

Proper 7B: Mark 4:35-41  
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June 23, 2024

## Does God Care?

A boy went up to his older brother who was busy with some task. “What’s the difference between ignorance and apathy?” the boy asked. His older brother replied: “I don’t know and I don’t care. Now, go away!”

It’s not clear to the disciples whether Jesus was ignorant or apathetic about their plight. He had them set sail across the Sea of Galilee, when suddenly a storm arose. The wind was blowing, the waves were crashing, and their boat was starting to take on water. You can imagine the disciples’ distress, even those among them who had made a living on boats. And where was Jesus, their leader, their teacher, in the midst of the chaos? Asleep, curled up on a cushion. Did Jesus not know or did he just not care that **THEY WERE ALL GOING TO DIE!** I guess it really didn’t matter, because Jesus was not doing anything about it.

And *that*, really, was at the root of the disciples’ fear, why they were so upset—it would have been one thing if Jesus had, you know, been bailing out water with them, wrestling with the sail, pulling at the oars alongside them, but instead he just lay there, asleep. You can understand their frustration and fear. Jesus, why aren’t you doing anything to help?

It’s a question that so many—Christians and non-believers alike—ask: If God really cared, why did he let this happen? Why doesn’t he do something about it? We might ask this of any number of injustices and tragedies in the world—wars, famines, natural disasters, corruption, abuse—but it is just as apropos of the crises in our own lives.

A colleague of mine tells of a seminary student he knew who felt called by God to serve as pastor to rural churches. Amazingly, he found a woman who felt called by God to marry him and go with him into a lifetime of service in out-of-the-way places. They went in June on a honeymoon, traveling by bicycle in the mountains and camping, the only honeymoon they could afford. First day out, on the road, there was an accident. She was hit by a car, crushed, and died a painful, terrible death. You can imagine that young man crying out, "You called me into the ministry. You put me in this boat, placed her here with me. Do you not care that we are perishing?"

People sometimes make a big deal out of atheism. Does God exist? In my experience, that’s rarely what people want to know about God. The main question they ask is the one asked by the disciples: Do you care? We know that God is real, that God is powerful and creative. But does God care?

Stephen Crane wrote a poem: A man said to the universe, "I exist."/ "That may be true," said the universe, "however that has never created in me a sense of obligation to you." How many, like Crane, have cried out in their pain and despair, and have received nothing in reply? Is there anyone "out there" who cares about us "down here?" Or are we mostly left to our own devices?

When we pray, "Deliver us from evil," do we really expect God to hear, to care, to act? Or, are we only talking to ourselves? If you're in crisis, in distress, facing disaster, *that's* what you want to know, what you *desperately* need to know.

Of course, when things are going alright, that question often doesn't seem as urgent. Perhaps that's where you are this morning. On this beautiful June day, it's easy to sit here in this air-conditioned sanctuary and think good thoughts about the world. Still, you know life. You know, there are darker, more difficult days than this. The world may seem benevolent and benign right now, and it may seem like nothing but blue skies ahead. But as much as we want to deny it, we know that storms rise up unexpectedly. One moment everything is placid, calm, serene, the next we are holding on for dear life, afraid we will soon be going under. An aging parent falls and you have to care for them. You get a phone call from a child telling you they're in trouble. You're laid off. Your spouse of many years suddenly calls it quits on the marriage. The storms, they can come out of nowhere. If you have ever suffered from cancer, you know what this is like. With cancer, your body turns against you, as the normal reproductive processes, the "natural" workings of cells, somehow go out of control, reproduce with astonishing speed, oblivious to the checks and balances of the body. A storm blows in and your once peaceful, functioning body becomes an angry, raging sea.

Point is, if you are enjoying smooth sailing right now, if this Sunday in June is pleasant and peaceful, be assured, life being what it is, there will be storms. As comedian George Carlin says, "We're all precancerous."

And when the storms come, today's Gospel lesson can be a real consolation. The message is, when you find yourself out on the water and the waves start crashing and you fear you'll be going under, remember that you are not alone. Jesus, the Lord of creation, is in the boat with you.

In his book *Letter to a Man in a Fire*, cancer survivor Reynolds Price tells of an 87-year-old woman who wrote to him about one of those moments in which she was facing her own time of difficulty as she was going through exhausting medical tests in preparation for surgery. One day she had a kind of vision. "I went out along the Galilee hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and then said, 'What do you want?' And I said, 'Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after the tests because I can't manage alone?' He [Jesus] thought for a moment and then said, 'How would it be if I came?'"

How would it be if I came? This is precisely what God has done in Jesus Christ. God has come to us in our suffering and pain, in our struggle to be human, in our fear and anxiety, and in our doubt and uncertainty. Jesus took off his "God-clothes" and put on humanity. He became one of us--one with us--one for us.

The disciples' plea—our plea—to God, Don't you care that we are perishing?, is then answered in the very humanity of God, in the mystery of God taking on flesh, becoming human like us. Jesus is able to tame the storm, sure, but his real answer to the question, Don't you care?, is revealed not simply in calming storms but in standing with us in the storm, suffering with us when the waters rage.

This is important for us to understand, for we often make the mistake of thinking that Jesus' job is to calm the storms in our life. But, if Mark's Gospel is any indication, sometimes Jesus is the one who causes the storms. Indeed, throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus is at the center of one storm after another. Whenever Jesus is near, the wind picks up, the waves bang against the side of the boat, and there is trouble. Trouble with demons, with diseases, with hardheaded, self-righteous religious leaders, trouble that ultimately gets him crucified. And if that is how it was for the one we follow, we cannot expect to escape every storm. Indeed, Jesus is just as likely to send us out in it.

Back in the 1960s, Birmingham, Alabama, was at the center of the Civil Rights Movement. Birmingham was the city of Bull Connor, fire hoses and attack dogs, and where Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous letter from jail. That letter was sent to eight pastors of biggest churches in the downtown area. One of these was Dr. Earl Stallings, pastor of Birmingham's First Baptist Church.

On Easter Sunday, April 14, 1963, several African-American young people came to worship at First Baptist. Following the service, Stallings graciously greeted the visitors at the doors, flanked by church members, photographers and reporters. The next morning, papers all over the country, including the New York Times, printed a large photograph of a cheerful Stallings shaking hands with the visitors. Not everyone was pleased, though, by the pastor welcoming the "wrong sort." And they let him know. Stallings' home phone rang around the clock with messages from segregationists, members of the church and "concerned citizens."

Stallings was followed Dr. Herbert Gilmore as pastor of First Baptist Church. The church had been hosting after-school tutoring for children who lived across the street in government housing. One of these was an African-American girl, Twila Fortune. She, and her mother, Winifred Bryant, began to visit Sunday School and worship at First Baptist. After several years of visiting, Twila told her mother that she was ready to make her profession of faith and be baptized. So one Sunday in October of 1970, Twila and Winifred walked the aisle of First Baptist Church to present themselves as candidates for membership.

But they were told that First Baptist was not receiving new members and that their application would have to be deferred. Over the course of the next weeks and after many late-night discussions (some lasting until two in the morning), their application for membership was presented three times for the congregation's vote. All three times, they were denied membership. After the third refusal, a layman, Dr. Byrn Williamson, stood in the sanctuary and said he would like to talk with anyone who wanted to be a part of a church who would welcome individuals like Twila and Winifred. Immediately over 300 people stood and walked out of the sanctuary of First Baptist Church. Not long after, this faithful remnant formed Baptist Church of the Covenant, welcoming whites and blacks alike.

Now, not every storm that arises is a two-hundred-year storm like that. But large or small, whenever the winds start beating and the waves rage, make no mistake, it can be scary. I know a young person who gave her life to Christ when she was a counselor at a summer camp. She was told at the time, by an adult leader, that if she gave her life to Christ, so many things that

bothered her about herself and about other people would be fixed. After summer was over, she showed up at her high school, said a little prayer, and asked Jesus to give her a wonderful Junior year. It didn't work out that way. Some of her friends just didn't understand her newfound Christian commitment. She was openly ridiculed by some of them. "Look at Miss Christian!" they mocked. Some of her classmates were outright hostile. "What gives you the right to think you are better than me?" they asked. She tried to explain to them that she didn't feel that way at all, but she was unable to change their misunderstandings of the Christian way. A storm had hit and she was caught in a downpour.

To put-upon believers like this young woman, St. Augustine of Hippo, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, offered this advice:

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 the 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, pay heed to him.

So, we come to appreciate a deeper meaning of this story. It is about more than the fact that Christ can bring quiet and stillness amidst the chaos. It is the acknowledgment that, as Augustine says, Christ sleeps within each of us and will rouse himself to respond to our cries when We cannot stand it anymore, when We cannot bear it on our own any more, when like the disciples, We have exhausted all of our resources and need help beyond our abilities.

For, Christ sleeps within all believers, and whatever we do, wherever we go, we may call on him as the disciples did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us—each one—our way. When the winds stir up and the waves run wild, we can trust that Jesus is with us and we will get through it, even if we get a little wet in the process. Thanks be to God!