

Just as He Was

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Texts: Mark 4:35-41

How do you like to relax? When the hour hand gets to five after an intense day at work, or you reach the end of your last class of the day, or when you're halfway through that hourlong commute (how did traffic get back to normal so fast, oh my gosh!?)... how do you look forward to unwinding?

A glass of wine? A good meal? A walk with the dog, or vegging out in front of the TV? Maybe a spot of gardening?

I don't know what it would have been for the disciples, but no doubt they were looking forward to some down time after a long day ministering to the crowds—bigger crowds every day, it seemed. If Jesus preached in a house, they would pack in to hear him. If he preached by the shore, he would have to get into a boat just to get some space from the jostling bodies. So many people. So many needs. It must be exhausting.

Now, finally, the sun is beginning to set. But still the crowd shows no sign of dispersing. How are they going to get away? Jesus makes a spot decision: They'll cross the lake and camp on the other side.

Great idea! There's just one very small problem.

The other side of the sea of Galilee—that would be the eastern shore. It happens to be part of the Decapolis—that region's been under Roman occupation for decades. The people there speak Greek and raise pigs and worship foreign gods... on what used to be Jewish soil. And Jesus and the disciples are just going to show up, a bunch of Aramaic-speaking Jewish villagers, and, what, camp on the beach? Does that sound relaxing?

But the crowd isn't going anywhere. The evening sky looks clear. The sea beckons. So...

"they took him with them in the boat," the story says, *"just as he was."*

"Just as he was?" What's that mean?

The gospel writer doesn't elaborate.

To me there's something so poignant about this simple expression. "Just as he was"—just a human being at the end of a long day—no weapon, no purse, nothing but what he has

on. Tired enough to surrender command and let the disciples take over. “*So, they took him with them,*” Mark says, like parents buckling a child into his car seat for the journey home. Crumpled in the bottom of the boat, the master and teacher are soon fathoms deep, leaving the disciples to sail on through the night... away from home and safety, toward the very place they least want to go.

Empire ahead. Expect stormy weather.

Sure enough, halfway across the wind rises, the sea swells, the boat is tossed, the waves break in. They’re starting to sink, and their boss is still dead to the world!

I’ve been feeling a lot like a small boat on a great sea over the past year or two, or four or five. As American politics have spun out into the realm of paranoia and falsehood and blatant voter suppression ... as the pandemic has upended our lives and torn through communities and families... amid relentless violence against people of color, and the equally relentless ritual of denial about race in America... I’ve marched, made phone calls, signed petitions; I’ve masked, washed hands, followed lockdown guidelines, broken them to demonstrate for Black lives—and through it all, mostly what I’ve felt is smaller and smaller and more and more powerless.

At the mercy of the elements. At the mercy of history.

Mark recorded his gospel story in about 70 CE, soon after one of the most catastrophic periods the Jewish people had ever experienced. An uprising against the occupation had brought down the Roman empire with a fury. After several years of fighting, the capitol city, Jerusalem, was ransacked and burned, the Temple destroyed, survivors scattered or taken away captive. It was a calamity on a scale that’s hard to fully comprehend today.

None of this had yet come to pass in Jesus’ lifetime. But the danger was ever-present. Internally, his society was deeply unequal and deeply divided. Externally, Rome kept an ever-watchful eye.

And so, the storm in our story is part literal, part figurative—an embodiment of the fear and anger that must have been constantly in the air, just waiting to erupt.

The wind roars, the waves beat in.

In the bottom of the boat, Jesus sleeps on.

We know what happens next. They wake him up, he orders the storm to be quiet. And they are filled with rejoicing... right?

Well—sort of.

You see, everything about this scene is a pattern, a foreshadowing, of how the story is going to end. Jesus setting aside his lordship—surrendering himself into human hands. His sleep, like the sleep of death, and his rising at the moment when all seemed lost. And most of all, the disciples' response: not so much joy, as terror.

Terror in the face of God's transcendent power.

“Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. And they were filled with great awe,” Mark says, except that “great awe” doesn't really do the Greek justice. The passage says, “And they feared, *ephobethesan*, with a great fear, *phobos*—that's right, as in *phobia*—and said to one another, “Who then IS this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

We'll hear that word *phobos* again, at the close of Mark's gospel, when the women who have come to bury Jesus find the tomb empty and are greeted with the news of his resurrection. “And they were *ephobounto*—afraid,” the story says, sugar-coating nothing. The messenger commands them to go back and tell the other disciples that Jesus is risen, but the gospel closes abruptly with the women running away, afraid to tell a single soul.

You thought the storm was scary? Meet the One who can tell the storm to go lie down as if it were a naughty dog.

You thought death was the ultimate terror, the end of everything? Meet the One who is Lord even over death itself.

It's one thing to believe in God. It's quite another to encounter God face to face.

Outside, the storm is quiet. Inside, the weather is a little less serene.

Who is this?

Is he human, frail, and powerless, like us? Or is he unimaginably, terrifyingly powerful?

Can both of these things be true together?

The disciples can't begin to hold the immensity being revealed to them. It will dawn on them only gradually, as fear finally begins to give way to hope.

Meanwhile, as day breaks, they sail on—still heading for imperial territory, and their mission of liberation. No, they're not done yet. That was just one storm. Another is waiting for them on the further shore. And there will be others after that, as they go from town to town, disrupting the peace, announcing God's inbreaking reign. What Jesus has begun here, the disciples will continue, in every generation.

Even when the world is falling apart, as it was in Mark's day. As it is in ours. As it always is, at all times, in every human life.

It feels completely overwhelming, doesn't it? It feels like we're on our own. We don't know how to make our way through the storm's life raises up for us.

But friends, each frail human boat, so tippy, so ready to splinter and capsize, is the bearer of the immensity of God, infinitely greater than any storm, greater than our fearful hearts, greater even than the engulfing sea of death.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

And so, we take courage—not in ourselves, but in the One who is our strength and our hope. We dare to follow Jesus wherever he leads, sharing with him in his work of liberation—not just for the world “out there,” but the one we've built inside as well. I can't keep running from the parts of myself that have been colonized by the foreign gods of white racism. I have to face them and begin the slow, patient work of dismantling, so that I can work for change “out there” with a less divided heart. Even if it means dismantling my own sense of safety and security as I do so. I'm happy Juneteenth is finally getting recognition as a national holiday. But we need more than symbolic victories! We need a complete remaking of the social order, on a scale that only God can bring about.

So, if it feels as if the world is falling apart—it is. Continually—generation after generation. Falling apart and being remade.

But we can love now. We can help and heal and confront and console now. This is our moment in history, our chance to offer up our very own unique YES to God. YES justice, YES wholeness, YES gladness and mercy, forgiveness and kindness. Yes, God.

Just as we are, God calls us and sends us. Just as we are, God is with us and within us.

So, take heart, beloved. And when the wind rises, when the waves swell, may you hear again the voice of Jesus speaking from deep within you, saying to the storm, “Peace! Be still!”