

### **“Who IS This?!” – Mark 4:35-41**

For the life of them they couldn't figure him out. There he lay, calm as can be, snoozing away while they were about to drown. What was the matter with him? Why didn't he wake up and do something? The shrieking of the wind shearing off the tops of the towering waves threatened to deafen them. The intense flashes of lightning tore apart the premature darkness, revealing all too clearly the boiling black clouds and the water filling their tiny boat, and illuminating with great detail the intense fear in all their faces. Well, all the faces except one.

There Jesus reclined, comfy on a pillow, sleeping peacefully like a baby while all around him was in chaos and terror. They couldn't understand. They simply couldn't figure out why this incredible man, upon whose every word they hung, whose call they couldn't refuse, who made the lame walk and the blind see and the lepers clean, was sleeping and wouldn't, or worse yet couldn't, do something to save them. Their hearts were pounding loud enough to be heard over the shrieking wind and the crashing thunder, but his pulse rate looked like it was about 40. Who IS this man, they wondered, who would save strangers, and foreigners, and women and children, but who wouldn't even wake up to help them. “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying here?” they demanded of him as they shook him awake.

And that's where their real fear took over. We can't be sure what the disciples had in mind when they interrupted Jesus' nap. We won't ever know for sure, but judging from their reaction I suspect they expected that he would somehow make sure that the boat didn't sink, that none of them would get washed overboard, that the howling wind would drive them ashore on some safe beach, where they could finally wade through the crashing surf and drop exhausted onto the sand. I'm pretty sure that's what they expected, because instead of being comforted those badly shaken disciples were even more terrified by what actually did happen.

“Cut it out!” Jesus said, rebuking the wind and the sea. And the wind did, and the sea did, just like that – cut it out, that is. Instantly, or at least immediately, all was dead calm. The only sound was the hammering hearts of the now fully-terrified disciples, standing in the now peaceful boat in the middle of a calm sea, and perhaps the sounds of their jaws dropping onto the deck. “Who IS this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?!” they asked of each other, now filled with great awe. Actually, what the text tells us is that they now “feared a great fear”. I guess so! They could not have expected that the answer to their desperate request to Jesus to save them would be displayed in such dramatic fashion. They could not have been prepared for such an incredible display of power over not just illness but over the very elements of the cosmos. Who IS this man who can stop even the wind and waves with nothing more than a half-sleepy “cut it out!”

Who, indeed? The answer was, and is, as obvious as the demonstration of offhand power. The only possible answer is that this man, this Jesus, had at his command the full power and authority of God, and that understanding terrified them. Rightly so that they were terrified, since they had obviously come face to face with one who not only spoke with great wisdom and insight, who displayed great gifts of healing, but who at the mere issue of a spoken command the power of God to control even the elements of nature, including that habitation of all sorts of unfathomable evil creatures, the sea. With such a dramatic display of the power of God in him and at his beck and call, how could the disciples not have been in awe, in terror of having come face to face with God himself? The answer to their question, “Who IS this?!” suddenly and powerfully came all too clear.

Who, indeed? That question is still asked today, although the answer is somewhat easier to get now than it was for those terrified disciples. They had to learn the hard way, through

living alongside Jesus just who he was, and it was at best confusing. Amazing displays of power seemed offset by incredible weakness and gentleness. All seemed lost at his trial and execution, but then all came clear as Jesus reappeared to them, risen victorious over even death. The answer to their question, “who IS this?” eventually came clear that this Jesus was truly the Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God.

In spite of their terror at the time, what a wonderful metaphor for being saved by Jesus from traumatic times this dramatic incident must have become for the disciples. I’m sure they must have related this story time and time again, because it appears in various forms in all of the gospels. Told and retold, with different emphases, and echoed by those who were in the other boats that accompanied Jesus and the disciples, the story became preserved in scripture and now provides a metaphor for us.

Not that all or any of us will literally need to be rescued from raging wind and water, although I suspect I’m not the only one here with tales of being kept safe while out on the water in conditions that were life-threatening. But this dramatic incident gives us a model for what to do when life is rocking our boat, so to speak. And life does that, doesn’t it? How often and what are the ways that life from time to time makes you feel like you’re about to go under? Is it worry over financial stress? Or perhaps relationship issues with people who put the “fun” in dys”fun”ctional? Or health challenges? Or weather? Or the seemingly endless ways people have of being mean and nasty and vindictive and graceless? One thing is certain: to be alive is to find yourself from time to time in one of the inevitable storms of life, to have your boat rocked from time to time by forces that seem completely overwhelming, apparently unstoppable, and totally life-threatening.

That’s where this dramatic incident provides us a model in our faith. You may not ever need Jesus’ help in a storm on the water, but if you’re like the rest of us there are plenty of storms in life from which you will be rescued by Jesus – simply by following the disciples’ actions and rousing Jesus for help. You may already have done this. Perhaps you might even not have been aware that you were doing it, and not have recognized Jesus’ hand in your rescue. You’ve heard my joke about the man rescued in the flood, so I won’t use it again (but you can ask me at coffee if you haven’t heard it!) but I did see a parallel in a recent issue of *The Christian Century*. That story involves an atheist lost on the tundra in the far north, where there are no landmarks. He later told a friend that he prayed, “God, if there is a God, please help me.” His friend asked if God had indeed rescued him, and the atheist replied, “No, as luck would have it, a couple of Innuits came along just then and led me back to the base camp.”

It sounds so easy and yet it’s so hard to do, isn’t it? It is so difficult to simply call upon Jesus to calm the storms that swirl around you, and to trust that he will do so. It may seem like he is asleep at the helm, uncaring about our safety, oblivious to our plight and our peril. In spite of our professions of faith in him, we protest and ask, as the frightened disciples did, “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying here?” And like the disciples, we too are often terrified to discover just how much and how deeply Jesus does indeed care for us, and how quickly and completely he comes to our rescue.

There’s another aspect to this story that is worth our attention. Even in those times that we do tentatively reach out for Jesus’ help, don’t we still try to keep control by asking him to solve the problem the way we would? Imagine for a moment if the disciples had asked Jesus for help the way we usually do ... “Master, please help us get safely through this storm and get back to shore”, and if he had done what they had asked. Another few hours tossed by the wind and the waves, and then winding up right back where they started. Has that ever happened to you,

asking Jesus only to do the possible? Or if the disciples had asked instead, “Lord, if this boat goes down, please let me be rescued” and had their prayer answered by one of the accompanying boats, how diminished would the grace of God be?

But instead here is an example of Jesus’ identity and power, available for simply asking, and there is a clue in that simplicity. Instead of telling Christ in desperate prayer exactly how you think he should rescue you when you find yourself in one of the storms of life, simply ask that he calm the storm, and rescue you in such a way as to bring him the glory. I promise you, he will. It may not – probably will not – happen the way you think it should, and you may even miss his hand at work. But save you from the storms of life he will, because absolutely, yes, he cares about you. Jesus cares about you with all the love that God has to offer, and his powerful help is there simply for the asking. That is who Jesus is!