In Over Our Heads
Mark 4:35-41

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Vienna Presbyterian Church
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People tell me, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” While I appreciate the sentiment, I’m not buying it. I can’t find the slogan anywhere in Scripture nor does it match my experience. God gives me more than I can handle. If I could handle everything on my own, I wouldn’t need God, would I? If I change one word in the sentence it makes all the difference. God never gives you more than He can handle.

The disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that we are perishing?” (4.38) When we are going through the storm we wonder to ourselves, ‘Lord, don’t you care what is happening to me?’

I’ve entitled this sermon “In Over Our Heads.” We can be in over our heads in no time. Suddenly, without warning we can find ourselves in over our heads.

There are lots of stories in Scripture about people caught in storms. This passage from Mark 4 is one such story. Jesus has been drawing big crowds in his ministry. Earlier in this same chapter the crowds have driven Jesus to the water’s edge, so he utilizes a boat to serve as a makeshift pulpit.

Jesus finishes his teaching and directs his disciples, “Let’s go over to the other side of the lake” (4.35). The lake in our story is actually the Sea of Galilee. While we regularly refer to this body of water as a sea, actually it’s the size of a large lake, 13 miles across at its widest point.

This lake is surrounded by mountains on all sides. The mountains serve as a gigantic funnel for the wind that can become a seismic storm without warning. The storm in our story strikes fear in the heart of Jesus’ disciples. I can understand how a tax collector named Matthew is terrorized by the storm. However, when veteran fishermen like Peter, James and John become alarmed, it’s obviously no ordinary storm.
Mark does not supply us with a description of the boat, but it’s likely to be comparable to the boat discovered along the Sea of Galilee in 1986. Two brothers were walking along the shoreline during a drought and spotted an outline of a boat in the sand at the water’s edge. The boat has been carefully excavated and preserved. According to radiocarbon dating, it’s determined to be a first century fishing vessel 27 feet in length which can hold 15 passengers. It’s often called the Jesus boat although there is no evidence that Jesus and his disciples actually used it.

While the storm is raging, Jesus is in the stern of the boat, lights out! Picture the scene. The disciples scream; Jesus dreams. Thunder roars; Jesus snores. While Jesus will display his divinity later in this story, here his humanity is in plain view.

The disciples rouse Jesus from his slumber, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are perishing?” (4.38) Their tone seems stern, rather indignant. Don’t you care…? While his disciples interpret Jesus’ sleeping as a lack of care, Mark seems to suggest that his sleep communicates his deep trust in God.

Jesus doesn’t answer their don’t you care question. Instead, he rebukes the wind and orders the whitecaps, “Peace! Be still!” (4.39) Rebuke is a strong word. It’s the same word Jesus spoke to the demons when he drove evil spirits out of people.

He then addresses his terrified shipmates, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4.41) Certainly Jesus doesn’t mean to imply that his disciples wouldn’t have been caught in this storm if they had faith. Rather, he’s asking in so many words, ‘If I am in the boat with you, why are you so afraid?’
His disciples are awestruck with Jesus’ power. “Who is this?” (4.41) It’s almost as if Mark steps outside this story to ponder this question with us, “Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?” Earlier, Jesus’ disciples are terrified by the storm. Now they are afraid of the one who has authority over the wind and the waves.

This story begins a series of stories in Mark’s gospel that highlight Jesus’ power. This story of power over nature is followed by stories of Jesus power over demons (5.1-20), sickness (5.24-34) and death itself (5.21-24 and 35-43). Mark declares that Jesus has the power to do what no one else can do. He can calm a sea and heal people. He can cast out demons and raise people to new life. Who is this man, indeed?

You may be caught in your own storm at the moment. A doctor says that you have cancer. Your boss tells you that your job is being eliminated. Your friends have turned their backs on you or someone you love is in a bad way.

“Jesus, don’t you care that we are perishing?” Why isn’t Jesus doing something about the storms in my life? Why is he sleeping in my time of need?

Charles Tindley is regarded as the father of American gospel music. He was born in 1851, the son of slaves. His mother died when he was four and he was separated from his father a year later. He taught himself to read and write at 17. He moved to Philadelphia to work as a janitor in a church while attending night school. He enrolled in correspondence courses to earn his seminary degree. He returned to the church he served as janitor to be its pastor. It was an integrated church well before its time. At the time of Charles death, the church had swelled to 12,000 members.
Tindley wrote many gospel hymns including “Stand by Me” made famous by Elvis Presley and others, “When the storms of life are raging, stand by me. When the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, Thou who rulest wind and sea, stand by me.”

If you are one who prefers contemporary Christian music, the band Casting Crowns released a song in 2006 entitled “Praise You In The Storm.” The inspiration for the song was band members watching a little girl succumb to cancer. “I’ll praise you in this storm and I will lift my hands for you are who you are. No matter what I am and every tear I’ve cried you hold in your hand, you never left my side. And though my heart is torn I will praise you in the storm.”

One of the popular symbols of the early church was a boat in a vast sea. This symbol can be found in burial grounds of early Christians called catacombs and soaring cathedrals. The early church imagined itself to be a little boat on a voyage into the mighty Roman Empire. But when Jesus is in the boat with us, what have we to fear?

The news about Bruce Jenner has been inescapable this past week. I could hardly find a news outlet that was not touting Jenner as the next new thing. Must we be lauding Jenner as the next American hero? Must we be a part of this?

I mention Bruce Jenner because I want to drill down on this matter of identity. If we are as Christians, who God says we are, faith is critical to this story. Jesus asked his disciples “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Faith is more than cognitive assent. Faith is trust. This faith is not something we manufacture on our own. Faith is trust—simple trust in who God says we are.
Paul writes in Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2.8-9). Grace is God’s unmerited favor. We do not earn or deserve God’s favor. This divine favor is totally unmerited and completely undeserved. Every day we are given is a free gift from God. Every breath we draw is a sheer gift to us. C.S. Lewis writes in a letter to a friend, “God loves us, not because we are lovable, but because God is love.”

I described grace on a Great Banquet retreat this way. A traveling salesman was travelling through the Deep South. He stopped at a local diner for breakfast to order bacon and eggs. When his order came, there was a white blob on the side of his plate. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing to the white mass on the side of his plate. “Them’s grits,” the waitress said. “Well, I didn’t order grits,” he said. The waitress looked at him with a quizzical expression, “Mister, you don’t order grits. They just come.”

We don’t order or deserve God’s grace. It’s like grits. Grace just comes from the heart of God.

What God supplies in grace, we receive in faith. Faith trusts that God’s grace in Jesus Christ is sufficient to save me. When I open my life to receive this gift of grace, I exercise faith and trust in God.

God never promises people blue sky and smooth sailing. But when Jesus is in the boat with us, we have no reason to be afraid.

Doubt is not faith’s opposite. Rather, faith is the antonym to faith. Faith is what immobilizes faith. We live in a fear based culture. We fear all sorts of things: global warming, a downturn in the market, terrorist groups. I find it interesting that the root word for terrorism is terror.
Martin Niemoller was a pastor who took a heroic stand against Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany. When he first met Hitler in 1933, Niemoller stood at the back of the room and listened. Later, when his wife asked him what he had learned, he said, “I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.”

It’s not the absence of storms that set us apart as followers of Christ, but our trust in Jesus’ power to save us in the storm. We have no reason to be afraid when Jesus is in the boat with us. Faith is trust—simple trust.