

In the Same Boat
Mark 4:35-41

I don't know about you, but this has been a tough week for me, an unsettling week. The auction at Isabelle's, the funeral for Charles Taylor – we've all been reminded that even the longest, happiest, most productive lives don't go on forever. And as such pillars of the community pass from the scene, and as we see for sale signs popping up everywhere on Church street, we have to wonder about the future of our little town. We may not like change, but it's coming, and there's nothing we can do about it.

And of course things on the national level don't inspire much more confidence. What will our economy look like after all this spending? What will our health insurance plans look like when Congress gets through with them? Will those on Medicare be able to afford the new payments, and will doctors be able to afford to treat them? And if you don't like what you hear about these new laws, is there anything any of us can do?

This week I've personally been spending far too much time working on denominational issues that are no less troubling. There's a group within the PCUSA which is trying to rewrite the entire Book of Order. If the General Assembly and a majority of the presbyteries agree, we will lose important due process protections and the standards for ordination will be watered down to a shocking extent. But aside from warning people about the dangers of this new document, what can we do about it?

So, let's be honest – some problems are real. They are serious. And no amount of positive thinking can wish them away.

This is the situation that confronts Jesus' disciples. They are out on the Sea of Galilee, when they find themselves in the midst of a storm. Now, remember that at least four of the disciples were experienced fishermen. They knew all the ins and outs of a boat. They also knew how quickly severe storms could blow up on that lake. Doubtless they had weathered many such storms before.

But this storm was different. This storm was serious. The waves were crashing into the boat, and beginning to swamp it. Given these men's experience, we know they were not hysterical. They were not blowing things out of proportion. We have to believe they were in real danger of sinking. They had real problems, serious problems, just like we do. Thus, in a symbolic sense, we are all in the same boat with them. We all know we are in big trouble.

Well, how did the disciples deal with their situation? The first thing they did was to rely on their own considerable experience. We don't know what measures they took as they saw the

storm coming and as they began to be tossed about. But given their years of fishing experience, we can be confident that they tried everything they knew to do. But still the winds blew and the sea foamed and the storm raged.

Where was their faith? At first, it was in themselves and their seamanship. But as their boat began to sink, it became apparent to them that their faith had been misplaced. All their self-confidence couldn't save them from the storm.

Yes, we are in the same boat with the disciples, aren't we? The problems we face – the loss of good friends, changes in our town, changes in our health system, changes in our denomination – these aren't just serious problems. These are problems none of us can really do anything about. In the face of these problems, we are just as helpless as those disciples were in the face of that storm.

Helpless? This is a hard thing for us American Christians to admit. We tend to be confident and independent people. We tend to face sickness with stoicism. We know how to endure hardships and disappointments. When the waves of the storms of life come over the gunwales of our boats, we tend to shrug our shoulders and start baling.

And maybe that's your approach to the problems that face you. Maybe you are still struggling to keep your own boat afloat today. Perhaps you are sure that you can muster up enough strength to master that disappointment or to confront that fear that plagues you. Perhaps you are confident that you can continue to deal with your chronic grief or pain, even though it's wearing you down. If you are still practicing do-it-yourself Christianity, then this passage is not for you, at least not yet.

No, this passage is for those who know they are in the same boat with the disciples. This passage is for those who have realized the seriousness of their situation and who have tried everything to solve their problems, but to no avail. This passage is for those who know they are helpless. This passage is for sailors whose decks are awash, and whose pumps have failed, and whose ship is going down.

What would sailors in such desperate straits do? Well, what did the disciples do? We would like to say that they turned in faith and trust to Jesus. They did wake Him up, but if you will look carefully, they didn't ask Him to help. They simply woke Him up to tell Him that they were all about to go down with the ship.

In other words, they understood both the seriousness of their problem and their helplessness to solve it. But the conclusion to which they came was not hope, but despair. They

had placed their faith in themselves and their seamanship, and when they were disappointed, their faith simply died.

Is that so unusual? Don't we often do the same thing? When trouble comes, we first try to convince ourselves that we are indeed in control of the situation, that there is nothing we can't handle. And when we are proven wrong, when the circumstances of life become overwhelming, we lose all faith in everything and give way to the forces of temptation or of despair.

Why do we vacillate between such extremes? It's because of our pride. Think about it: we try as hard as we can, and when we fail, our pride tells us that if we can't do it, no one can. And as long as we leave ourselves at the center of our universe, we can go on believing that. As long as we remain our own gods, we can expect nothing except the extremes of over-confidence and despair.

But the good news for the disciples is that there was someone else in the boat, someone who, all appearances to the contrary, was in complete control of the situation. And the solution He brings comes straight out of Psalm 107, which we read responsively this morning: when they cried to the Lord in their trouble, He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed.

That same power is available to us today. Today, we can be sure that the God Who was in the boat with the disciples is in the same boat with us. The good news is that ours is a God of overwhelming might. The good news is that nothing is too difficult for our God.

Take a minute and think about some of those overwhelming problems we all face. Are any of those things – denominational problems, political problems, death itself – are any of those things a match for our God? Do you think that any of those things can get the best of the Almighty One Who calms storms with a word? Do you think any of those things are stronger than the One Who called all the storms, the wind, and the rain into existence with the same Word of Power?

No, if there's one thing that's clear in this passage, it is that Jesus is Lord and God, the Almighty sovereign of heaven and earth. If there's anything we know for certain about Jesus it is that nothing is too hard for Him.

And we would be tempted to stop there, with a meditation on the power of Christ, for that realization is indeed one of our greatest comforts in times of trouble. But the passage goes on to describe the disciples' reaction to this display of power, and to that we must turn before we conclude.

We might have expected them to respond with joy and gratitude. After all, Jesus has just miraculously saved them from an all but certain death. The fact that they wondered, or were amazed, is certainly understandable. But why were they afraid?

Well, power is not always reassuring, is it? After all, people with power don't always do what you want them to. Archer Daniels Midland came to town with a lot of money. They invested a lot of money in the oil mill. But then they closed it. They had power, but that power didn't end up being used for our good.

No, in order to be comfortable around powerful people, you have to have faith in them, which means you have to trust them. That's why Jesus turned to the disciples and asked: "Why don't you have faith?" That's another way for Him to say, "Why don't you trust Me?" That was the key question for them, and it's the key question for us.

We know that at first the disciples put their faith in themselves. Then, when they thought the ship was going down, they lost their faith and gave in to the despair of pride. But even after Jesus saved them, they didn't trust Him. Instead, they were afraid of Him.

Just so, many of us Christians have come to the point where we know that our lives are unmanageable. We find it easy to confess our sins, because we repeat them all too frequently. In our most honest moments, we really don't have faith in ourselves anymore.

At the same time, we Christians know that God is Almighty. We believe that God has the power to straighten out our lives, and the lives of our loved ones. We know that God has the power to heal our broken relationships. Indeed, many of us can recount times when God has done great things for us in the past. We really don't have a problem admitting that God is Almighty.

But in the face of our overwhelming problems, in the midst of our helplessness, Jesus' question comes to us, "Why don't you trust me?" Are we really trusting God today? Are we really trusting Him with all those problems we brought in here? Are we really expecting Him to work changes in our lives? Are we really convinced that He cares enough to intervene on our behalf?

How can we move from fear of God to faith in God? The best way is to remember that He is in the same boat with us, in the midst of the same storm. For our God isn't just a God of power and might, who rules the winds and waves with His words. God isn't just a God of justice and righteousness, meting out punishment on the wicked.

No, in Jesus Christ, God became a man. He sailed into hazardous waters in the same boat with His disciples. And He is in the same boat with us, too. He suffered pain and hardship,

sorrow and loss, just like we do. And in order to keep us from perishing, He didn't just still the storm. He died in our place, that we might live with Him forever.

But the best news is that Jesus didn't wait for us to get our act together before coming to save us – He came to save us from our sins while we were still in the midst of those sins. Just as He didn't wait for the disciples to put their trust in Him before stilling the storm, so Jesus still takes the initiative to breathe new life into dead sinners, giving us new hearts that can then respond to Him in faith and love.

Yes, those same serious problems are waiting for us outside. Yes, all those problems still seem overwhelming. Yes, the storms of life are still raging. But we have a God Who is powerful to still all those storms. And we have a God Who is willing to help us, right where we are, in spite of our doubts and fears. We may be in the midst of a storm, but we shouldn't be afraid – for Jesus is in the boat with us. Let us trust Him to see us safely through.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.