

“Does Jesus Care?”

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Evidence shows what God can do. Experience reveals how much he cares.

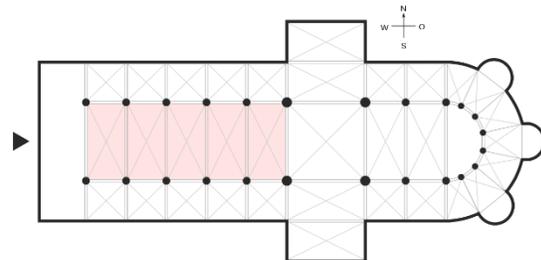
Mark 4:35-41

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Sitting in the boat

I want to start somewhere you probably didn't expect – with a brief lesson about Gothic architecture. The pink area in this diagram is called “the nave.”



During my quarter-century at Corinth, I've known that's what it's called, but I don't think I ever wondered why – until I came across an explanation this week. The word “nave” comes from the Latin *navis*, which means “ship.” You are sitting in the middle of the boat!

A web site called [Jesus Walk](#) explains:

The ship (bark or barque, *barchetta*) was an ancient Christian symbol. It is the Church tossed on the sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution but finally reaching safe harbor with its cargo of human souls. Part of the imagery comes from the ark saving Noah's family during the Flood (1 Peter 3:20-21). Jesus protecting the Peter's boat and the apostles on the stormy Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41). It was also a great symbol



during times when Christians needed to disguise the cross, since the ship's mast forms a cross in many of its depictions.

Every time you come to church and sit in the nave, you should remember that this is a place to find refuge, companionship, and hope. You should also never forget that storms are the norm for the Church of Jesus Christ and every individual believer.

Uniquely Mark

Mark is not the only Gospel writer to tell this story, but he does offer a unique twist. I identified at least ten details Mark relates that Matthew and Luke omit or alter a bit. Don't let that bother you. I believe if you had lived the story, you would say that all three of them related it accurately. Variations in the details actually enhances the integrity of their story. They didn't just copy one another or a common source. Mark's source is likely Peter, and he had probably heard Peter tell this story many times.

Mark is the only one who introduces this story with the phrase, "That day when evening came" (35). Jesus had been teaching about the kingdom of God in Mark 4:1-34, including some familiar parables like the sower and seed. A large crowd had gathered throughout the day and it looked like the Jesus movement was taking over. Instead, the parables focus on inconsistent responses. Lots of people might get excited at first, but only a minority will be with Jesus for the long haul. That's OK, though. The parable of the mustard seed teaches that small beginnings can lead to great things.

So it's now evening, which means that this storm is going to play out after dark. Mark also wants you to notice that Jesus has had a long day of projecting his voice to large crowds and interacting both publicly and privately. He's ready to "leave the crowd behind" (36) and cross the lake to the other side.

Mark adds two other intriguing details. First, they took Jesus along "just as he was" (36). I assume he's setting us up for the fact that Jesus is going to nap in the boat, so "just as he was" probably means he's exhausted. His entourage whisks him away from the crowds, who will stick around and listen to him talk or watch him heal as long as he will stay. The water escape option is perfect, and his disciples are content to let him sleep. The other uniquely Mark detail that I still don't really understand is also in verse 36 – "There were also other boats with him." It's OK whether you're a Bible reader or preacher to sometimes say, "I don't understand this part."

The next part of the story is common to all three Gospels. Nothing unusual in Mark in verse 37. The reason everyone tells it the same way is because this is the heart of the story. It's the most memorable part of the story because it's the most emotional part of the story. Emotion sears memories into our brains. What's common to all three gospels is "the furious squall," so much water in the boat that it is "nearly swamped," and Jesus "sleeping." Mark alone adds in verse 38 where Jesus was sleeping ("in the stern") and that he was sleeping "on a cushion."

We need to add in a few details with a combination of reading between the lines and our imagination. First of all, it's getting dark. Second, since this is a sudden storm, let's assume there's no advance hint of it when the disciples and Jesus (and maybe others) get in the boat. It's about 7 miles across the pear-shaped Sea of Galilee, which they would expect to traverse in about two hours, give or take a bit, if the sea is calm. With the wind behind them, maybe faster.

I've often heard people say these were experienced fishermen, but as far as we know, only four of the twelve were. We don't even know that Jesus has ever been in a boat prior to this occasion. Ancient Jewish people were not seafaring people like the Greeks and Romans. The Jewish Bible is full of the terror of the sea – its breadth, its depth, its fury. Other than a small river and the Dead Sea, there's only this one small body of water in Canaan; most Jews had no reason to be on it. Swimming and boating and water skiing were not common recreational activities. Nobody had invented lifeboats yet. I'm guessing few to none of them had ever learned to swim.

Had they known a storm was brewing on the east side of the Golan Heights, I'm guessing none of them would have gotten in the boat, Jesus or not. They all assumed a calm leisure ride, and Jesus certainly set the tone by climbing immediately into the back of the boat and falling asleep on a cushion. Nobody's troubled. I can tell you that when the first breezes picked up, some of them became anxious. Matthew the Tax Collector, Simon the Zealot, Thomas the Doubter, and Judas Iscariot were probably among the first to say, "Guys, I think we should turn back."

"We got this," came the quick reply of Peter, echoed by his brother Andrew, James, and John. They sail on a little further, and a gust of wind almost knocks the boat over. They pull down the sail and start rowing. Then suddenly everything's dark and the boat lurches and the waves crash over the side. At this point any one of them was probably ready to head back, but which way is "back"? They can't tell. The boat starts to fill up with water, and when it's clear the fishermen are worried, everyone else is in a panic.

Except Jesus, of course, he's still asleep. Finally, one of them shakes him. I'm guessing Peter, but it could have been any of them. "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (39). (We're back with the text itself now.) This is a critical line in the story, and only Mark phrases it this way. The other gospels say something like "We're going to drown!" Since Mark wrote first, it's quite possible Matthew and Luke were embarrassed by the sharp tone of the disciples' rebuke and left it out. It either impugns the character of Jesus or the men who later became heroes of the fledgling church.

And it's really odd to accuse Jesus of not caring for human suffering. In Mark's gospel he's already healed lepers, cast out demons, lifted Peter's mother-in-law off her sick bed, forgiven and healed a paralytic lowered through the roof, even defended the disciples against Pharisaical criticism about picking grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. These miracles demonstrated Jesus' power, yes, but they certainly also

evidenced his compassion. Yet here they are, these baby followers of Jesus, accusing him of not caring. I get that this is a situation they haven't encountered before. I don't even think it's entered their minds that he can and might calm the storm. He's never done anything like that in their sight. But why he is sleeping? Doesn't he even care if they all go down?

So Jesus gets up, speaks to the wind and waves as if they're the demons he's known to cast out. Only Mark quotes his actual words: "Quiet! Be still!" And when he does, it's not like the storm slowly dissipates and the waves drop from five feet down to four and eventually they're rocking the boat gently like a cradle. This storm goes from 60 to zero in zero seconds. Everything is "completely calm," the sea like glass.

He turns to his gaping disciples and asks them, "Why are you so cowardly?" (40, *The Message*.) "Afraid" (NIV) is the wrong word. "Why are you so timid?" He adds another question: "Do you still have no faith?" Again, I don't think the point is that they don't have enough faith to believe he can still a storm. They don't have enough faith to believe he *cares*. That kind of faith is much, much harder. When need or grief or pain is washing over you and you think you're going under, most of us don't have a problem believing God can do something. That indeed is the very problem we have. If he can, why doesn't he? Does he not care? To believe that he does is the essence of faith.

The next verse says they "were terrified" (41) – literally they "feared a great fear" – and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him." That's not a question; it's an exclamation.

When God doesn't fix it

As most of you know, I'm two weeks out recovering from shoulder surgery. It's felt like a bit of a storm at times, but I'm not going to compare a few nights trying to get comfortable in a recliner after the physical therapist stretches my arm a few degrees more with the kinds of storms many people face – including many of you. My "storm" has been more like that dusting of snow we saw in Hickory at midday on Friday, and in the scheme of things it will dissipate as fast. I expect to fully recover in a few weeks.

By comparison, many people – including some in this room, have faced down blizzards and tornadoes and Cat 5 hurricanes. By the providence of God, I have been reading or listening to some helpful books these last two weeks. Let me mention two.

Confronting Christianity is the best apologetic book I think I've ever read. Compellingly written by a Ph.D. graduate from Cambridge University, a mother of three, Rebecca McLaughlin poses twelve of the most challenging questions Christians have to answer about our faith. Chapter 11 is titled, "How could a loving God allow so much suffering?" What I like about her writing is the combination of emotion and logic. She starts the chapter tapping into the worst of human stories where it seems God was, or is, asleep – ISIS, the British slave trade, the Holocaust, the global sex trade, famines,

cancer, child abuse. She quotes Richard Dawkins who insists that evil proves the universe has “no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”

She frames the question in the words of C. S. Lewis, after the unexpected surprise of a wife named Joy late in life followed by the tragedy of her decline and death from cancer. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis wrote, “Not that I am (I think) in danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like.’” Nailed it. That’s the problem. “Don’t you care that we drown?” In response, McLaughlin writes,

From an atheist perspective, not only is there no hope of a better end to the story; there is no ultimate story. From a Christian perspective, there is not only hope for a better end; there is intimacy now with the One whose resurrected hands still bear the scars of the nails that pinned him to the cross. Suffering is not an embarrassment to the Christian faith. It is the thread with which Christ’s name is stitched into our lives.

I don’t know how a skeptic would read her book, but for me (the already convinced), she answers every tough question.

Another book that deeply moved me was Laura Story’s *When God Doesn’t Fix It*. I ordered the book because one of our own members told me she had recently found out she’s in the book. In the chapter where Laura talks about the response to her Grammy Award-winning song, “Blessings,” Laura shares the stories of those impacted by the song. This church member said she had a “love-hate” relationship with the song when it came out. It would remind her of the deepest pain of her life.

Her alcoholic husband had been a godly man and a supportive husband before he started drinking. He became abusive and even tried to kill her. The reason her story is in the book is because it’s one of those stories without a happy ending. Not in this life, anyway. He is in a nursing home, having completely lost his mind. God didn’t fix the man, didn’t fix the marriage, and she has had to navigate faith in the middle of a storm that rages on and on and on.

She’s quoted in the book writing to Laura, “There is a breathtaking beauty found in suffering that you can’t know until you risk looking for Jesus in the middle of it. That beauty is so moving you gasp in awe of the Creator who gives us beauty for our ashes.”

As for Laura, her husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor a year into their marriage. The surgery that removed the tumor also permanently damaged his short term memory. Her book is full of humor, like when he first woke up and didn’t recognize his own bride. “Do you know why I’m here?” she asked. “I’m your wife.” He pumped his fist into the air and said, “Yes!” But the book is also full of the agony of dashed dreams, including the faith-inspired, biblically informed dream that God would

and could heal her husband. He didn't and hasn't. How do you hold on to the Lord when the storm never, ever lets up? She ends her book, "Share your story. Give God the glory. And live a better broken."

Let me tell you why I think Jesus expected his disciples to trust him. He didn't really expect them to imagine that he would quiet the wind and calm the waves. He had never done anything like that before. What stirred him into asking, "Do you not have any faith?" was the question, "Don't you care?"

Odds are most if all of them had never been in any storm that bad, any life-threatening situation that terrifying. Most of the worst storms we encounter are unlike anything we've ever seen our whole lives long, anything we ever imagined.

Bill Gaither wrote these words back in the 70s:

*Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth or song,
As the burdens press, and the cares distress,
And the way grows weary and long?*

*Oh, yes, He cares, I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.*

The words are beautiful, but how do we know? If you need an intellectual response, you need Rebecca McLaughlin's book.

Reading Laura Story's book reminds me of the importance of the ship – the nave, the church. It reminds me why we gather in this place. Being here is our parallel to Jesus healing the leper, casting out demons, forgiving and raising the paralytic. We gather here to hear the Word of God, but also gather in a community of those who have lived or are living through the storm. When they tell us that in spite of the depth of their pain, they know he cares, we regain our security, our hope, our strength.

It may be our story or someone else's. But when we see and hear how God meets those with himself even when he doesn't "fix it," we in turn are pointed to the cross where God didn't just speak to us in our suffering. He showed us how to hold on when we ask God to "take this cup away" and cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In the ship during the storm, evidence shows what God can do. Experience reveals how much he cares. Amen.