

Be Still

Mark 4:35-41

In addition to all of the challenges of the last year caused by the pandemic, we're also still recovering from the challenges caused by the derecho last August. Just as students were coming back to Iowa State for the fall semester, a strong wind suddenly came up. Here in Ames, we were spared large damage, though we still dealt with power outages, downed trees, and roof damages. But the devastation was worse to the east of us. Dramatic pictures showed grain silos blown over, whole neighborhoods without trees, and more. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources recently reported that the storm wiped out over 4 million trees throughout central and eastern Iowa. Even now, damage is still being repaired.

But the storm made us be still. Without power, we were forced to be quiet. With limited power and limited cell phone connectivity, we were forced to be without our modern conveniences for a time. We were forced to focus in on what we had around us, and who we had around us. We were forced to be still.

Storms were a common occurrence on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus and his disciples should have been used to having one pop up. But it had been a long day of teaching. Jesus was tired, and asleep in the stern of the boat. The disciples were tired, too, though used to long nights out on the water trying to catch fish. But suddenly a storm comes.

Storms are unpredictable. They often come unexpectedly, without any warning at all. When the disciples left the shore that evening, everything was fine. Then "a great windstorm arose." The Sea of Galilee is located 700 feet below sea level, surrounded by hills. Frequently, a rush of wind and colliding

changes in temperatures can cause storms to arise. Storms on the Sea of Galilee are known for their suddenness and ferocity.

The word in the original Greek that describes the storm in this passage is *mega*, which we use to create the word *megaphone*, and means "great." The word is actually used three times. The great windstorm, the great calm after Jesus speaks, and the great fear of the disciples after Jesus saves them. The fact that the disciples were frightened tells us it was no small storm. Remember that at least four of the disciples were experienced fishermen who had spent time out on this very body of water. They had seen storms before. But this was an unusually great one that threatened to swamp the boat, sending them into a panic. Yet while the disciples panic, Jesus doesn't. When they awake him, he doesn't panic. He rebukes the wind and the waves, commanding them to be still. And they listen to him. It is still, quiet, calm. The disciples are amazed and afraid.

In this account, Jesus shows both his humanity and his divinity. He shows his humanity by what he's doing in the boat. He's sleeping. He's tired. He's vulnerable. As Philip Yancey writes in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, "The creator of rain clouds was rained on, the maker of stars got hot and sweaty under the Palestine sun. Jesus subjected himself to natural laws even when, at some level, they went against his desires." He faces the power of the wind and waves just like his disciples do. After a long day of teaching, surely Jesus didn't want to face a storm in the middle of the night, in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Yet he did. Jesus showed his humanity.

Jesus shows his divinity by commanding the storm, the wind and the waves, to be still. And it works! Jesus rebukes the storm, and it stops. His disciples are full of awe and fear. Jesus' words and actions convince the disciples that Jesus is unlike any other man. It shows them they still have no idea who really Jesus is. When Jesus reveals himself in new ways, the disciples react in awe and fear.

Jesus calms the storm by telling it to be still. The disciples are still before Jesus. They need time to figure out what has happened. They know Jesus is their teacher, but they need time for this lesson to sink in. Jesus calmed the storm, and did so in a way that helped the disciples mature in their faith and trust in him more deeply. In the same way, Jesus calms the storms in our lives but actually does so in ways that mature our faith and lead us to trust in him more deeply.

After Jesus calmed the storms, the disciples were further on their way to understand who Jesus really was. They were on their way to know that Jesus was God. They were on their way to understanding why he had come to earth, to defeat the powers of sin and death. They knew more of why they should be still before him.

We, too, need time to be still. When we're constantly going from one thing to another, from one crisis to another, we can hardly think. We need time to be still, to clear our heads, to breathe, to find peace. The world's adage is, "Don't just stand there, do something." In some instances God asks us, "Don't just do something, stand there." Be still. God is in control. You are not.

Jesus commands the winds and the waves to be still, but it's a good command for us, as well. In

Psalm 46, which Martin Luther uses as the basis for his famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress*, it describes storms and earthquakes, while reminding us that God is our fortress, that God is with us. It ends by commanding us to be still and know that God is God.

As early as the first century, this dramatic story became a symbol for the Christian church. In Christian artwork, the church began to be pictured as a ship — a ship with a cross for a mast, sailing through the storm of life. We still call the main part of the church where the congregation sits the nave, for this reason. When we do baptisms, we pray that we may be kept safe in the ark of the church, protected from the storms of life. Presbyterian pastor Richard Deibert writes that Mark paints this scene “to typify the mighty challenges confronting [the] Christian community throughout the centuries.” In this story we recognize those times in the life of the church when it is threatened by the forces of chaos and confusion, forces that turn out to be no match for the reign of God present in the person of Jesus. We see that today, in our nation, facing storms outside of the church in a changing culture and the recovery from the pandemic and its restrictions. We see that inside the church, as well, facing scandals and abuses within churches and denominations. We see that throughout the world, as Christians face persecution from totalitarian governments and extremists of other religions who hope to use fear to destroy the church.

But this and other stories of Jesus bringing peace into times of fear present us not merely with the presence of Jesus, who shares our predicament amid the storms of life, but with the power of Jesus, who can do something about the storms. This passage gives us not so much with a strategy for coping with the storms

of life. It instead gives us a promise of salvation.

So often, the problems that cause us trouble in the present look laughably small in the rear-view mirror. Though this often reveals our own shortsightedness, it also reveals the power of God to deliver and save. Life's struggles and challenges are real and threatening, but God's power to save is more real still.

We don't know when the storms of life will come. We don't know when we will be faced with situations that make us fear for our lives. Yet we know who is with us in those situations. The one who commands the winds and the waves to be still, tells us to be still, as well. He tells us to be still and know that He is God. We know Jesus is with us, and will save us. What a wonderful, comforting promise.

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