



# The New England Church Pulpit

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Finding Faith When Your Boat is Sinking

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Mark 4.35-41

*On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

Biblical stories such as this one present difficulty for clergy. It's not that we are bereft of ideas of what this might be about, but rather such stories present us with the dilemma often asked by people: why doesn't Jesus rescue people today from the storms that threaten to drown them? If Jesus can control the wind and the waves, why can't he control the floods that wipe out thousands or the hurricanes that threaten life and limb, or the hatred that causes Holocausts or the separation of families at borders?

Often we're asked, in a joking manner, of course, but with still with the same jab at control: can't you do something about the weather for the church picnic next week? or for my daughter's wedding next month? John Buchanan, of Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, responds: "Sorry, I'd love to help, but I can't. I'm in sales, not production." We know, and they know, that weather is produced by atmospheric conditions, troughs of high pressure and low pressure systems portrayed in colorful graphs and bars and swirling lines by the likes of Tom Skilling. But even so, we all wonder why the miracles of Jesus's day can't be duplicated today; life would be so much easier if, with a snap of a finger, Jesus would wake up and come to our rescue.

But what if the point of the story is not the miracle but the relationship? What if we're looking at the wrong part of the story? One of the risks of focusing on the miracle is that of destroying faith because we don't see God acting in the same way today. We throw the baby out with the bathwater, and, indeed, if our faith is based on the reality of such stories actually happening in historical context, faith will falter and die.

But let's look at the story as one of human fear quelled by the presence of the divine. If we focus on fear allayed by Jesus, we begin to see its relevance for us today. Here we have these men in a boat in the middle of a raging storm, hard-working, blue-collar men who know about physical challenges, who aren't afraid of much in life, but at the moment they're scared to death. They think they're going to die. Some are furiously rowing; some are tugging at the sail, which is now almost useless; someone still has the rudder, and they're all thinking about their wives and children and what they never got around to doing and saying in their short lives. They think this is the end.

And Jesus is asleep. On a pillow. Asleep? How in the world does a man sleep in the stern of that little boat? How impertinent that he be lounging on a cushion when they're fighting for their lives! So they shake him awake. "Don't you care that we're about to go down? How about helping out a little bit, doing whatever you can to keep this thing afloat?"

For these people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, water was a necessary evil. They needed it for their livelihood of fishing and transportation, but water to the people 2,000 years ago was the abode of demons. Think of the movie "Jaws" and you'll get a glimpse of their fears. Water also means chaos and threat. Their primitive boats weren't equipped with GPS and computers that equalized the pitch; waves crashed over the sides, buffeting them about and filling the hull with water to sink it.

It was their **fear** to which Jesus responds. It might be disturbing that Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat, but it also speaks to Jesus's trust that the boat will not sink. He calms the storm to stem the tide of fear, the point being the calming of their fear **by** the calming of the storm, not calming the storm to give them a miracle. Do you see the difference? (pause)

We do not fear the *demons of the oceans* much anymore, unless you're swimming with sharks. But fear in general is a common denominator of the human race. While a healthy dose of fear keeps us alive and out of harm's way, fear is often a debilitating demon. That demon can undermine our best efforts at life. That demon can drown our faith. That demon is often the source of wars and hatred, of violence against other human beings and against nature. When we're afraid of the unknown—whether it be the future or a category of people—we tend to shoot first and ask questions later.

Palestinians and Israeli's live in daily fear of what the other might do. Fear of terrorism gives rise to all sorts of political and religious shenanigans by charlatans who take advantage of a real fear to create a false sense of their own ability to eradicate it, advancing selfish causes. And by fearing, we often create the very problem we're trying our best to overcome. Fear of loneliness can cause us to engage in unhealthy relationships. Fear of being unwanted, or unlovable, or of being different can cause us to consider drastic measures of suicide. Fear of insecurity can make us too timid to live abundantly. Fear of what might happen can cause us to lower our sights, pull in our hopes, and live in but a fraction of the life we would otherwise enjoy.

It is the calming of fear that anchors this story in peace. We can understand why the early church loved this story. They knew what it meant to be in a little boat heading into the stormy sea; they were a small minority in any city in which they lived, hunted down, persecuted, arrested, tortured, and executed by the most powerful entity in their world, the Roman Empire. They loved to hear the story of Jesus calming the sea and with it the fear of loneliness, of dying, of hopelessness. Stories such as this have been told for 2,000 years as a reminder that we have the spirit of Jesus and each other to engender hope in the midst of fear.

In his insightful little book *First you Have to Row a Little Boat*, Richard Bode writes about his lifelong passion of sailing, and what this taught him about life and faith. Sailing, Bode said, taught him about “the relationship between myself and the elements over which I have no control. You have to use whatever the weather gives you; you can’t control it.” When we think that we are in control, the hurricanes, the tornadoes, as well as the droughts remind us how puny little we are by comparison, and how little we can control such monstrous forces of nature. We are not in total charge of our fate. We are subject to death, accident, disease. We can, without warning, lose love, health, work, and home. But, Jesus says, do not fear; nothing can ever separate you from God, who, though appearing to be asleep, is nevertheless with you in the boat.

Sometimes the storm is mild, and we weather it well with the skills we’ve developed rowing our little boat over the years. Other times, the storm is overwhelming, threatening to capsize us and do us in. But we soon realize that we’re all in the boat together; some are rowing, some are bailing water from the hull, some are pulling at the sail, some are praying. Such holy camaraderie calms our fears; such divine relationships help us weather the storm.

Whether it is a sense of the strong spiritual presence of Jesus himself or whether God comes to us in the friends here at church or our poker buddies or our kids’ soccer parents or the neighbor across the street, we are not alone. When we are not alone, the power of fear to control us is assuaged. Most of us, if we look back at the most difficult of our days, when we felt alone or afraid, when we were all but drowning in our storm that threatened to capsize us, we realize that there were people right beside us, bailing water from the boat, holding on to the sails, praying for our strength when we couldn’t pray ourselves, and otherwise tethering our lives to theirs to keep us from slipping away.

But we also know that there’s somebody else in the boat with us, back there in the stern, not far from the tiller, actually; quiet, seemingly asleep but present with all the courage, strength and peace that only God can give. And we know that even if we succumb to whatever demon threatens us, we are never lost to God. For neither death or life, nor demons, nor things past or things to come, can ever separate us from God’s love. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

We come today to this place of solitude and quiet in order to collect our thoughts and center our beings in your holy love, God of hope. We too easily forget the privilege we enjoy in our middle-class lifestyle where air conditioning on hot summer days and heat on cold winter days provide us comfort. We too easily forget that we have food to eat, and not only that, but a wide variety of food to nourish our body as well as our spirits.

We come to this place today to give thanks, and in giving thanks, to remind ourselves of the needs of the world around us. We are isolated from poverty and loneliness; from homelessness and security; we are protected from a certain level of vulnerability in our finance concerns and even in our health issues because we can afford insurance. In this day of community with you and those around us in this room, we also seek communion and solidarity with those who are not as privileged as we are.

For those at the border whose cries break our hearts; for those holding fear when they should be holding a Teddy bear; for those in detention centers and tent cities and places where cameras are not allowed: their tears are our tears; their fears must be our own fears if we are to be faithful as the Body of Christ. For when any part of the body is in pain, the whole body is in pain.

For those of our knowing who are facing difficult days; for those facing surgery and those facing the unknown; for those whose lives are now confined to home or nursing facility; for those in prison and jail; for those trapped in relationships that are less than fulfilling; for those caught in financial binds that threaten their very livelihood; we pray. May they sense your presence even as they feel the solidarity with which we offer our love and support.

Go with us this day that we may know life abundantly, and this not just for personal well-being, but for the help it might also offer others along the way. In the name of the Christ, amen.