

You Cannot Google Hope

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Mark 4:35-41

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The Scripture passage today is one of my favorites. I seem to come back to it every spring when we think about boating. I think Jesus must have enjoyed the seashore, too—the water, the sounds of shorebirds, maybe he even liked being on a boat. After all, that is where he called his first disciples, and he did a lot of teaching by the sea. Perhaps he found the seashore to be as lovely as I am sure all of us do.

If you are a boater, I think the story I just read can probably jog your memory about some hair-raising times adventures on the water—although I doubt that any were as hair-raising as the one described! But I can tell you that if Richard and I had lived through a storm like that on a boat, he would have had to find a new first mate!

I've never been to the Holy Land, but in seminary, I remember being surprised to learn that the Sea of Galilee is really a large lake—only 13 miles long, North to South, and only 8 miles across at its widest span. There are many larger lakes here in the United States.

The thing that makes the Sea of Galilee so treacherous is that it's shaped like a big bowl—with hills completely surrounding the sides.

Storms come up suddenly in that desert climate, and the wind rushes down those hills to whip the water into a frenzy. I have heard that waves crash on the shore, and the spray can be felt over 100 yards away. Those are big waves! In just a matter of minutes, the serene glassy water and clear sky can give way to a violent, raging storm.

A couple of other things also make Mark's story very scary. First of all, the boats on that day had flat bottoms with a sail. That is great for calm water, but not particularly good if there are wind and waves. The other thing that is almost unbelievable is that, even though some of the disciples were professional fishermen, scholars believe they did not know how to swim! People in Palestine in the First Century just did not learn how to swim. Those guys in the little rowboat were "goners" if they went into the water!

Is it any wonder that the Bible records that they were scared out of their wits, and they rush to Jesus for help? Imagine their utter surprise when they see Jesus fast asleep resting peacefully on a cushion in the stern of the boat. He was completely at peace in the midst of a huge storm.

That must have seemed unbelievable to those terrified disciples. It was a very bad storm. The Greek words in the passage describe a storm so violent that it's like an earthquake at sea. And the waves were so high it completely hid the boat from view. They looked lost between the swells. If you've ever seen the old movie "The Perfect Storm," I think that's the kind of seas Mark is describing. The disciples were understandably terrified!

They shout to Jesus over the sounds of the storm. They probably had to shake him by the shoulder. They said, "Wake up, teacher, wake up!" And then, maybe because they're a little irritated that he could be sleeping through what they think is a killer storm, they ask him, "Don't you care? We're all

about to be killed here. Are you going to sleep through this? Don't you even care about us?" In his special way, Jesus just stands up & with three words he calms the storm. "Peace, be still!"

I love this story. It's a powerful account for us anytime, but it seems especially relevant for this storm we're facing right now called Covid-19.

But a bad storm doesn't have to be called a virus. There are plenty of other storms that we have to face. What do we do then? How do we make it through the storm? Let me point out a few of the things where I think this story can be of help.

The first lesson I see is that life is uncertain. We certainly know something about uncertainty. For the disciples, the storm came so quickly. The situation changed so rapidly it made their heads spin. Life is like that, isn't it? It can change in the blink of an eye. Like Jesus and the disciples, we were sailing along so peacefully last March with everything looking so promising and bright. But suddenly, so suddenly, clouds gathered, the skies darkened and rumbled, the winds blew, and we quickly found ourselves caught in the fury of a storm—a storm that alarms us and shakes our world.

That storm is called pandemic right now, but lots of other storms alarm us. It only takes a word from a loved one, a phone call, an accident that happens in the blink of an eye, a report from a doctor. You know what I mean. Life is uncertain. Life can be so calm one minute, and then a storm hits with amazing suddenness.

The second thing I learn from this story is that we need to prepare ahead. When the storm hit, Jesus was relaxed, poised, and confident because of the deep spiritual resources he had built up ahead of time. He was prepared. We see the opposite of this in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. When a storm hit, those sailors ran around shouting in desperation: "All is lost! To prayers! To prayers!" You see, for them, faith was nothing more than a last-ditch effort, the last resort, something you turn to only when all else fails.

Not so with Jesus.

For him, faith was a daily lifestyle, a way of life that conditioned him, prepared him, and gave him the spiritual strength to face the harsh storms that came his way.

A few years ago, a Methodist minister wrote a book entitled "Noah Built His Ark in the Sunshine." The premise of the book is that Noah prepared in the sunshine for the flood that was to come. People laughed at him. They made fun of him. They told him that what he was doing was ridiculous and unnecessary. After all, the sun was shining. It hardly ever rained. It was the desert, for Pete's sake! Why waste time building an ark? But Noah was faithful and kept on building. When the troubled waters came, he was prepared, he was ready, he was equipped, and he was able to ride out the storm.

The Bible gives us the tools we need to be prepared. Remember Psalm 23? "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Or Isaiah 43: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. The great promise we see through-out the Bible is that God is always with us. No question about it, life is uncertain, and we need to prepare ahead to face the storms that are certain to come.

The final thing I learn from this story is that our hope is in God. You can't google hope. I tried. Honest. (You can try it for yourself later!) These days people think they can get everything from the

web. But you can't google hope! The internet gave me the Wikipedia definition, the Merriam-Webster definition, and then all the organizations that have the word "hope" in them. Hope for Chain-smokers, Hope Counseling Center, Hope Pregnancy Center, Hope for Atlantic City! (and many more!). The hope we need only comes from God—our faith and trust in a God who loves us no matter what.

At the beginning of our service, you may have recognized the hymn Chris played— "It Is Well with My Soul." Here are just the words of the first verse:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll.  
Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

At first, you might think that the guy who wrote those words must have been basking in the sunshine of life to write such inspiring words. But, actually, the opposite is true. Horatio Spafford was in deep pain when these words of hope came from his soul. His wife and four daughters were on their way to England by ship. (Horatio was supposed to join them later). Their ship collided with a cargo vessel on the Atlantic. The four daughters drowned. Only his wife survived. Horatio was naturally on the next boat to England to be with his wife. The captain of his ship knew of the tragedy of the other ship. When they came to spot where that boat went down, he showed Horatio where his daughters had died.

That night, alone in his cabin, Horatio Spafford penned the words to that wonderful hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul."

Horatio's faith in God never faltered. He knew the presence of Christ. Somehow, he felt Christ with him and within him, stilling the storm in his heart, bringing confidence and strength. He had learned that no matter what trouble, pain, or sorrow may come into our lives, with Jesus there is calm, there is victory, there is inner peace in stormy times.

I know those good parents are always close to their children when their children are hurting or going through something difficult. In the same way, I think God seems to draw even closer to us when we're in the middle of life storms. It's probably true that God is close to us all the time, but, somehow in the storms, we tune in better to God's presence and strength.

During World War II, Edward R. Murrow reported that during one of the toughest moments of the war, he saw a sign tacked on the outside of a church building. It read: "If your knees knock, kneel on them."

Good advice.

When your storms of life come along, do what the disciples did—turn to Jesus for help. Our hope is in God, and he has the power to still the storms of life.