

Does He Even Care?

March 18, 2018

Mark 4:35-41, II Corinthians 5:16 – 6:2

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit  
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/sermon03-18-2018.mp3>*

As we start the message this morning, I'd like to ask each of you to imagine or remember a time when you were in a group of people that was about to go on a trip somewhere. It doesn't matter where – maybe it was Grandma's house, or Kennywood, or camping. Think about a time when, in your mind, you knew it was going to be a great time. You knew where you were going, why you wanted to go, and what you hoped to accomplish.

And let's say that this was a trip you were excited about – but not everyone in your group shared that enthusiasm. Now, if you've never been on a trip where you were excited and other people were bored or argumentative, first off – congratulations, and secondly – keep that to yourself and use your imagination here.

You're on the way to the campground. You've got all the stuff packed – sleeping bags and marshmallows and fishing rods... and then it begins to drizzle.

Now, *you* want to go. *You* have a vision. And maybe *you've* even checked the long-range forecast and are aware that this is a three-hour rain event. So maybe *you* start offering a narrative that goes something like this: "Oh, hey! It looks like some of those showers found us after all. Well, that's all right! Let's get that stuff out of the way now and we'll have all week..."

But you know that sooner or later there will be another voice: "Ah, seriously? Rain? This is just *perfect*. Why are we even doing this? Who wants to go stupid camping, anyway? I can't believe

you made me leave home to do *this*.”

<sup>1</sup>If you can imagine *that* situation, you can imagine the scene



in Mark 4. Jesus has just finished a very, very long day of teaching. The crowds have been so large, in fact, that he's had to preach from a boat for the entire time. And now, as evening falls and most people think that it's time to head for home, he turns to his followers and says, "Hey, guys! Here's a thought: let's go *that way*!" And as he does so, he points to the east – to what Mark calls "the other side".

As they've done innumerable times in the past, the disciples glance at each other. I don't know if anyone actually *says* it, but they're thinking it: "Seriously, Lord? *There*? You've gotta be kidding, Jesus. There's nobody there... nobody, I mean, except for those people. The Gerasenes. The pagans. The unclean people. They're not like us over there, Jesus."

But Jesus is happy as a clam and either doesn't notice or pretends not to notice and smiles, points to the other side, and slides into the place of honor in the back of the boat where he promptly falls asleep.



<sup>2</sup>As he slumbers, the storm comes up and these seasoned fishermen begin to whine and worry more and more. I can imagine every now and then one of them will jostle him just a little bit in the hopes that he'll wake up and come to his senses, but that doesn't happen. Finally, with a note of accusation and

rebuke in their voices, they cry out, "Lord, do you even give a darn about the fact that we're all going to die! Do you care? Wake up!"

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Teaching From a Boat*, Carl Schmidt (1885-1969)

<sup>2</sup> *Christ on the Sea of Galilee*, Eugene Delacroix (1841)

This would probably be a really good time for me to interject and remind those of you who are here every week about the fact that our operating premise is that the Gospel of Mark was written first for a group of Christian believers in Rome who were the target of some pretty vicious persecution at the hand of the Emperor Nero. As they watched their loved ones being martyred, as they endured the loss of their homes, as they had to flee for their lives, I think it's fair to say that they were acquainted with storms, and fear, and even the urge to lob an accusatory question in the direction of their Lord.

The first readers of the Gospel of Mark had to have been wondering – “*Does he even know what's going on here? Does he care? Where is Jesus now, when we need him?*”

The fellas in the boat found out the answer to that in a hurry. He is roused and he stands up and speaks two words to the tempest, saying essentially, “Stop! Be muzzled!”



<sup>3</sup>The disciples had to remember when he came across the man with an evil spirit back in chapter one and said very similar things, because they repeated the question that the earlier crowd had asked: “*Who is this guy? And how does he do this?*”

I find Jesus' choice of words here pretty instructive. “*Siopa* – ‘Hush’! – *pephimoso* – ‘be muzzled’!” I think about the animals I've been around who were muzzled, and it occurs to me that such an animal can still strike a lot of fear into my heart. There's snarling, lunging, thrashing...but if that muzzle is on right – there are no teeth to deal with. The power to intimidate is present, but the power to destroy is diminished.

My sense is that the first readers of the Gospel of Mark

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<sup>3</sup> *Peace, Be Still*, Arnold Friberg (c. 1955)

heard this story and were reminded of the fact that even someone as mighty as Nero had limited power and would be of no eternal consequence.

I would imagine that there are those of us in the room today who long to hear a similar word. Some of us need the assurance that Jesus is still in the business of calming storms. You might remember that one of the ways that the people in scripture experience terror is as a result of the whirlwind, or the chaos, or the storm. Jesus' disciples here are tossed about by circumstances beyond their control, and they are petrified and angry.

Some of you know how that chaos feels. And I have good news: the one who muzzled the storm on that day is present with us today, and he does care for you. There is a word of deep and powerful assurance for us.

Yet even as we cling to that promise of the presence, we must also hear a word of challenge. The disciples wake Jesus and they say, "Don't you even care about us?"

And then Jesus does two things. First, as we've mentioned, he speaks to their fear. He calms the storm in which they find themselves. He cares for them. We love that part of the story.



But second, he keeps sailing. He keeps the boat filled with wet, hungry men who may or may not have fresh stains in the seats of their togas heading eastward in the middle of the night, sailing toward 'the other side.'

With these actions, he proves to his disciples that yes, in fact, he does care for them. But equally, he demonstrates his care for the folks in the region to which they are heading. Look at what Jesus *doesn't* do: he doesn't say, "Well, that was quite a

shocker, eh boys? Look, we've all had a long day. What do you say? Let's head back to Capernaum and we'll think about crossing this sea some other time."

No. He not only continues to move in the direction of the excluded, the marginalized, and the ignored, but he keeps dragging these disciples along with him. And so they sail into the night, toward the uncertain and unloved shores that lie ahead.

The passage from Corinthians demonstrates the fact that the Apostle Paul heard that challenge from Jesus loud and clear. In the reading you've just shared, he states emphatically that we are not free to look upon anyone or anything as beyond the care of God.

In Christ, he says, there is a new creation. There is a cosmic "do-over". The Lord who has done so much in terms of reigning in the power of chaos in our lives is now charging us with the same ministry of reconciliation in the world.

Paul tells his congregation – and ours – that we are not free to merely acknowledge the power of Jesus in our own lives and go about our daily business full of thanksgiving for that relationship. No! We are, of course, called to notice that care, and to celebrate it – but then we are commissioned to be those who actively share it in the world around us.

Did you catch the last sentence of chapter 5? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Look – being in the boat as the storm becomes stilled does more than simply save our bacon – it changes us. We, who claim to be followers of Jesus, are not called to *know about* the righteousness of God. We are not called to *believe* in it, or to *receive* it. We're not supposed to *point to* or even *share* the righteousness of God. What does Paul say? "...in him we might

*become* the righteousness of God.”

I believe that Jesus looked at the boys in the boat, and he looked at Paul, and he’s looking at you and at me, and he’s saying, “Look, you’re not just along for the ride, here. You’re not just being dragged along, hoping that I get past this ‘love your neighbor’ phase you are afraid I’m going through. *YOU* are the way that I am loving my neighbor! You are the ambassadors for reconciliation. You are the righteousness of God in the world today.”

Listen, I’m not discounting the need for us to be glad for those days when Jesus comes in and helps us get through the crisis that seeks to overwhelm us. Not at all.

But if that’s all we do, then we’d be like those who wanted to turn the boat around and head for home after things got scary. I think that in part, Jesus is helping us to recognize his power and authority in every sphere of creation so that we can invite others to notice and grow through those times too.

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How do we do that? Here are two ideas to start with. First, I think that becoming the righteousness of God in the world today means that we are willing to engage with those whose *experience* is different from ours. For instance, the elders of the church are, in addition to the significant task of providing care and oversight to all the ministries of the congregation, dedicating a portion of each meeting to discussing the hope of racial reconciliation in our world today. Because our congregation is predominately white, and because each of our current elders is white, we have chosen to be led by Daniel Hill’s recent book ***White Awake: An Honest Look at What it Means to Be White***. In so doing, we hope to remember that while our experiences are, well, our experiences, those experiences are not necessarily universal. We want to first consider, remember, and reflect upon who we are and how we got here, and then, we pray,

be open to thinking about the fact that not everyone's story is the same as ours.

Listen to this: when we got together earlier this week, I had to ask them to stop talking about the book so that they could do their work as elders. Moreover, when I made them stop discussing the book, they asked if they could come early to the next meeting so that we'd have more time to consider the power of Christ to inform and heal the racial divide that is so apparent in our world today.

In the same way, each of us can choose to consciously invest ourselves in seeking to understand something of the stories of the people who are in our lives. We can be attentive to the injustices that we see; we can extend ourselves in gestures that reflect the righteousness of God.

In addition to seeking to be more willing to engage with those whose experiences differ from ours, I want to challenge you, in the name of God, to refuse to dehumanize those whose *opinions* are at odds with your own.

This happens with alarming frequency on social media, but even those of us who swear we can't be bothered with Facebook or Twitter or Insta-chat or whatever are more than willing to be sucked into this practice by whatever media and allegiances with which we choose to engage.

Look, I get it. You believe that the other person is wrong when it comes to gun rights or abortion or the Trump administration or freedom of speech or the willingness of the Pittsburgh Pirates to make any meaningful attempt to field a competitive team. You have your opinion. They have theirs. So talk about it. Or don't.

But for the love of God, people – seriously – *for the love of God* – do not demean someone for whom Christ died by referring

to them in terms that are degrading and dehumanizing. In what ways does calling someone a “wingnut”, a “libtard”, a “deplorable”, a “Trumpster”, or a “POS” help you to become the righteousness of God in the world today?

“Ah, relax, Pastor Dave. I’m just trolling people. I’m just trying to get a rise out of him... It’s nothing.”

So when you use your speech to demean, insult, attack, or ostracize me, it’s nothing... but when you use that same speech to tell me that Jesus loves me and cares for me in the midst of the storm, I should pay attention? That seems confusing to me, and is certainly not helpful to your cause.

Listen: on the night that Jesus took his friends out and they nearly got killed by the storm the boat was full of people who wondered if God really cared about them. I’m here to remind you that every boat, or car, or bus, or office, or school you walk into this week will be just as full of people asking the same question. You know the truth: Jesus *does* care. He wants to express that care so deeply that he has sent you to demonstrate that care.

Remember that. And be care-full. And be grateful. Thanks be to God, who comes to us in the midst of the storms and sends us through them. Amen.