

Boat. Disciples. Lord.

Matthew 8:23-27

Laura Anderson ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ October 8, 2023

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²³ And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

²⁶ And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:23-27)

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This story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee is such a great, action-packed adventure, isn't it? The disciples and Jesus are crossing the sea, and suddenly this monster of a storm blows up. It's such a huge storm that even though at least four of the disciples are professional fisherman by trade, they are unable to control the boat. The vessel is being swamped by the waves, and it looks like the boat and its passengers may go down. This storm is so powerful that Matthew calls it, literally, a “mega seismic storm.” It is an earthshaking, wave-quaking, boat-tossing event. And yet, despite the storm's larger-than-life presence in the story, it isn't the focus of the passage at all. Instead, the storm functions simply as a catalyst that allows us to see how three other characters in the passage respond. So this morning, we'll look beyond the storm as best we can to focus on these three “characters” — for lack of a better word for now. And these three characters are the boat, the disciples, and the Lord.

Boat

So, the boat. You may be wondering, “How can the boat be a character?” It doesn't seem to have a very big role. Plus, it's ... not alive. We don't have time to dive into

the details here, but in carefully studying Matthew's version of this story alongside Mark's and Luke's, scholars have come to the widely accepted conclusion that in Matthew, the boat is not just a boat. The boat actually represents the Church.¹ Some of you probably know that Matthew is the only Gospel writer who explicitly uses the Greek word for “church” in his Gospel — for example, in 18:17, where he writes about church discipline. But here in chapter 8, Matthew isn't using the word for church. Instead, he uses the boat to symbolize the Church. Although it is indirect, this is, I think, the first reference to the Church in the New Testament. And first references, like first words, are usually important because they help set the agenda. So, what is the first thing we learn about the Church here?

The first thing we learn is that the Church is not spared the storms of life. The Church will experience calamity, suffering, and life-threatening events. It will be so severely besieged that at times it will seem on the verge of being utterly destroyed. This doesn't come as a surprise, does it? Just after the dawn of the Church, Stephen became a martyr for his faith in Christ (Acts 7). And in our times, according to the 2021 World Watch List of Christian persecution, 13 Christians are killed every day for their faith, while another 12 are imprisoned and a further 5 are abducted. An estimated 309 million Christians live in countries with very high or extreme levels of persecution. This number went up by almost 50 million in just one year — from 2020 to 2021 — as a result of more governments taking systematic oppressive actions against Christians.² No, the Church is not destined for smooth sailing. Matthew got that right.

What else does Matthew tell us about the Church here? Let's jump ahead to verse 26, where Jesus asks the disciples the question, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” We'll come back to this in more detail, but for now, I want to point out that while Jesus calls the

¹ Günther Bornkamm's 1948 comparison of Mark's and Matthew's versions of the stilling of the storm gave birth to a new way of exploring and interpreting biblical texts known as redaction criticism. His conclusion about Matthew's unique understanding of the boat as representing the church is pretty mainstream today and accepted by biblical scholars of most

every theological stripe. For some introductory thoughts about redaction criticism, see <https://seminary.bju.edu/theology-in-3d/redaktionsgeschichte-in-the-gospels/>.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/christian-persecution-2021-countries-open-doors-watch-list.html>.

disciples, literally, little-faiths, he doesn't tell them to get out of the boat. He doesn't say, "Your faith is too small; you cannot be in my boat. Get out!" Nor does he say, "Your faith is so big and so strong. I think you can swim to shore on your own." Indirectly, then, Matthew is telling us that, whether our faith is big or little, there is room in the boat for us. We belong in the boat. There is room in the Church for us.

The final lesson about the Church that we'll focus on here is this: with Jesus in charge of the boat, the Church will make it safely to the other side. Jesus will bring us home. This does not mean that everything will turn out fine when we face difficult storms in our life. Just because we claim the name of Jesus doesn't mean everything is going to work out okay. Bad stuff happens to Christians. Bad stuff happens to the Church. Our sure hope is that Jesus will get us safely to our eternal home. The passage may not be easy, but the boat, with Jesus at the helm, will ultimately get through the storm. And in the meantime, we do not have to face those storms alone. We have our brothers and sisters in Christ to help us, to encourage us, to pray with us and for us, to tell us to hang on and stay in the boat. And we do the same for them. We also have the presence of Christ, who is always in charge of the boat and who never leaves us, no matter how hard the storm may rage.

Disciples

Let's take a look now at the disciples and how they respond to the catalyst of the storm. The passage begins with Jesus getting into the boat, and the disciples follow him. For Matthew, this is what Christian discipleship looks like: Jesus leads, and we follow. Without delay, without hesitation. So far, the disciples are off to a great start!

But then the storm hits. And at some point, they realize that they are in danger of going down with the ship and they are terrified. They go to Jesus and they say, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" In the Greek this is even more terse - it's just three words. Lord, then save ... they're so scared and stressed that they can't even be bothered to put in the "us." And then that whole phrase, "we are right now in the process of perishing" is expressed with just one word, one verb, in the Greek. Lord! Save! Perishing! It's filled with tension and fear.

But notice this: Even in their terror, the disciples call Jesus "Lord." They recognize that he is the one who can save them. That's good theology. It sounds like the disciples are still doing a pretty good job of following Jesus, right? It seems like it. But then Jesus wakes up, and what is the first thing he does? Calm the storm? No.

Stop the winds? No. The very first thing he does is to ask his disciples a question: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

Some of you know that I am currently taking a class on crisis response. I'm in so far over my head. But I have learned a few things. For instance, in a crisis, the most important response is getting people to safety. If they're out of danger, you keep them from going back into the danger. Here, the disciples are about to drown on a churning sea, and Jesus is not first working to bring them to safety. My professor would not be impressed.

Once people are safe, you work to decrease their stress and fear and to re-engage their cognitive, rational-thinking capacities by asking them simple questions: What's your name? Are you hurt? After that, you can start to ask more complex questions: What do you need to be comfortable in the shelter tonight? Who would you like to contact? Questions are good. Except for one kind. You know what kind of question you don't ask? You don't ask questions that begin with the interrogative, "Why?" because these sorts of questions can make people feel guilty and judged: "Why did you bring your game station instead of grabbing your important papers?" "Why didn't you have a go-bag ready when you live in a flood-prone area?" "Why ... are ... you ... afraid?" Jesus not only asks a "Why?" question, but he does it in a way that makes the disciples' fear seem abnormal rather than a perfectly human response to a terrifying situation. Again, my professor would not be impressed. I'll tell you what. In two weeks when I take my final exam in Crisis Incident Responses, I do not expect to ace the exam. But if Jesus shows up to take that test with this kind of a question as the primary tool in his toolbox, well, at least there will be one person who does worse than I do.

Because ... what is up with that question? "Why are you afraid?" It makes me wonder: Is Jesus utterly clueless? Is Jesus so divine that he is completely out of touch with the reasonableness of human fear in this situation? WHY ... does he ask this question?

He asks this question because for him, the storm is not the problem. **The storm is not the crisis. The real crisis is that the storm has swamped the disciples' faith.** As their fear has gotten bigger, their faith has gotten shakier. Recognizing this, what more can we now say about the disciples?

According to Jesus, fear and faith don't go together. Now, this is not a condemnation of fear. In a fallen world, fear is helpful because it can alert us to danger and move us to take action to get out of danger. That's a

good thing. But if fear continues unabated, when it has us in its grip, our brain goes primal: fight or flight. Flail or freeze. We lose the ability to think clearly. Our cognitive capacities become impaired. We are reactive, not rational. We are focused on the moment, and our ability to remember is diminished. It is hard to remember who God is. It is hard to remember why we believe in God. It is hard to have confidence in the perfection of who God is and what God does. Unchecked fear can throttle our faith. So Jesus asks a question designed to shake the disciples back into their cognitive capacities and away from their fear: Why are you afraid?

How do you think the disciples would answer this question? Maybe, “I’m afraid because I can’t handle the boat.” Or, “I’m afraid because the boat is filling with water and I don’t want to die.” “I’m afraid because I don’t know what’s going to happen.” “I’m afraid because you might not do what I want you to do, which is to get me out of this storm.”

How about for you? When you think about the storms you’re facing, how do you answer Jesus when he asks with gentle honesty, “Why are you afraid?”

Lord

Let’s turn our attention now to the Lord Jesus, who is the main character in our story. In particular, let’s focus on Jesus’ response to the storm in verse 26b: “Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.” In the Greek, it reads a “mega” calm. At Jesus’ rebuke, the mega seismic storm immediately becomes mega calm. No wind. No waves. The sea still as glass. And silent. You can almost hear the cogs of the disciples’ brains turning, turning....

Because something unprecedented has just happened: someone who looks like a human has calmed the sea. He hasn’t stretched a staff over the water at God’s command, the way Moses did when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 14:16). He hasn’t invoked the name of God, as Peter will when he heals the lame man in Acts 3. All Jesus does is speak, and the sea obeys. And the only Being with that kind of power is God. Psalm 65:7 addresses God and says, “You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.” Psalm 107:29 declares that God “made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.”

The preposterousness of a human claiming to have the power to calm the sea is seen during the time of the Maccabees (between the era of the Old and New Testaments). At that time, there was a new ruler in town,

Antiochus Epiphanes. He was Greek-speaking and he came to Judah and Jerusalem bringing the Greek language, Greek education, Greek architecture, Greek culture ... and Greek gods. He issued edicts requiring the Jews to worship his gods and to violate their dietary laws. Those who refused to comply – and they were many – he had killed. So, Antiochus had a well-deserved reputation as a murderer. But he was also known as a blasphemer. He was a blasphemer because he had the “superhuman arrogance” to claim that “he could command the waves of the sea” (2 Macc. 9:8, 28).

So, what of Jesus? Unlike Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus isn’t *claiming* to command the waves of the sea. He just did it. He commanded the waves and the wind and they obeyed. Instantaneously. And the disciples are beginning to understand. Earlier they called him “Lord,” and now they are starting to understand the depths of this title, the reality of who this man in the boat is. They don’t know how to take it all in. So they ask a question of their own: “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (v. 27).

In this question I think we hear the potential remedy for a fear-shrunken faith. As we learn to answer this question in a fuller, more robust way and as we come to know and experience and love Christ as he truly is — the living, all-powerful, all-loving Lord God of the universe — our faith will grow because it is anchored in HIS reality rather than the day-to-day reality of this world, which can keep our eyes on things below.

If the source of a growing faith comes through knowing God better, how do we do this? There are so many ways to pursue this end, but I’ll offer just two ideas today.

The first is very simple and very practical. When we read Scripture, we want to be sure to focus on the character of God as it is revealed in the passage. Christians are not immune to the seductions of our me-oriented culture, and as a result, we can read the Bible with too strong a focus on what it says “to me” or “for me.” We can jump too quickly to asking what this means for “my” life. So instead, we want to be sure to consider what each passage reveals about God. What is God like here? What is important to God? What does God do? What does he value? We can meditate on the person and the attributes of God, and let the spectacular Being of God fill our mind more and more. Little by little, this truer, fuller image of God will become more and more the Lord we know and love and serve and worship.

The second idea goes hand in hand with the first.³ Yes, we want to get to know God in a fuller, more robust way, and **at the same time**, we need to make our desires for preferred outcomes second to God’s desires. If we want what we want no matter what, then we may call Jesus “Lord,” but we are treating him more like a genie in a lamp whose primary function is to give us what we want when we say the right words and offer the right prayers. Our desires are not submitted to God.

Notice — and this is important — our desires, in and of themselves, are not the problem. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you **the desires** of your heart.” Desire is not the problem. Trouble comes when we cling to our desire for a specific outcome instead of yielding that desire to God’s sovereign care. How do we break this cycle?

For starters, we can look to Gethsemane. There Jesus modeled for us this yielding of desire. Jesus pleaded with the Father to let this cup pass from him. Jesus didn’t deny his desire, and when we pray, we don’t have to deny our desire either. Jesus tells his Father exactly what he wants: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” But then he yields his desire to the Father’s: “Yet not what I want but what you want” (Matt. 26:39). We can pour out our heart to God. We can tell our Heavenly Father what we want to happen. And then we open our hands and we say, “Not my will but your will be done.”

As we come to a fuller understanding of who Christ is and as our faith in him grows little by little, leaving less and less room for fear, this process of placing our desires second to God’s desires may well become more natural and easier. No longer will our fear of the storm be our primary focus, even though in prayer we may still ask God to see us safely through that storm. No longer will attaining our desired outcome be our motivating concern. Instead, captivated by the beautiful perfection of the One in the boat with us, we may find that **Jesus himself has become our deepest desire**. Jesus himself has become the other side of the storm. Our safe harbor. Our true home. Amen.



³ My thoughts here on spiritual attachment / subordinating our desires to God draw their inspiration from a teaching by John Mark Comer, “The Three Levels of Faith,” at Vintage Church

The Next Step

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Matthew 8:23-27 again. What catches your attention as you read it through this time?
2. In what ways are the disciples being faithful followers of Jesus in this passage? In what ways are they not? Where do you see your own discipleship reflected in theirs?
3. According to Jesus, fear and faith don’t go together. Why not? (For a little help priming the pump, check out Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 11:1, Romans 8:37-39 and 1 John 4:16-19.)
4. Think of an area of your life—e.g., companionship/loneliness, finances, family’s salvation, health, grief or loss, state of the world, mortality—where your first response tends to be fear. Imagine Jesus looking at you square in the eyes and asking, with love, “Why are you afraid?” What would you say? How would Jesus respond?
5. If biblical scholars are right and Matthew’s boat represents the Church universal, what lessons can we learn about the Church from his account here? Given these lessons, why do you need the Church, and why does the Church need you?
6. For Matthew, the antidote to faith-squelching fear lies in how fully and robustly we can answer this question: “What sort of man is this (emphasizes Jesus’ humanity), that even the winds and the sea obey him (emphasizes Jesus’ deity)?” How do you answer this question today? Is your answer typically robust enough to keep fear in its proper place? If yes, praise God! If not, what do you need from Jesus to be strengthened in your faith? *Be sure to pray for one another here.*
7. *Boat... Disciples... Lord...* Through which word is Christ speaking to you most clearly today? What is he saying, and how are you responding?

LA, in February 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty6Die3WC8Y> .