

In the Same Boat
Mark 4:35-41

We got this. That had to be what Peter, Andrew, James and John were thinking as the first drops of rain fell. After all, they were professional fishermen. They had spent all of their lives in, on, and around the Sea of Galilee. They knew its moods, and they knew their way around a boat. This wasn't their first storm at sea.

In the same way, over the last century and a half, our medical and scientific communities have come to understand a lot about diseases and the way they spread. Our scientists have come up with cures for everything from smallpox to polio, and as a result, American life expectancies have risen from an average of 68 in 1950 to 78 today.

Of course, we haven't been able to solve every medical problem. Even as our cancer treatments have become ever more effective and tightly targeted, a cure continues to be just out of our reach. And viruses have been giving us grief since well before we knew what they were, many of them mutating regularly enough to keep us from being able to develop vaccines for them. It has often been said that we can send a man to the moon, but we can't cure the common cold.

And so we come to our present invisible enemy – COVID-19. We are learning how to test for who has it or who has had it. We know how to treat the symptoms – in fact, folks at our University Medical Center have figured out a way to fashion home-made respirators out of stuff you can get at the hardware store.

But we don't have a cure for this virus. And only time will tell if it's stable enough for a vaccine to be produced that will keep us from getting sick with it. And so here we are – the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the history of the world, commanding the greatest amount of medical and scientific information that mankind has ever known – and all we can do is hide from this microbe, hoping it will pass us by.

In other words, we find ourselves in the same boat with those disciples. All their skills and experience, all the time they had spent in and around the Sea of Galilee didn't matter. In a storm that intense, neither the quality of their seamanship nor the seaworthiness of their craft could save them. They were scared, and they had good reason to be. And so do we.

So, what did the disciples do? We would like to say that they turned in faith and trust to Jesus. And verse 38 tells us that they did wake Him up, but only to accuse Him of indifference, not to ask Him for help. They woke Him up to tell Him that they were all about to go down with the ship.

So yes, 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.

And don't we often do the same thing? We start out trying to convince ourselves that we are indeed in control of any given situation, that there is nothing we can't handle. We got this. But when we are proven wrong, when the circumstances of life become overwhelming, it is so easy to lose all faith in everything and give way to the forces of temptation or of despair.

So, why do we vacillate between these extremes? It turns out that both are really just manifestations of the same thing: pride. Our pride tells us that we got this, that we can fix any problem that we can face. And so we try as hard as we can, but when we fail, our pride tells us that, surely, no one else could have done any better. That's why disappointment follows confidence so easily: we believe 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 pride on the one hand and despair on the other.

But the good news for the disciples is that there was someone else in the boat with them, someone who, even while he was asleep on a pillow, was in complete control of the situation. And the solution He provided came 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. Simply put, the Son of God brought the power of God to bear on a situation that was impossible for mere men to solve.

And the good news is that same power still exists today. The good news is that our God is still a God of absolute authority, a God Who can still any storm that might come our way. The good news is that nothing is too difficult for our God.

Take a minute and think about some of those overwhelming problems we face all too often. Are any of those things –political problems, relational problems, health problems, even this deadly virus – 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 certainty is indeed one of our greatest comforts in times of trouble like these. But the passage

goes on to describe the disciples' reaction to Jesus' display of His divine power, a reaction that's rather strange, at least at first glance.

For let's face it: it would have made more sense for the disciples to respond to their deliverance with joy and gratitude. After all, Jesus had instantly and miraculously saved them from an all but certain death. But instead of worshipping Him or even thanking Him, Mark tells us that they feared exceedingly, that they were afraid of Jesus. Why?

Well, being in the presence of overwhelming power is not always reassuring, is it? After all, people who command such power don't always do what you want them to, right? For example, many of us are grateful that our governors have issued executive orders limiting the size of crowds in public places – we know that the spread of this virus needs to be stopped or at least slowed down. But the same power that can save lives by imposing social distancing can also cause tremendous economic hardship, as the recent protests in states from Michigan to Kentucky have demonstrated. Many small businessmen are rightly afraid that if these stay-at-home orders continue much longer, they'll lose everything they have. Yes, it's easy to see how displays of power can easily provoke us to anger and fear.

And so, in order to be comfortable around powerful people, you have to have faith in them, 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 of Him saying, "Why don't you trust Me?" That was the key question for them, and it remains the key question for us.

Remember, at first the disciples were putting their faith in themselves, in their seamanship. Then, when they thought their boat was sinking, they lost all faith and gave in to despair. But even after Jesus saved them, they didn't trust Him. Instead, they were afraid of Him.

Just so, many of us Christians have realized that we are in over our heads. Floods, tornados and this virus have convinced us that we are in no way in charge of the world around us. Moreover, many of us are ready to admit that we are just as helpless where it comes to our personal lives. We find it all too 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 confess that whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed. We know that God has sufficient power to straighten out our lives, and the lives of our loved ones. We understand that God has the power to heal our bodies as well as our broken relationships. Indeed, many of us can recount times when God has done great things for us and for others in the past. We really don't have a problem admitting that God has the power to do anything He wants, even calming a storm with a word the way Jesus did.

But in the face of the storms of life that are raging all around us today, Jesus' question comes to us, just as it did to His disciples after their storm was over: "Why are you so afraid?"

Why don't you have faith in me? Why don't you trust me with the overwhelming problems you are facing right now?"

For are we really trusting God today? Are we really trusting Him with all those problems we can't do anything about? Are we really expecting God to make the changes we need in our nation, in our community, in our personal lives? Are we really convinced that He is powerful enough and that He cares enough to help us? Or after our Bible study and our songs of praise, will we just go back to our anxieties, to our disappointments, to our despair?

Sure, we know that God is powerful. But how can we move from fear of God to faith in God? The best way is to remember what this passage makes clear: 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 created the winds and waves by His word. God isn't just a God of justice and righteousness, thundering His judgment on the wicked from His distant heavenly throneroom.

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 speak a word and 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 died for us while we were still sinners, still in rebellion against Him. 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 we had an hour ago, all those doubts and fears – they haven't gone away. Yes, all those problems still seem overwhelming. Yes, the storms of life are still raging all around us. But we have a God Who is powerful enough 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.