

LOST AT SEA

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Mark 4:35-41

Vacation Bible School kicks off tomorrow. All this week, an army of volunteers has spent hour after hour decorating and planning and getting everything ready for when the kids arrive tomorrow night. The theme for this year's VBS is **Shipwrecked**, and through the week we are going to explore the different ways that we can get lost and how Jesus rescues us. We are going to look at the story of the lost son (the prodigal son), the story of the criminal who was forgiven by Jesus at the crucifixion, and the story of the disciples who were lost at sea—our reading for today. I will ask that through the week that you keep us all in your prayers—prayers of thanksgiving for the adults who have brought all of this together, prayers for the children that this VBS will be meaningful and fun, and prayers that everyone stays safe and that all goes as planned.

Our scripture reading for today is the familiar story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus has been preaching and teaching to a large crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Late in the afternoon, Jesus says to those with him, *Let us go across to the other side*. They leave the crowd on the shore and climb into a boat. Jesus' boat is not alone; others join them. They begin sailing across the lake toward the opposite shore. During the night, however, as they traveled, a storm appears and crashing waves threaten to sink the boat. Despite the chaos of the storm, Jesus sleeps soundly in the stern of the boat, on a cushion. Those in the boat go to him and shake him awake saying, *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*

This is the part of the story that I have the most difficulty comprehending. Most of those that Jesus called to be his disciples were fishermen. That would make them experienced sailors. I, myself, grew up on the Gulf Coast and have spent a large part of my life on boats. My family has always had at least one boat and together we've logged hundreds if not thousands of hours on the water. Weather is a crucial part of boating. You constantly have to be mindful of the weather and keep an eye on the horizon for storms. The western side of the Sea of Galilee is lined with hills. Behind these hills lies the Mediterranean Ocean. It is entirely possible for a storm to develop over the Mediterranean and then without warning blow across the hills onto the Sea of Galilee. I imagine that this is what happened that night that Jesus and his disciples were crossing the lake. But still, why were the disciples *afraid*? Why did they wake Jesus saying, *Do you not care that we are perishing?*

I remember when I was a kid, maybe eight years old, and this family was visiting us. We were all out in the boat when a afternoon thunderstorm popped up and started heading toward us. Not a big deal. We turned the boat and headed for home. The storm continued in our direction a little faster than normal and we could

see the curtain of rain in the distance. We could also see occasional flashes of lightning. Again, not a big deal. We would beat the storm home. But this family had a boy who was a year younger than me and he became hysterical. The storm terrified him. He was crying and wailing and clinging to his mother and yelling that the storm was going to get us. Later, his mother explained to me that they were from Oklahoma where storms could be dangerous and her son was afraid to be outside and exposed.

Back on the Sea of Galilee, that must have been an exceptional storm for the fishermen to get as rattled as they were. Having a few times been caught in an exceptionally bad storm, I can tell you that it can be unnerving. The whole world is moving every which way. All you can do is fight for control. When the disciples go to Jesus saying, *Do you not care that we are perishing?* I don't think that they are seeking supernatural intervention. Instead, this was an 'all hands on deck' moment. "Grab a paddle and row to keep the bow headed into the waves. Help hold the sail down. Grab a bucket and start bailing. Don't just lie there. We've got to save ourselves. It is going to take every one of us to get through this."

So Jesus wakes up. He doesn't grab a bucket. He doesn't start rowing. Instead, he tackles the heart of the problem. He scolds the wind and to the sea he says, *Peace! Be still!* Immediately, the wind dies down and there is calm. Mark had described this storm as being a "great" storm using the Greek work *mega*. The calm is described the same way. It is *mega* calm. In a matter of moments we've gone from a great storm to a great calm all because of a few words from Jesus. Jesus then turns to the disciples in the boat and asks them, *Why is your faith timid? Have you still no faith?* One translator puts it this way: they were *afearred a great fear*. Among themselves they wondered, *Who is this that even the wind and the sea listen to him?*

As I have studied this reading this week, I've decided that the pivotal point of the story is that question the disciples put to Jesus, *Do you not care that we are perishing?* In front of that question is only wind and storm; following the question is peace. And that question, it makes me chuckle. Who are they to ask if Jesus cares? Of course, Jesus cares. We know Jesus cares. Jesus' entire ministry is about caring, and compassion, and love, and forgiveness. Jesus befriends the lonely, heals the broken, guides the lost, comforts the sorrowful. We'll read just a little later in Mark's gospel about how Jesus *saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd* (6:34). It is ludicrous to ask if Jesus cares.

We who gather here to worship call ourselves Christians—followers of Jesus the Christ. As Christians, we are to lead our lives in obedience to Jesus' teachings and commands. We are to love God and love our neighbor. We are to preach the Gospel to the world. We are to repent. We are to love and pray for our enemies. We are not to judge. A good summary of the Christian life is found in the letter of 1 Peter which says, *...all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers*

and sisters, be compassionate and humble (3:8). I could go on for quite a while listing all the expectations that scripture places on the followers of Jesus. But you are aware of most of these.

Over the past two weeks, the news in our nation has focused on the topic of the separation of immigrant children from their parents. In the past, those immigrants caught entering the country illegally were charged with a misdemeanor and sent back or placed into the immigration pipeline, many seeking asylum. In April, the administration imposed what they call a zero-tolerance policy meaning that anyone caught entering the U.S. illegally would be prosecuted for committing a federal offense. According to the Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, the administration wants “to get this message out” in order to deter people from coming to the U.S. and requesting asylum. John Kelly, the White House Chief of Staff, has remarked that the family separation is indeed a “tough deterrent.” However, I want to point out that seeking asylum in the U.S. is not illegal.

The side-effect of this zero-tolerance policy is that now when an adult is apprehended, any minors with them are taken away and placed into the hands of the Department of Health and Human Services while the adult is placed into custody. In the past, most families arrested after crossing the border were released for civil deportation hearings.

On Wednesday of this week, the president issued an executive order ending the administration’s policy of separating families. However, since April, approximately 2300 children under the age of 18 have been separated from their parents. They have been placed in various locations all around the country. It is not clear when or if the president’s executive order will reunite these children with their families.

I am well aware that politically this is an incendiary issue with powerful emotions on both sides. But I want to ask you to set politics aside and look at this from a purely Christian perspective. How do we love our neighbor?

In the story of Jesus calming the storm, Jesus tells his followers to get in the boat so they can *go across to the other side*. The other side was a different land, a different country, a different people. Halfway through their journey, all became chaos. But because Jesus is there, peace is restored and the boat continues on its way. As Christians, the questions we have to ask ourselves is how do we treat those who are on the boat, lost at sea, caught between lands, tossed about by chaos and fear? Do we remain asleep on a cushion or do we show that we care and speak out to bring peace to fractured lives.

The issues surrounding immigration are extraordinarily complex. There is no simple solution. It will take all of us to work it out. We are all in this boat together. As Christians, the question is ‘will we seek a solution through power or compassion?’