

## COURAGE FOR THE STORMS

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Mark 4:35-41

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Last week, I had the joy of visiting my parents in central Florida, where I was attending a worship and music conference. Late each afternoon, I would leave the conference center and head for my parents home, as I watched the late afternoon thunderstorms roll across the Florida horizon. I thought back to my childhood, my 9th year to be exact, when my then-stepdad married my mom and inherited the task of babysitting for me on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons when Mom went straight from teaching high school students all day to being a grad school student at night. That fall was a stormy fall, and poor Gene Scifres learned quickly that when it came to thunderstorms, he had a scaredy cat on his hands. The first peal of thunder and I would run to hide in the basement. Now this was not a nice fully finished basement or even a partially developed daylight basement. This was a root cellar basement. Concrete walls, unfinished wooden stairs, a few single bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and just enough shelving to hold my grandma's summer canning each year. But I gladly braved the dark, dank basement, complete with spiders and their webs to escape those loud peals of thunder.

At first, Gene – as I called him then – laughed at me and waited upstairs for me to emerge. After patiently awaiting my return through several stormes, he realized I was serious about these fears – this wasn't just a 9 year old playing hard to get or trying to rope him into hide and seek. So he asked me lots of questions. Was it the noise? Was it the lightning? Was it the wind and rain? Through his patient questioning, he discovered that I was terrified of tornados – probably from watching “Wizard of Oz” when I was way too young. All the while, storms came and went, he perched himself at the kitchen table at the top of the stairs, playing solitaire or

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listening to the radio, patiently awaiting my return. But now he knew my fear, and so he tried every man's favorite tool: logic. He calmly tried to reason with me. He would turn on the weather report to show how there were no tornado watches or warnings, assuring me that he would usher us directly to the basement before any tornado could reach our house. Still, at the first peal of thunder, down to the basement I flew. A few storms later, Gene surprised me by following me down the stairs – down those narrow stairs into a basement so tiny he couldn't stand up straight, to wait out the storm by my side. During that storm, he was his normal, steadfast self – telling silly stories, offering to play cards, talking about his day at work, listening to the antics of my day. Somehow, his steadfast calm calmed me. His actions seemed to say to the raging storms outside, "Peace, Be Still"; but to me they said, "I love you." The next storm, when I ran to the storm cellar, I stopped and looked at him sitting at the kitchen table and decided maybe I could just sit there at the top of the stairs. We waited out that next storm together, this time in the kitchen. Next time, he opened the back door and started talking about how much he loves thunderstorms. He described the sounds of the storm slowly coming toward us and the beautiful clouds on the horizon. He made thunderstorms sound magical. When I asked questions about tornados and all those dangers, he calmly explained what he knew and reminded me that he would make sure Mom and I were safe in any storm. "Peace, be still," he seemed to say to the raging storm; "I love you," he seemed to be saying with actions to a frightened little girl. His calm voice and his steadfast faith that we could withstand any storm slowly transformed my fears. Over time, my feeling about thunderstorms started to change, and I would even occasionally venture to the back porch to watch the thunderclouds and lightning at his side. His courage in all of those storms gave me courage. To this day, I'm terrified of tornados – probably

because I've never actually had to live through one. But thunderstorms capture my imagination, as they do my dad's. Last Saturday afternoon, we were sitting in their comfortably air conditioned living room when the sky outside grew dark and the wind began to blow. Despite the 80 degree temperature and 100% humidity, we all three opted for the lanais, where we sat and watched those thunderclouds and strikes of lightning. Dad brought up a meteorology map to show the hundreds of lightning strikes that were occurring, a crazy thing to do for someone terrified of thunderstorms, but a fun piece of information for a little-girl-all-grown-up who now has enough courage for the storms to even enjoy the fascinating truth that it's probably more amazing that more people aren't struck by lightning than the reverse – perhaps God really does try to protect us, even from nature's real dangers.

Standing on the tranquil Galilean shores on a beautiful spring day, it's hard to believe that squalls are common on that giant lake, that they can come from nowhere and threaten even large vessels, let alone a little fishing boat. Then again, I've swallowed plenty of salt water and sand when I underestimated the Pacific Ocean. Thinking on those times, it's easier to understand how the disciples got themselves into a treacherous storm so unexpectedly. The waters of this good earth are both unpredictable and soothing, dangerous and beautiful, life-giving and life-destroying. Kind of like the river of life. . . . And so, a storm on the sea tells us not only another story of the disciples; it makes for a good parable. Traveling the river of life is just like that Galilean Sea—it is unpredictable and soothing, dangerous and beautiful, life-giving and also life-destroying. When traveling the unpredictable, the dangerous, and even life-destroying rapids of life, it's natural to get scared. The disciples would have been downright silly if they hadn't been frightened. But why in the world did they wait so long to wake Jesus up and ask him for help?

Today's story is a vivid reminder that when we cry out to God, God will answer. It doesn't matter if our prayers are right or if we know what to ask for. God knows, and God can calm the turbulent waters of our lives. Today's scripture reminds us that we are not in this alone. Christ is right here with us, ready to guide our sails, to calm the waters, and to soothe our worried hearts. But Christ wants us to travel with him and to trust his guidance. Then we can harness the power of faith—faith that can become our courage for the storms of life, faith that can guide us through the most unpredictable waters or frightening changes. Embrace the gift of faith, turn to Christ, and discover courage for the storm--courage you never knew you had.

This past year, many of you who are part of this church have been traveling an interesting stream in the river of life. Hearing last winter that your beloved Pastor Bruce would be resigning and retiring on Easter Sunday, many of you cried and complained, worried and fretted. Over the months, you've grieved, you've remembered, you've laughed, you've celebrated. We've even slowly begun starting to vision and dream about the future of Community Church. But still, it's been a challenging course to run this year. And there are challenges yet ahead in this river of ministry and church that you share, just as there are always challenges in the river of life.

Each one of us here probably has a different read on the weather conditions – the weather conditions of your church and the weather conditions of your lives. That's just the way of it! I suspect even the disciples in the midst of that storm each had a different read on what was happening, when it started, and how it might end up. So, it is when we travel this river together – even in the same river, we each experience the journey differently. Certainly, in the river of life, we travel many, diverse courses. But even when it seems we're on the same course, we're not experiencing this river in the same way.

Some may feel like you're stuck in a dead calm, not sure whether to move ahead, aware that you can't move back. Some may feel like you're in the midst of a great storm, worried and afraid and not sure how to get your bearings. Some may think it's just another day on the water. Some may even call this just another day in paradise. And some may have snuck to the shore, hoping to avoid any part of this traveling along the river. And yet, travel we must – for time is this river, and we are all a part of it. And for those of you who claim this church as your church home, you have stepped into the boat with everyone else.

Today's scripture reminds us, however, that we are not in this boat alone. Christ is right here with us, ready to guide our sails, to calm the waters, and to soothe our worried hearts. But Christ needs us to travel with him and trust in his guidance. This is a particularly important message to remember when we're facing change and transition, like the retirement of one pastor and the arrival of a new pastor. It's so easy to confuse our pastors with Jesus. (Don't tell us pastors about this – our heads might swell!) Seriously, a lot of church members think their church can't survive without their pastor. But guess what, Christ is the head of the church – not our pastor, not our priest, not even the pope. Christ. The Cornerstone. The firm foundation. The steadfast rock of our salvation. The lighthouse in a storm. The One whom even the wind and waves obey. And Christ isn't going anywhere. Christ is right here, in the boat with us, traveling the river of life with us.

The challenge is to remember that, to trust that, and to remain faithful on this journey with Christ. Pastors are great, because we can see them and touch them. Kind of like parents are awesome, because they can hold our hands when we're afraid and talk to us with advice when we're confused. Friends are wonderful, because they can tell us when we're being foolish and

applaud us when we do our best. But God is the Parent who is with us, even when our parents die and leave us behind. Christ is the Shepherd who is with us, even when our pastors retire and leave our church. The Spirit is the Friend, the Advocate, who dwells in our midst to nudge us away from foolish actions and toward the right paths in our journey with God, all the while giving us that sense of fulfillment when we're doing our best for God, which is often the only applause we really need.

And so, Christ calls us to have faith in this truth: that Christ is with us always, that our boat is steadfastly under Christ's guidance, and that we can travel the twists and turns, the rough waters and the calm days, safe and secure in the arms of Love, in the hands of the One whom even the wind and the waters obey.

Of course, there will be rough waters ahead. Some of you are jumping right in and rowing hard to move the boat forward, maybe even in new directions. Others of you are trimming the sails and holding the boat steady, so the wind doesn't move you forward too fast. Others of you are hiding below deck, hoping no one calls on you to make any decisions or help with the journey. Others may be even trying to turn the boat around and travel back to the past. Some have disembarked and wandered away, leaving us sad and grieving from having lost not just a beloved pastor, but now some beloved friends. But to each of us, Christ offers two challenging questions: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

Those questions aren't just for stumbling, bumbling disciples who so obviously should have awakened Jesus earlier and asked for help. Those questions are for every person who strives to move forward into the unknown with Christ. For in moving forward, we all face fears and doubts. Who isn't afraid when they get bad news from the doctor, or has to watch a spouse

slowly slip away toward death? Who doesn't have doubts when plans fall apart, or finances aren't enough to cover the monthly bills? Who isn't unsure about a pastor who came out of nowhere and a pastor who will one day come, that you probably have never even met? Who doesn't face a doubt or two when you think about the future of your church? It's natural to be afraid, when facing the unknown. It's normal to have doubts, when the waters are rough. I'd have been terrified if I'd been in that boat with the disciples. I still remember being afraid when my favorite pastor left my home church to become a District Superintendent. But the questions Jesus asks remind us to have faith in God, and to turn to God when we need comfort in the midst of a storm. "Peace!" Christ says to us, just as he said to the doubting disciple Thomas when Thomas met the Risen Christ whom he thought was dead in a grave. "Be still!" "Peace," Christ said to me when I doubted I would ever love another pastor as much as I'd loved Pastor Jack – and then God sent Pastor Larry, who mentored me right into seminary. "Be still," God has said to me when I complained that I couldn't survive tragedy that came my way – and then God held my hand through that tragic journey and sent a couple angels in human form, just to remind me I wasn't alone.

The river is flowing. Storms will come, storms will go. Beautiful days of smooth sailing will come, and challenging currents will force us to chart a different course. Others travelers will join the journey with us. A variety of sailors will join our crew and travel this boat with us. But through it all, our Pilot, our Savior, Christ our Lord will be steadfast and true, ready to help, ready to comfort, ready to guide. We need only ask.

I encourage you now to sit silently to listen for God's still, small voice. Listen for the presence of God, which is our courage for the storms of life.