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God Is Our Friend
Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶ *And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, **just as he was**. Other boats were with him.* ³⁷ ***A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.*** 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?**”* 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.* ⁴⁰ *He said to them, “**Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?**”* 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?”*

Years ago, Pastor Ron Rolheiser attended a faith seminar where a woman shared the following personal story:

*She had been **happily married**, her children grown, and she and her husband were running a successful business. Then it all fell apart. Her husband, a recovering alcoholic, began to drink. Within two years, they had lost everything. Their **business went bankrupt, they lost their house, and their marriage fell apart**. She moved to a new city and took a new job, but the pain of what she had lost lingered and she found herself constantly depressed as she sought to begin again in mid-life.*

***Her frustration culminated one evening** when, having worked late, she was driving home and stopped for a red light. While waiting for the light to change she was hit from behind by a **drunk driver**. (The irony wasn't lost on her.) Her car was badly damaged and she was taken to the hospital. After several hours of medical treatment, near midnight, she was released, driven home by a policeman. **As they drove up to her townhouse, she noticed that the front door was wide open**. Getting out of the car she realized that her home had been ransacked and vandalized. It was the last straw: all that pent up frustration, anger, loss, and grief finally burst, and she lost control, **began to scream hysterically, and ran across the lawn shouting** at God and life—with the policeman chasing her.*

*As she recalled this, she said she remembered exactly what was running through her mind as she ran across that lawn. Her anger and her questions were about God: “**Where is God in all of this? Why is God letting this happen? Why is God asleep?**”*

*Then, suddenly, in one instant, everything became calm. She stopped running, and shouting, and felt a flood of calm and peace that she had never experienced before. No magic lights went on, no divine voices were heard, and she made no claims of “miracles”, but, in one second she realized that, no matter the storm, no matter the loss, and no matter death itself, **God is still in charge of this universe.** One second was all it took. **Calm returned.** She sent the policeman home and began cleaning up her house.*

Ron Rolheiser, The Sunday Website, June 23, 2024.

We’ve all been there, right?

Haven’t you felt ever ***like this woman*** running across her lawn?

When life is falling apart, and you wonder—***where is God?***

Why is God letting this happen?

Is God asleep?

And what kind of ***“friend” is God***—if God allows such pain?

Sound familiar?

Today we have the Gospel story of ***Jesus calming the wind and waves.***

But before he does that, he is ***asleep*** on the boat,

and the disciples are ***scared to death*** of the storm that threatens to sink them.

They cry out, ***“do you not care that we are perishing?”***

And what does Jesus do in response?

Does he say—***“Oh, it’s ok, go back to sleep, and let me sleep!”***

No---he ***gets up, rebukes the wind and the sea, saying “Peace, Be Still”.***

And then, there is nothing but calm.

Jesus SAVES them.

And then he says: ***Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?***

He wants them to know that they don’t have to fear---

because **HE IS WITH THEM.**

And he is in ***control.***

So...I wonder, what storms are YOU facing right now?

And what do you hear ***God saying to YOU, in this story?***

What things are filling you with ***frustration and fear?***

Our fear is REAL.

The *wind and waves of life are REAL*. And frightening.

One of *THE most popular phrases* in the Bible is *Do Not Fear*.
And for good reason.

That phrase is the bookend of the Gospels—
we hear it when the angel announces to Mary,
and to the women at the empty tomb at the resurrection!
Do Not Fear.

Why are those words so *important and powerful*?

It's because *life* is filled with fear—

We each have circumstances that overwhelm us with fear—
illness, caregiving, financial woes, job stresses, family struggles.
We may struggle with *anxiety, depression, addiction, or regret.*

And, *our WORLD is a scary place*—

There's so much going on—politics, violence, polarization, racial and social
injustice, all kinds of pain and suffering.

And people just aren't as kind and tolerant of each other today.

Fear is a problem—because of the way it makes us feel and act.

It can be *dangerous*—because it can *turn us away* from God.

It can cause *hopelessness*.

It can lead to a *denial of God's power*,
turning our focus to things we think God CANNOT do.

This is why the angels all say, *Do Not Fear*.

Because Fear is REAL and dangerous.

So how is it possible to NOT be afraid?

That's where this story speaks.

We are all in the boat of life, and we all encounter the wind and waves.

BUT, we are not alone.

Jesus is in the boat WITH US.

And as the kids learned in VBS—Jesus, God, IS *REAL*.

GOD IS A *FRIEND*.

And that makes *all the difference*.

The *disciples were still learning* this about Jesus.

Many of the disciples were fishermen,

And would have been quite *familiar with boats, and the Sea of Galilee*,

with its frequent storms and waves.

What was *unfamiliar* was having someone in the boat who could *calm* those waves!

I was reading about the Sea of Galilee this week.

It covers 64 square miles---it's 13 miles long and 8 miles wide!

It's the lowest freshwater lake on Earth, the shoreline is 680 ft below sea level, and the surrounding hills are about 2000 feet above sea level, so the wind can funnel through, whipping up waves.

And storms are fed by the drastically different temperatures.

A storm on the Sea of Galilee is serious and scary.

Just like our lives. James Martin, *From Fear to Calm*, Christian Century April 15, 2014.

To say that Jesus could sleep in the midst of a storm on this sea is striking.

But why would he have been sleeping at all?

Probably because he was tired, having just ministered 24/7.

But I think there's something else.

Jesus knew that his Father God had everything under control.

So he could sleep.

But the disciples were shocked to find him asleep!

Much like the Psalmist, who also speaks about being afraid of the waters of life.

In Psalm 69, it says "*the waters have come up to my neck*".

in Psalm 44:23 the Psalmist asks "*why do you sleep, O Lord?*"

But, what if the psalmist is not asking from a lack of faith?

What if he asks---because of his ***confidence in God's power?***

What if we can cry out to God---because ***God is the only one*** who can help us?

When was the last time YOU cried out to God?

Do you cry out from a ***lack*** of faith?

Or do you cry out, because you ***know*** God has the power to help?

I think ***most of us know that God CAN help***....the question is,

Do we believe God's help IS coming to us?

In this story, we see Jesus coming to help us.

Cancer survivor Reynolds Price wrote a book called, ***Letter to a Man in a Fire***.

And in it, Price talks about facing exhausting medical tests before surgery.

And one day she has a ***vision***.

"I went out along the Galilee hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen.

But Jesus looked over the crowd at me and said, *'What do you want?'* And I said, 'Could you *send someone* to come with me and help me stand up after the tests because I can't manage alone?' Jesus thought for a moment and then said, *'How would it be if I came?'*" Reynolds Price, *Letter to a Man in a Fire* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 30-1.

What if Jesus would come to YOU?

To US?

Because Jesus himself is a calming presence, isn't he?

And the kids learned in VBS that the calming presence of Jesus is always available to us,

Because Jesus lives--- ***In our hearts.***

So, if we ask for his help, it's right here--immediately.

Spiritual director James Martin says that he has learned that this Gospel story ***is one of the most helpful passages to Christians today.***

Because it ***speaks to the fears*** we all face.

And it ***reminds us of the peace and calm*** that Jesus can bring.

And who doesn't need peace and calm? *James Martin, From Fear to Calm, Christian Century April 15, 2014.*

After all, we are stressed, busy, and overwhelmed.

In fact, we often wear our stress and busyness as a badge of honor.

I know I'm guilty of allowing too much stress and busyness,

What about you?

Most of us hear one another sharing stories of stress.

Do you ever hear people saying, *"I'm so calm, I don't have too much going on"*?

That would sound bizarre, right?

And yet that is the answer Jesus wants us to have!

This story is also powerful because

life presents us so many different challenges.

And there are days when we want to give up,

Or run across our lawn screaming,

just like the woman in the story today!

I've been there, haven't you?

A couple of years ago, this church studied a great book, Called ***Sailboat Church***, by Rev. Joan Gray.

And the premise is simple.

We are called to ***be like sailboats***, letting the Holy Spirit fill our sails,
Instead of living like ***rowboats***, where we try to do life on our own power.

And in her book, she talks about how this is so important,
Because we all face the storms of life.

So we must prepare, as individuals and as a church, for the storms.

How do we do that?

She says that we do it one way----***we PRAY.***

That is how we ***build the trust*** we need in God---

That is how we ***receive God's peace and calm.***

That is how we ***meet Jesus.***

We pray.

How and when do YOU pray?

Is it enough to ***sustain*** you?

Is it ***meeting the needs*** you have, with your challenges?

Do you take time to pray with loved ones? friends? church family?

Prayer is by far the most POWERFUL way that we hear from Jesus.

It is like the ***power cord*** for Christian life, connecting us to God.

So, how can you ***increase*** time in prayer?

Gray says that we should pray in three special ways.

In ***expectation***—that God will answer.

In ***recognition*** that the Spirit is at work around us.

And in ***thanks*** to God.

She suggests that every church have a group praying for the church!

We have a group of Elders praying each Thursday morning, for our congregation,
our merger, and our Presbytery.

We do expect God to answer, we do see the Spirit at work, and we do thank God.

Our kids learned about prayer at VBS.

And they learned about ***God-sightings***---

A God sighting is where we see God at work around us.

For instance--a beautiful sunrise, or a hug, a fun song, or a special activity.

God is at work all around us, the question is---are we paying attention?

Friends, hear the Good News:

our Savior Jesus wants to bring us peace and calm.

Jesus wants to be our friend,

a friend who ***loves*** us, and ***helps*** us when we face the storms of life.

A friend who is always ***with*** us.

May we trust in God, and look for God's help.

May we pray---even more.

And for the gift of the God who calms the wind and waves,

All God's people can say together, Amen.