even accuse Jesus of not caring about them: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” As we might say: “God, do you not care that I am sick, I am lonely, I am hurting, I am dying? Do you not care?” What an insulting question! Of course God cares. Even when Jesus was sleeping, God cared. Even when heaven is silent, God cares.

This does not mean that the storms will not come. They *will* come. But it does mean that God will not desert us. This does not mean that the storms will not overwhelm us. Some of them will. But it does mean that God is not overwhelmed. This does not mean that we will not be killed. God’s own son was crucified, dead, and buried. But it does mean that God has plans, purposes, and resources for us that go beyond this life and that are more powerful than death.

All of this is to say that since Jesus is Lord, we are to trust him. We are to obey him. We are to love him. We are to serve him. We are to follow him and worship him. We are to have faith in him. Since Jesus is Lord of our lives, we are not lord of our lives. We may think we are. We may act as if we are. But when we do, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. We are called upon to relinquish the idolatrous notion that we are in charge of our own lives and instead to offer up our very lives to the service of God. Did you think stewardship was just about money? That is only the beginning. God not only wants us to honor him with all of our money, but also he wants all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In fact, he knows that if he can lead us to let go of our money, there is a good chance that he

can win our hearts for himself, and that is what he really wants. To make a substantial and sacrificial gift to the church of Jesus Christ is a powerful way of saying that Jesus is Lord of our lives and that money is *not* lord of our lives. We cannot love both God and money. It simply does not work that way. It is one or the other. So giving money to the church is a way of saying, "Yes, Lord, I love you." And failing to give to the church says just the opposite. We need to make a good beginning with our financial gifts, so as to acknowledge Jesus as the Lord of our lives, to place our faith in him alone, and to draw our courage from him alone.

So here are the answers to our two questions. Who is Jesus? Jesus is Lord. What does he ask of us? We are to have faith in him, to trust him, and to obey him without fear or hesitation. There is always the temptation not to believe that he is Lord, not to have faith in him, and not to trust or obey him. But the word of God to us today is calling us to trust in him even when the storms come. This gospel story helps ordinary people like us to live with grace, serenity, and dignity amid the joys and sorrows, the successes and defeats of life (John H. Leith). Are we willing to trust God even while we are perishing and heaven is silent? When the storms come, and the wind blows, and the water rises, can we acknowledge him as the only security in our lives?

What are the storms that batter and threaten us today? How does the world bear down upon us and try to make us reject Christ and doubt God's love? Of course, there are real storms, such as the hurricanes that strike our shores and our homes from time to time. There are also massive upheavals in the governments of the world, in international relations and in the lack thereof, as well as in disruptions in our cities and our economies. There are incomprehensible acts of terrorism, leading to war and rumors of war. Through it all, Jesus is Lord, and the God and Father of Jesus Christ continues to be in charge of the universe and of the course of human history. That alone is our faith and courage.

On a personal level, one of the storms that rages in our lives is that of disease. Sometimes it is calmed and defeated. Sometimes it is followed by more storms of decline and death. What do these mean? This is very hard. In general, we want to say that God's will is for life and health, so that disease and death are opposed to his will. But in the particular, this is not always the case. Certainly all healing comes from God, and sometimes God chooses to restore us to this life, to maintain us in the land of the living. And yet, at other times, God apparently allows these storms to rage on. In fact, eventually we all die, every one of us. This life is an uphill battle. In the end we all lose. Does this challenge by our final enemy, death, mean that God is absent or uncaring? Of course not. But it does mean that God made the world so that this life is a temporary trust. We are here only a short while before God calls us

on to something else. So this is not our final home. We are but passing through here, even as Jesus and the disciples were crossing the sea.

It is interesting that in today's reading there are other boats on the sea with Jesus and the disciples. They were not alone. The other boats must have felt the fury of the storm, too. They must have witnessed the calm when the sea glassed over. These others on the course of life, riding through the storms of the sea, benefitted from presence and the ministry of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Note also that Jesus and his disciples were sailing across the Sea of Galilee "to the other side." They were leaving Jewish territory and entering Gentile territory. Having preached and taught among the chosen people of God, they were carrying the gospel to those who were outside the people of God. As Jesus embarked on this mission to those outside of Israel, the boat—very often a symbol of the church—was being swamped. Then the disciples in the boat, those already in the church, started screaming,

"Jesus, don't you care about us anymore? We're about to go under!" What happened next? Jesus quieted the storms, chastised the insiders, and went right ahead with his mission to the outsiders who had not yet heard the gospel.

You see the point here. The church around the world in general, including Grace Covenant here in particular, is in the midst of massive transition. To provide worship, Christian education, fellowship, and congregational care for those who are already on board is not, and cannot be, the only activity of this church. It is not enough to provide care and programming only for current members. Instead, mission, evangelism, and outreach to those who are not yet here are the vital mission of the church. We may be sailing into unknown waters! We may encounter winds and waves we have never known before! We might be tempted to cry out: "Lord, don't you care that Grace Covenant as we have known it is perishing? No one knows everybody's name anymore! We need more money than we've ever needed before! Where is this all taking us?" And what this story tells us, what the word of God says to us today, is that Yes, of course, God cares. Moreover, God will carry us safe through the storm.

God calls us to trust in him through all this, to believe in his love, and to obey him in carrying out his mission to those not yet here. If we settle for a self-centered way of being the church, which in fact cannot be the church, that would be a failure of trust and a failure of obedience, and the storm would get worse. If we are full of fear and doubt, we fail our Lord and do not give a good witness about him to our neighbors. But if we aim through the storm, look for the far shore, become the church into which God is making us, and open wide the doors of Grace Covenant so as to gather all of God's children here, that will be a brave act of trust and obedience. That will be a light shining in the darkness. That will be occasion for

great rejoicing. It will not be easy. Nothing worth doing is ever easy. But the God and Father of Jesus Christ does care about us and care for us, and he will carry us safe through the storm.

“Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” This involves to two questions: Who is Jesus? and What does he ask of us? The answer to the first is that Jesus is Lord. The answer to the second is that he asks for faith and courage. Are we willing to make both of these answers our own answers? Can we confess him as Lord, give him our faith, and follow him without fear? When the storms come, and the wind blows, and the water rises, can we acknowledge him as the only security in our lives?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Minister
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220-2925
Telephone 804-359-2463
Facsimile 804-278-6298
goodloe@grace-covenant.org