

Can I Trust You to Be Stronger than Each Storm in Me?

Mark 4: 35-41

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On Monday of this week, law enforcement officials said they had stopped an act of terror in Cleveland. No, it was not stopping LeBron James from holding Cleveland fans hostage while weighing his free agency options. Rather they arrested a man who was plotting to make a car bomb that would be detonated at the Fourth of July celebration in downtown Cleveland.

After Boston's marathon bomber, and foiled attempts in Times Square, and a string of deadly school shootings, fear is our opponent.

This week as I read and reread the story of Jesus and his disciples being caught in a violent storm, I pondered how fear and faith are connected. Indeed, that is part of this story.

It is evening, and after a day of teaching, preaching and healing, the disciples and Jesus are off in a boat, making their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Which is actually a lake twenty-five miles long and seven miles wide. Now the disciples are not *landlubbers*. In fact, some of them make their living on the water as fishermen.

While they are out in the middle of the water, a furious storm comes up, and the disciples panic. They believe their boat is about to capsize and that they are in danger of losing their lives. And yet, as the disciples are in a fearful meltdown, what is Jesus doing? Jesus sleeps. Really? Can we imagine?! Jesus sleeps as the storm rages. In their desperation the disciples wake him:

"Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus responds with one of his most extraordinary acts; he commands the storm to be quiet, to be still.

When the wind ceased and the sea became calm Jesus then turned his focus on his disciple companions. Remember that those men had already seen him exorcise demons, heal the withered hand of a man and give healthy legs to a paralytic, cured a begging leper, and healed the bed-ridden mother-in-law of Simon Peter. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Considering what they had experienced with Jesus, it was a fair question. I mean, they *had* seen his great works of faith and the amazing things he had done in the name of God. But still they seemed clueless to the power of God. Right?

This is where Jesus then links fear and faith. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And we get the sense that these two powerful emotions — fear and faith — are somehow closely tied.

So, think about this question: What are faith’s opposites? Or faith’s impediments? Atheism? Agnosticism? Apathy?

Maybe. But I am also wondering if faith’s opposite (or at least its impediment) is fear...or at least a certain kind of fear. I mean, there is obviously a place for healthy fear in our life. Right? Fear can save our life with its powerful fight or flight instincts which arise when we are in danger physically or emotionally.

I recently read *Citizens of London*, where the author takes us back to 1941 London when England was perilously close to being forced to surrender to Germany. German submarines were sinking hundreds of thousands of tons of merchant shipping each month, creating dangerous shortages of food and materials necessary to fight the war, and London was being bombed almost every night.

Fear was real on many levels as Hitler’s Germany had already conquered much of Europe, including France, and England was next. But fear can be a great motivator for action, for focus and for doing what is necessary to survive and win. And the author tells how that fear focused the Brits to rearrange their lives and their priorities as they waited for the United States of America to join the war to stop Hitler.

Fear can be a positive motivator or when we are faced with a challenge at work, or with a serious problem in our family. In those times we are absolutely afraid that if we don’t get it right, if we don’t focus, get our act together, the challenge will not be met and we will fail miserably.

Which is a great motivator when you are a preacher and you know that hundreds will be waiting for a word from the Lord on Sunday morning. All of us preacher-types know that if we don’t focus our preparation and focus on a word from the Lord that this sermon will sink faster than the Titanic!

Fear of failure can be a really important motivator. Right?

Not too long ago a friend was seeking a job and it looked as though she was going to be offered this job. It was a big job, an important one, a job that made a difference. But there was fear and anxiety that this job would be too challenging or too big of a stretch. So I said to my friend: "If you are not absolutely afraid when you take on a new job, afraid of its challenge, afraid of failure, then it's not a job worth taking."

Fear can be a powerful motivator.

And when the disciples were afraid that they were about to go under, that the boat was about to be swamped, that they might drown in the storm, I'd say that was a healthy fear. And in their healthy fear what did they do?

They called on the One who could help them. They called on the sleeping Jesus to bail them out.

The question for you and me, and I suppose for those disciples, can be really a significant spiritual question. What is the connection between Jesus and the storms? I'm not talking about the weather here ...but the storms that rage around us and the storms that are within us...these storms that threaten to undo us with their chaos!

Fear is something we have in common with these Jesus disciples:

Fear about a report from our doctor grips us with anxiety or fear,
Fear about our jobs and family security,
Fear that our children are going off tract,
Fear that an important relationship is on the rocks,
Fear that we are not measuring up as a parent or a spouse, partner or friend,
Fear that we are not up to the difficult task that stands before us,
Fear that this grief we are experiencing will leave us depressed forever.

In the story Jesus says to the wind and the waves, "Peace, be still." But sometimes a story has more than one dimension. Is it possible that Jesus could also have been saying to his anxious and fearful disciples, "Peace, be still?"

One of the most significant figures of the early church was Saint Augustine who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries in North Africa. His leadership and theological insights influenced the church for centuries, and his thinking was paramount for reformers, Calvin and Luther.

Augustine had this insight into today's scripture:

When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind.

When your anger is aroused, you are being tossed by the waves.

So when the winds blow and waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering.

On hearing yourself insulted you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune – shipwreck.

Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you.

What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence.

Rouse him, then remember him, let him keep watch within you.

Are you with me? Jesus was asleep on the boat. Literally. But Jesus was asleep within the disciples.

Which is to say that even as people of faith, Christ is often asleep within us and waits to be awakened. Maybe our journey of faith and our constant battle with anxiety and fear means to wake up the sleeping Jesus within us every day, each day. To awake Jesus to give us courage, to give us peace, to give us hope.

It's not easy.

Several years ago actor Pat Morita died. He was best known for his portrayal of Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* for which he received an Oscar nomination.

Let me refresh your memory. *The Karate Kid* is about a teenager named Daniel who feels alone and unprotected in the hostile environment of his school and community. He is afraid — unable to defend himself against the hoodlums of his neighborhood.

It happens that Daniel meets an old man, Mr. Miyagi, who has a black belt in karate — and the old man agrees that he will teach him what he knows so that he can protect himself.

On the first day of his lessons the old man asks Daniel to wax and polish several old cars that he owns — wax on — wax off. All day Daniel labors to follow these instructions: wax on — wax off.

On the second day the old man asks Daniel to paint his fence — paint up — paint down. Again it takes all day.

On the third day Mr. Miyagi asks him to sand the wooden floor of his verandah in a circular fashion, and again it takes all day.

So at the end of the third day Daniel is very angry — “I’ve done all this work for you,” he says, “and you still haven’t taught me anything.”

At this point the master karate instructor tells Daniel to stand in front of him and do the motion for wax on — wax off — and lo — as he does this — Mr. Miyagi throws a punch but his blows are deflected by the boy’s arms. He has learned unknowingly.

Got it? Follow and trust the master teacher, learn what he is teaching you, and when you wake up the skills he has taught you, you’ll be ready.

Faith is really about trust. Right?

Years ago drought threatened an important crop in an island village off the coast of Greece. So the Orthodox priest told his flock: “There isn’t anything that will save us, except a special prayer litany for rain. Go to your homes, fast during the week, trust in God, and come on Sunday for the prayer litany for rain.”

The villagers heard him, fasted during the week and came to the church on Sunday morning. But when the priest saw them, he was furious. He said, “Go away, I will not do the prayer service. You do not trust in God.”

“But Father,” they protested, “we fasted and we trust.”

“Trust? You call this trust?” he said. “Then where are your umbrellas?”

My favorite prayer is written by an Irish Celtic Christian of the sixth century. Not much is known about Branden the Navigator but his writings survive. I sometimes read a prayer he wrote that we will pray during this service. The line that always awakens Jesus in me is

*Christ of the mysteries,
Can I trust You to be stronger than each storm in me?*

“Prayers for a Spiritual Journey”
by ship captain Brenden the Navigator (486AD-575AD)

Lord, I will trust You,
Help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown.
Give me the faith to leave old ways
And break fresh ground with you.

Christ of the mysteries,
Can I trust You to be stronger than each storm in me?
Do I still yearn for Your glory to lighten on me?
I will show others the care You've given me.
I determine amidst all uncertainty always to trust

I choose to live beyond regret, and let You recreate my life.
I believe You will make a way for me and provide for me,
If only I trust You and obey.

I will trust in the darkness
And know that my times are still in Your hand.
I will believe You for my future,
Chapter by chapter, until the story is written.

Focus my mind and my heart upon You,
my attention always on You without alteration.
Strengthen me with Your blessing and appoint me to the task.
Teach me to live with eternity in view.
Tune my spirit to the music of heaven.
Feed me, and, somehow,
Make my obedience count for You.