

A Great Calm

First UMC of Pocatello

October 24, 2021

Mark 4:35-41

In this familiar story which Mark shares with Matthew and Luke, the disciples in the boats on the Sea of Galilee experience three “great” things in the presence of Jesus – a great windstorm, a great calm, and great awe. These are indicated by a threefold repetition of the Greek word *mega(s)* in verses 37, 39, and 41.

Out on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of night, the disciples are suddenly swept up in a great windstorm that threatens their lives. The storm obscures the stars and blows the boats about so that all are disoriented. Its winds whip up thrashing waves that topple the men and pour water into the boats. This great storm is an external threat. It is a danger that afflicts the disciples from without. They have no control over this circumstance; they are simply swept up by it. One reason that this story has resonated so much with Christians over time is that we, like all people, live much of our lives this way: adrift in a tiny boat, at the mercy of dangerous, storming forces beyond our control, we desperately try to survive, and it seems like God is dozing right through it. None of us is a stranger to the great storm.

On the other side of the storm, there is what the scripture calls great awe. This is the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom. To be in awe of Jesus is to have a powerful, inner experience of faith that transforms our perspective on circumstance. Paul puts it this way: “If God is for us, who is against us? ...[Nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:31, 39). Awe is an overwhelming reverence, a sense of dependence on the One who speaks against the dangers swirling about us. Awe comes when Jesus has verified the love of God for us in the midst of our desperation. In awe, we, like the disciples, see Jesus with new eyes, and we are drawn into deeper knowledge of who he is. Just as we know the great storm, we also *desire* to know that great awe, which is trusting faith.

Between one side of the Sea and the other; between the storm without and the awe within; at the very center of this story there exists *the great calm*, that dark stillness where the winds have died down to a mere whisper, and the waves have mellowed to a gentle rocking, and Jesus’ powerful word still lingers in the air, and we can lift up our eyes and see.

We can breathe.

This week, I have been captivated by the great calm. I have felt desperate for it. This sermon has felt both crazy and necessary to prepare. Crazy because, as I have sat with grieving families, and as I’ve continued to feel the sustained weariness from COVID, I have felt frantic, and have turned to Jesus and said, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” But this is precisely why this word is *necessary*. I believe that Jesus is here among us in our little fleet of fragile boats. I believe that Jesus is speaking words of stillness and peace over us, that he is always and everywhere inviting us into his great calm.

Let's notice four things about this great calm.

The first is this: The great calm is God's gift. It is sheer, unearned grace. Just as the great storm was beyond the disciples' control, so too was their rescue into the great calm. It flows from the loving concern of God. We know it is *real* because we are from God. Our origins are in that dark, mysterious stillness of God's presence. So, as the psalm says, if we "settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there...your right hand shall hold [us] fast" (Ps. 139:9-10).

We don't earn this gift, but it is good when we ask for it. What the disciples *did* have the power to do was wake up Jesus and accuse him of not caring about them. If they are any indication, it's okay to demand relief from the storm with messy, desperate, even faithless words. "Don't you care...?" All that Jesus requires is that we come to him in whatever condition we are in and say, "*Help me. Help us.*"

This wisdom – that the great calm has nothing to do with our composure under pressure and everything to do with God's gracious response to our honest pleading – is found throughout Hebrew Bible's book of psalms.

For example, Psalm 3 begins, "O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me." It ends, "Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

Psalm 5 begins, "Give ear to my words, O Lord, give heed to my sighing." It ends, "You bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover them with favor as with a shield."

The psalm that Lou read earlier, Psalm 69, begins, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck." It ends, "The Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds. Let heaven and earth praise him."

The great calm is a gift given freely to those who are bailing out water and worried about going under, and who are not ashamed to say so.

The second thing to notice is that the great calm is necessary for transforming fear into trust. Dwelling in the great calm makes growth possible. The great calm is the resting place, the quiet time, the time between desperation and reflection, storm and awe. In the calm, the focus is not on our plight – that's the storm – or on our growth – that's the awe – but on simply being in God's presence, overshadowed by God's protective word. We often bypass this time of silent stillness. We are shaped by our culture to avoid stillness. We think we can go right from fear of circumstance to trust in the Lord on simply the adrenaline of the experience alone. Some of us miss opportunities to grow because we are embarrassed by our behavior during the storm time. We don't want to talk about our fear or grief or panic, or admit that we accused God of not caring. We don't want to face our faithlessness. Our culture is also addicted to busyness, and it valorizes burnout. No sooner are we delivered from one storm than we are plunged into another. We must resist this temptation to constant action, because the great calm is the only bridge between fear and awe. There is very little growth in faith without it. As the scriptures of both Testaments affirm:

“In returning and rest you shall be saved” (Isa. 30:15).

“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 26:10).

“After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12).

“Abide in my love” (John 15:9).

The third thing is that the great calm is inaugurated and protected by Jesus’ words. “Peace! Be Still!” If you are wondering how to enter into the great calm that Jesus offers, I’ve been learning that it comes when we rest in Jesus’ presence simply and openly, without agenda or defensiveness or fear. It comes when we listen to his voice and dwell on his word. Not in an intellectual or abstract way. I don’t mean we recite the creed or just read the Bible the way we’d read anything else. I mean we truly rest in his promises, meditate on them, bring them into the deep core of the heart, and pray them. We hear them spoken directly to our souls.

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

Jesus says, “I do choose, be made clean” (Mk. 1:41).

Jesus says, “Child, your sins are forgiven” (Mk. 2:5).

Jesus says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mk. 6:50).

Jesus says, “But take courage; I have conquered the world” (John 16:33).

Such words sustain us in short, daily moments of pausing and breathing. They hold and revive us during longer stretches of stillness such as a day of rest or a retreat. The great calm is about lingering under the sound of the Word. When we desire the great the calm, we are really desiring to learn how to pray.

Finally, this is the fourth noticing: the great calm blesses others. It’s an intriguing picture that Mark gives us: “other boats were with him” (4:36). Matthew and Luke omit that detail when they re-tell the same story. Maybe to them it seemed superfluous. I think it allows us to see a great truth: *We’re never alone in our storms*. A storm didn’t just threaten the boat that Jesus was in – it threatened all the boats. While no single experience of pain or fear is the same as any other, one of the strategies of fear is to convince us that we are utterly alone, to convince us that no one could ever understand, that no one would want to sit with us as we sort things out, or receive us in all our weariness and distress.

The pandemic has fallen upon all of us. We are not alone in it. We grieve, and so do others. We wrestle depression, and so do others. We fear many things, and so do others. When the great calm comes to one, it is a gift that can be shared with many. Jesus' unworried slumber in the mist of affliction is an outward reflection of his inner calm; when he rises, he is able to share that inner condition with others and quiet the chaos. *All* the boats benefitted the powerful word of Jesus. So, when *you* are centered and grounded in God's love despite whatever circumstances seek to blow you about, that gift will touch the lives of others in powerful ways. God's gracious gift to you will also carve out a refuge – a still, quiet space; a great calm – for others.

This is one of the profound realities of being together as the worshipping Church. Every week, weary and haggard, we emerge from our storms and live for a moment under the protective care of God's word. We admit our need and receive strength for the journey. The Seas are subdued – for a moment! – and the wind dies down – for a moment! – and in that moment we are granted the peace that surpasses all understanding; our trust in God is awakened; we receive grace that can be shared with others.

The great windstorm? Jesus subdues it.

The great calm? Jesus inaugurates it.

Great awe? Jesus inspires it.

Together, these three “greats” point toward the answer to the question that concludes the story: “Who then *is* this...” Someone *great*, yes, greater even than these.

May we know that he is with us out there in the storms of life.

In the name of Jesus Christ, the one who's voice cries, “Peace! Be still!”

Amen.