

Job 38:1-11

Psalm 20

Mark 4:35-41

**Do not. Be. Afraid**

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The opposite of faith is not unbelief but fearing the wrong thing.

‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’

Until this week, the assumption of perhaps every thought I have ever had about this question – and probably every sermon I have heard on it – is, Yes, Jesus does care – *of course*, Jesus cares. The evidence for this is that he stills the storm. Is this not what care would look like: noticing and acting?

Let’s affirm that Jesus *does* care, while allowing that closer attention to the story undermines confidence in *too easy* a ‘Yes’ in response to the desperate question, Do you not care? Or, perhaps more to the point for those in that boat and us in ours, we might enquire more deeply of this story just what the care of Jesus *looks like*.

Crucial to all this is that Jesus has to be *woken up* in order to be made aware of a storm which has scared the b’Jesus *into* all his friends. The disciples presume, not unreasonably, that one has to be conscious to care. And so, pun (w)holly intended, they effectively ask, For Christ’s sake, Jesus; how can you sleep at a time like this?

The gospel’s answer to this is that it is precisely for the Christ’s sake that he sleeps – not because the Christ is tired and needs to catch up on his rest but because there is nothing present of sufficient moment to warrant him waking; there is nothing to worry about.

This is too much, of course, if the story were about a few blokes in the wrong place at the wrong time. If that were all that the story told, then there is plenty to worry about and plenty to do, and the disciples are right to be holding on very tight with one hand and bailing frantically with the other. But this is *not* the point of the story – the point of *telling* the story.

The storm is not stilled to demonstrate that Jesus cares and will meet our sense of what we need. The wind and the waves are stilled in order that Jesus might be heard – a still, small voice cutting through the wild night. He needs to be heard, not to deny or do away with the wild and frightening things, but that those things be relegated – be put in their right place – in the hearts and minds of the disciples.

And what is it we are to hear? What is it for which the storm is stilled?

‘Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?’

By this Jesus does not mean, “Can’t you fix this yourself?” Of course they can’t. ‘Have you no faith?’ means, “These are only wind and waves. Fear. Only. *God*.”

The care Jesus demonstrates here is not that he will still the storms about us. There is no promise in the story that the storm will be stilled. Jesus will himself soon succumb to a perfect storm of fear and suspicion, and a few of those in the boat will perish in other religious and political storms over the next 20 or 30 years. Many interpreters of this passage see this story, in fact, as written specifically for those later situations, as an answer to *their* pressing question: Does God care what is now happening to the church?

God does care what is happening to the church, but in the sense of, “Why is my church timid? Why does it cower?” Does it imagine that hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword will *separate* it from me (Romans 8.35)? We are again in the space we have visited the last couple of weeks – Adam and Eve, suddenly afraid when they *notice* their vulnerability (a vulnerability which was always there), and then our own disorientations and sense of vulnerability as a few reliable foundations have shaken and buildings fallen, and we’ve had to take wing until we find somewhere else to nestle into again.

Have you no faith? Why the so timid, fearful?

The stance Jesus takes before the wind and the waves is the same stance he takes in the face of the cross: there is, finally, nothing to fear here. It is scarcely pleasant – it will sometimes even be hell – but if God was indeed crucified on that ancient Friday, then hell is not beyond God’s attention, and hell doesn’t change that, finally, we belong not to the devil but to God. All this is true all of the time – as the funeral service puts it – in strength *and* in weakness, in achievement *and* in failure, in the brightness of joy *and* in the darkness of despair.

We. Belong. To God.

The ‘climate’ – what is going on in the world around us – is not a indicator of where God is or is not.

Notice that, in this way of thinking about the story, it matters *not one jot* whether Jesus could actually command the wind and the waves. For all that we have said, the story is irrelevant if we seek *evidence* about whether Jesus was a miracle-worker or not. We notice most of all the calming of the waters and the wind, and much less the word which the calming makes it possible to hear: Do not cower here; have you no faith?

This is the hard part of the story, and not the miracle. And so at the end the disciples fall back in terror, now at *Jesus* and no longer at the storm. The shock is not merely that Jesus commands the storm, but that he has no fear of it. For the story, these two things are the same.

And so Jesus says *not* to us, You could have done this yourself, had you the faith. He declares rather, *If the god I am* is God, your life is not to be a fearful one. Faith is knowing what or whom to fear, and what not to fear. The opposite of faith is not unbelief but fearing the wrong thing. Faith is knowing what does, and does not, own us.

We *will* likely be afraid on high seas, for all the obvious reasons. The storm might be a threatening diagnosis; the unbearably quiet house brought by bereavement; the loss of a job; missiles lobbed from over the border; public embarrassment; the impending divorce (or even the impending marriage!).

We *will* likely be afraid in such situations for all the obvious reasons. Yet, in such storms – wild or still – Jesus asks, And what is it about this place you know but is *not* obvious? I am with you always. *You are mine*. You are mine.

In all such things, you are – together in the boat, as a community of love and mutual support – more than conquerors through the one who loves you. There is nothing to fear but that we might fear what is unworthy of fear.

Do not be afraid. There are more important things to do.

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