

Disruptive Love

Mark 4:35-41

This fall we're looking at selections from the four Gospels in order to take a closer look at the heart of Jesus. To see how he loved people through the way he interacted with them, how he treated them.

So far we've look at the stories of people who sought Jesus out: the leper, who came to him for cleansing; Nicodemus, who came to give Jesus an opportunity to explain himself; the paralyzed man, whose friends brought him for healing. Today we look at a story of Jesus and his interaction with his disciples, his close friends and followers who were with him all the time.

If you're not familiar with the story of Jesus in the Gospels, it's helpful to know that part of his strategy to expand the kingdom of God was gathering a close band of followers, twelve men whom he personally selected and invited to come be with him, to learn from him, to observe everything he taught, and then to be sent out as witnesses and messengers of his kingdom (cf. Mk. 3:13-19).

And so unlike the people we've met over the last few weeks, who had a single, remarkable encounter with Jesus, the disciples were around Jesus all the time. They ate with him, they traveled with him, they were there for every sermon, they saw all the miracles. But, that doesn't mean that they knew him any better. Often in the Gospels, the faith of marginal figures (the people who come on and off the page in a single story) is held up in contrast to the disciples, who despite being with Jesus all the time just don't seem to get it. And that ought to be a bit unsettling for those of us who read our Bibles often, or go to church regularly, or who have been around Christianity for most of our lives. Just because you spend a lot of time around Jesus doesn't mean you always see him clearly, or even know him truly. Sometimes Jesus has to disrupt our worlds to help us realize who he really is. And as dislocating and terrifying as that experience might be, he does it out of love. A disruptive love, if you will, because Jesus loves us too much to leave us where we're at in our unbelief, and so he makes space for us through the trials of this world to realize who he truly is. That's what we see in our story this morning in Mark 4:35-41—the disruptive love of Jesus.

After the story we looked at last week at the beginning of ch. 2, Mark has followed Jesus as he's called his disciples, continued to preach and teach and work miracles, and found himself involved no small controversies as the religious leaders oppose him and accuse him and begin making plans to destroy him (as early as ch. 3, cf. 3:6). Most of ch. 4 focuses on Jesus' teaching, particularly his parables, as Jesus teaches from a boat at the edge of the sea of Galilee, to avoid being crushed by the crowd. Verse 35 brings us to the end of the day, as Jesus pulls back from the crowd and the scene narrows in on just him and his disciples.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. (Mk. 4:35-36)

So rather than pushing their way through the crowds, they just set sail. But it's no pleasure cruise. Verse 37: "And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling." The Sea of Galilee, even to this day, is known for its sudden, violent squalls. As one author describes:

The Sea of Galilee . . . lies nearly seven hundred feet below sea level in a basin surrounded by hills and mountains that are especially precipitous on the east side. Thirty miles to the northeast Mt. Hermon rises to 9,200 feet above sea level. The interchange between cold upper air from Mt. Hermon and warm air rising from the Sea . . . produces tempestuous weather conditions for which the lake is famed.¹

Or as the captain might say, grab your life jacket and hold on, because it's about to get rough.

I've never been in a boat during a violent storm, but I don't want to be. I've seen *Deadliest Catch*; no thank you. But it's no doubt a terrifying experience. And the disciples are understandably afraid—watching your boat flooding with water. But perhaps the most startling part of this story is what we read in v. 38: "But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion."

What?!? That doesn't make sense on so many levels. One—how can you sleep through a terrible storm? And two—why would he sleep through a terrible storm—one so great that it threatens the lives of all those on the sea—instead of jumping in and helping out? His disciples seem to be asking the same question: "And they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'" (v. 38). Why don't you grab a bucket like the rest of us?

It's surprising to see Jesus act this way. But Jesus often surprises us, doesn't he? He doesn't always do what we think he'll do, given what we know about a situation. We don't expect him to actually touch a leper when he heals him. We don't expect him to not answer a question from someone who goes out of their way to seek him out. We don't expect him to pronounce the forgiveness of sins for someone who just wants to walk again. And so in our story, we don't expect him to be sleeping through a storm when his close friends are completely freaking out.

But as we've seen so far in these stories, it's often in his surprising behavior that we see his love revealed. Slowing down and asking why does Jesus do something we don't expect him to do, or not do what we think he will? What does that reveal to us about his love?

Why take a nap during one of the most traumatic experiences of your close friends' lives, one in which they're pretty sure they're about to die? "Do you not care that we are *perishing*?"—that's a strong word. That's the same word used in John 3:16, "shall not perish but have eternal life." What does he think his actions will communicate? *Calloused indifference*? That's what the disciples are picking up. That's what the sailors thought of Jonah when something similar happened on the Mediterranean Sea some 700 years earlier. There are a lot of parallels between the story of Jonah and the scene here on the Sea of Galilee—a violent storm, a crew that freaks out, a sleeping prophet. But there are also some important differences. Jonah was fleeing from

¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 148-149.

the Lord; Jesus *is* the Lord, and sleeps with complete trust in his Father. For the storm to stop the crew had to throw Jonah overboard; for this storm to stop, Jesus need only say the word.

And to really understand why Jesus sleeps and how this reveals not a calloused indifference, but a divine love, we have to see how the rest of the story unfolds. What he actually accomplished in the hearts of his followers through something so simple and surprising as a nap.

Verse 39. First, Jesus says something to the sea. “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.” Notice how the *great* storm was replaced by a *great* calm, at the mere word of Jesus. And then he says something to his disciples: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40). The disciples, who spent every waking hour with Jesus, should have known better than to freak out. There’s something not clicking for them. And you see what it is in v. 41, as the disciples say something to each other: “And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”

They don’t understand who Jesus is. They’re shocked, terrified at the power they just witnessed. And so notice now how the *great* storm, that was replaced by a *great* calm, is now overtaken by a *great* fear. They fear Jesus. They are overwhelmed with both awe and terror that their teacher, their Rabbi, has the power and authority to command the sea.

Think about what they’re trying to take on board in that moment. There’s only one person in Israel’s faith, according to Israel’s Scripture (the Old Testament) who has the power and authority to command the sea. The sea that was often a metaphor for evil and chaos for Israel (e.g., Exod. 14:21ff; Isa. 27:1). Only one voice could calm it, or control it—the same voice that created it: only the voice of God.

- Nahum 1: “His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers . . .” (1:3-4).
- Psalm 107: “He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven” (Ps. 107:29-30).
- Psalm 65: “By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness, O God of our salvation . . . the one who by his strength established the mountains . . . who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs” (Ps. 65:5-8)

Only God himself has the power and authority to do what Jesus did in that boat. And so when his disciples witness that, they react in the only possible and appropriate way. They stand in awe of his signs (as Psalm 65 put it). They become more afraid of their teacher than they were of the storm. They fear a great fear: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

There’s something that hadn’t clicked for the disciples yet. Despite all the time they spent with Jesus they still didn’t understand who he was. That if they had him, they didn’t have to fear the

storm. That the one who is with them is greater than *any* storm. They need only *trust* him, because he is *God in the flesh*. They needed faith.

And so Jesus, in his love, made space for them to come to that realization. He took a nap. He was unwilling to leave them where they were in their unbelief, and so he left them in the storm for a bit. He disrupted their world until that they might wake up to his true identity, and believe.

And he often loves us in a similar way. Because we too, regardless of how much time we spend around Jesus, can so easily forget or fail to realize that he is no mere teacher. Like the disciples, we get so focused on the terrifying circumstances around them that we miss the presence of the Creator among us. Without turning this true story into a mere analogy or metaphor, we can so often do the same thing, right?

We think God is asleep. How else do we explain our world falling apart? Maybe we're drowning in bills. Or we're drifting relationally from our spouse or our kids. Our mortgage is underwater. Our business capsizes. Our bodies are wracked by wave after wave of sickness and disease. We feel suffocated by depression. We can barely keep our nose above water, and we wonder why Jesus can't just wake up, grab a bucket, and start helping us bail.

But what if we're asking him for too little? What if we're treating him as too small? What if he loves us too much to leave us in our unbelief, and so he's leaving us in our trouble, in our trial, in order to create space for our little faith to be exposed? Preparing us to pay attention when he does something only God can do?

I remember a few months after Carissa and I moved to Wheaton for grad school, we pretty much ran out of money. We had some savings for the first few months, but for various reasons, the job I had lined up hadn't yet generated a paycheck. And so we found ourselves with a deadline, and simply had no money to pay the rent. And I remember telling Carissa one night, we need to pray for a miracle. We need \$1,000 by tomorrow, or we can't pay our rent this month.

The next day, we found a card in our mail. Some of our friends back in Nebraska, people we had led in Bible study and been part of the Navigator ministry, had been hanging out earlier in the week. And each of them, quite independent of one another, had felt led to pray for us, and so they stopped what they were doing and prayed for us. And through that prayer, several of them felt led to give something to us (with no knowledge of our situation). So they took up a collection amongst themselves, bought a card and signed it, and sent a check in the mail. For \$990. That came on the exact day we needed it.

We think God is asleep. Our world is falling apart. And then he does something only he can do, as if to say to us, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Now none of this should trivialize the very real pain that some of us are going through, or will one day go through. None of this should minimize the understandable fear we experience when our world closes in and we can see no way out. But it should remind us—it *must* remind us—that there is more to the story than our circumstances. That the persistence of our troubles is not evidence of God's indifference, or impotence. It may in fact be evidence of his love, as he graciously and patiently makes space for us, that our little faith might be exposed and replaced by confidence and trust in the God who is greater than our circumstances.

That applies to each of us personally, as we wrestle with financial trials, with health problems, with relational trouble, emotional trauma, with job stress, family worries, fighting against sin. The God who promises to make all things new in the end is able to deliver us in the meantime, not by just helping us bail ourselves out of our own trouble, but by telling our trouble to go jump in a lake.

Now of course sometimes the deliverance we long for waits till the end, the new creation to come. God is the one who determines that. But if you're anything like me, sometimes I defer to God's will not out of humility or deference, but out of fear. Out of unbelief that God actually can or wants to answer my prayers.

Now of course we have to defer to God's will; there's always a bigger story and we can't always see it. But don't let "if God's will" become a thin veil to disguise your unbelief. The God who spoke this world into being, who commands the destiny of every living soul, who accomplished redemption for us through the cross and resurrection of his Son—*that God* is present with us by the Holy Spirit. He has the power and authority right now to deliver us and to accomplish his plans. As the great hymn reminds us, "The waves and winds still know his voice, who ruled them while He dwelt below." So will we trust him to do things in our life that only God can do?

Can the God who raises the dead restore a dead marriage? Bring healing where the doctors say it's hopeless? Can the Creator of this universe create in us a desire to say no to sin and devote our whole lives for him? How big is the God we serve, and what will it take for us to see that? If you are experiencing disruption in your life right now, perhaps God is inviting you into a bigger faith.

And this applies not just to our personal lives, but to our vision and calling as a church as well. Do we really believe that Jesus has the authority and power to change hearts throughout Metrowest Boston and in every corner of the earth, such he is treasured above all things? Do we believe that he still changes lives? Do we believe that he wants to change the lives of our neighbors and family and colleagues and friends, and that he is powerful enough to use us to do it? Do we believe he wants to use Westgate to make a mark for his kingdom? And if so, what should that faith look like?

I invite you to redouble your efforts in prayer for our vision. It's not about us: the goal is Christ treasured above all things. And redouble your prayers for our Local Outreach Development Team as they round the corner into the final stretch of the work they've been tasked with. We're about to embark in a new and exciting season of gospel ministry as a church. But we need to keep our eyes and faith on the God who is among us, and not become distracted or terrified by the cultural storms that surround us. It's easy to panic as we feel our homes or our church being flooded with ideas and agendas contrary to God and his glory. To respond by circling our wagons, or withdrawing from the public square, even to be frustrated as though Jesus is asleep while the Enemy infiltrates his ranks. And we need to be alert, to guard sound doctrine and be ready to give an answer for the reason for our hope. But what's needed in these moments is *to step out in love with the hope of the gospel* for a world who needs the grace of Jesus every bit as much as we do, rather than recoiling or retreating.

And in stepping out in love, in holding out the gospel for others, we need be willing to follow Christ's example of disruptive love, and allow space for God to rock the worlds of people we love, that they might come to grips with who he really is.

I wouldn't say that that should be a default position when it comes to reaching out and loving others for Christ. I think the default position, when we look at the love of the Lord, the example of the early church, and the words of Scripture is to get our hands dirty in caring for others, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to lay our lives down in tangible love and service. As Micah 6:8 puts it, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

But sometimes, for some people, there does come a point where what they need is not help, but space. Space to come to the end of themselves. Space to realize that only God can get them out of this mess. Space to finally see how big God is. That he's not the kind of god who's there to help us dig ourselves out of our own trouble. But the God who commands all creation, who deserves all allegiance, who alone can save us, and who has in fact accomplished that salvation once for all through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, *for us*.

So what are you putting your faith in? Or better: *who* are you putting your faith in? Yourself, or Jesus Christ? And what are you trusting him for? To help you save yourself, or to show himself the true Savior and King of all the world?

That's a question for all of us. Not just those who are new to Christianity or don't know Jesus Christ. It's a question for those of us who have hung around him our whole lives, but can so easily slip into a shallow view of the Savior among us. Praise God that he loves us too much to leave us where we're at in our unbelief. May he be pleased to use whatever trials or storms in our lives to open our eyes to fresh faith in Jesus. And as he does among us what God alone can do, may we stand in awe before him.