

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 10-23, 32-49

Psalm 133

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

Mark 4:39

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## THERE WAS A GREAT CALM

Jesus spent most of his time and did most of his teaching in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee. Except for when Joseph and Mary took him to Egypt as an infant, he did not travel far from where he grew up in Nazareth. His farthest point of travel north was Sidon, on the seacoast about 60 miles from Nazareth as the crow flies, and his farthest journeys south as an adult took him to Jerusalem, about 65 miles from Nazareth, a range roughly equal to the distance from Socorro to Santa Fe. Yet the things he said and did in that small corner of space and time have not ceased to change the lives of people everywhere, in every generation. *“Heaven and earth will pass away,”* he said, *“But my words will never pass away”* (Matt 24:35)<sup>1</sup>.

Jesus often traveled by boat with his disciples, at least four of whom were fishermen, and today’s gospel concerns one of those times. It was on a day when, according to Mark 4:1-34, Jesus had been teaching by the Sea of Galilee. None of his teachings on that day gave any hint of the great miracle that was to come in the evening as they set out to cross the sea in a small boat.

It had been a day when Jesus and his disciples were surrounded by large crowds who came from the surrounding villages to hear him teach and perhaps witness more of his miracles. In fact the crowd got so large and pressing that Jesus found it necessary to get into a boat and pull away from the shore in order to speak to them (Mark 4:1). By the time evening came they were no doubt tired and needed time to rest by themselves and eat. Our gospel reading today begins at that point.

Mark 4:35-41. *On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”* <sup>36</sup>*And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.* <sup>37</sup>*And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.* <sup>38</sup>*But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?”* <sup>39</sup>*And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* <sup>40</sup>*He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”* <sup>41</sup>*And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?”*

- *He said to them, “Let us go across to the other side”* (v.35). Matthew and Luke have given us similar accounts of this episode, and all three agree that Jesus meant for them to head for Gadara on the SE shore of the sea. This would mean a voyage of several miles across open water, and sudden severe storms had a way of swooping down over the lake unexpectedly from the northern mountains of Syria.
- *They took him with them in the boat, just as he was* (v.36). In other words, Jesus (already in the boat) stopped teaching the crowds on the shore, and they pulled away from the shore with him “just as he was.” He had been teaching from the platform in the stern, and now laid down there on a cushion for a rest.
- *A great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling* (v.37). This sudden change in the sea put the boat in great danger. Once waves come over the side, the boat begins to fill and ride lower. Then even more water pours in, and you quickly founder and go under.
- *“Teacher, do you not care if we perish?”* (v.38). It is significant that they turned to Jesus for help in this sudden crisis. When you yell “Every man for himself” and jump ship, you may be lost in the storm. When you react as the disciples did in this crisis and really believe Jesus is able to help, he *is* able to help.

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<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV.

• *And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm* (v.39). Here, in one verse, is the miracle itself. You get the idea that the storm did not just die out, as storms usually do. It quit when he told it to quit.

There are other examples like this in Scripture where God "spoke" with miraculous results. Eight times in the creation story, God spoke things into existence. First he said, "*Let there be light,*" and there was light (Gen 1:3), and finally he said, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...*" (Gen 1:26) and mankind began. When Jesus spoke to the disciples and said, "*Peace be with you*" (John 20:19), he "spoke" peace into them by imparting the Holy Spirit.

• "*Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?*" (v.41). The disciples were filled with awe. Hearing Jesus speak was one thing. Seeing him heal people was another. He had yet to feed the five thousand, but up to now they had seen nothing like this, where Jesus revealed the power of God in nature. So they asked the question every one of us must answer: "*Who is this?*" They knew Jesus. He was the son of Joseph of Nazareth – the rabbi they had decided to follow. But who *is* he, to be able to calm a storm like this?

The miracles like this that Jesus did were called *signs* by John (John 2:11, 2:23, 3:2, 4:54, etc.) The Pharisees sought to have him do these signs for them, but he would not. See Mark 8:11-13, for example. Why not? What was his purpose in doing the signs? And why is it important not to see them simply as exaggerations of natural events? And in particular, what is the significance of the great sign in Mark 4?

First, the sign is recorded "*That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31). It identifies Jesus with God the Creator of and Authority over nature, the One who answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, "*Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you?*" (Job 38:34). It identifies him with the great and powerful God, whose "*way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet*", who "*rebukes the sea and makes it dry ...*" (Nahum 1:3-4). When you see Jesus in the boat with his disciples, and the other boats nearby, and he raises his hand and speaks, "*Peace! Be still!*" and nature hears and obeys, you see for a moment not a humble rabbi, but instead the omnipotent God who is able to fulfill the prophecy in Isa 17:13, "*The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm.*" No wonder they were filled with awe and said to one another, "*Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?*" They had seen, for a moment, the Son of man as the whole world will one day see him.

Second, the sign identifies Jesus with *Jehovah-Palet* (God the *Deliverer*), the One of whom Ps 107:28-29 says, "*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.*"

Believers have always taken this event as a sign that Jesus is with us and is able to calm all the storms of life, and give us peace. William Barclay<sup>2</sup> says Jesus gives us peace in the storms of anxiety, when we are worried about ourselves and about those we love, or about the future. He gives us peace "when life's problems involve us in a tempest of doubt and tension and uncertainty," when we stand at a crossroads and do not know which way to proceed. And Jesus gives us peace in times of sorrow, as when someone we love is taken away. Barclay relates the story of a gardener who had in his garden a favorite flower which he loved very much.

"One day he came to the garden to find that flower gone. He was vexed and angry and full of complaints. In the midst of his resentment he met the master of the garden and hurled his complaints at him. 'Hush!' said the master, 'I plucked it for myself.' In the storm of sorrow Jesus tells us that those we love have gone to be with God, and gives us the certainty that we shall meet again those whom we have loved and lost awhile."

There is no storm in this life to which Jesus cannot speak with authority. He said to his disciples, "*Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*" He has demonstrated his authority over nature – even over death itself, and told us he will never forsake us, and *nothing* can separate us from his love. Just imagine the sea shortly after Jesus spoke to it and said "*Be still!*" As his disciples related to Mark, "*There was a great calm.*"

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2 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 116.