

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“GOOD NEWS ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS”

2. Stilling the Storm

(Mark 4:35-41)

Pastor John Hart

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This morning, we continue with our sermon series called, “Good News Encounters with Jesus”. Actually, it’s redundant calling these “good news encounters”, because every encounter with Jesus is good news, because Jesus is good news himself.

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Here’s a story of an encounter that Jesus has with his own disciples, from the fourth chapter of *The Gospel of Mark*:

As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let’s cross to the other side of the lake.” So they took Jesus in the boat and started out, leaving the crowds behind. But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.

Let me pause here for a minute, because I want to tell you about a time when I was in the exact same situation. Well, I wasn’t on Lake Galilee in a boat with Jesus, but I was in a boat that got caught in a sudden, fierce storm.

I was in college. Back in high school and college, I was very much the outdoorsman. I loved to camp, to hike, to rock climb and mountain climb, and to canoe. And for one summer during college, I worked for “Sonshine Ministries”, a youth ministry in Southern California. Sonshine Ministries ran outdoor camping trips for church youth groups. Because to get out in nature, to leave all distractions behind, to face some stress in the outdoors, to rely on each other as a team – an outdoors adventure is a great setting for Christian growth.

One time, I led a youth group on a canoe trip down the Colorado River. OK, not *that* Colorado River – the one you see in the Coors beer commercials, guys in helmets crashing through rapids as they’re paddling like crazy. It *was* the Colorado River, but not the part that cascades down through the Rockies – this was the part that meanders across the desert along the Arizona-California border.

We put in at Bullhead City, Nevada, for a two-day paddle down the river. And it was extraordinarily boring. There were no rapids. There was nothing to look at but desert to the east and desert to the west, as far as you could see. Heck, we hardly had to paddle – the current was steady and strong, we just floated along. Even any chance of imagining ourselves out in the wilderness, communing with nature, was

shattered every time some maniac would buzz past in a speedboat towing some water skiers with AC/DC blasting on the stereo.

After camping the first night just north of Needles, California, the second day on the river was just as boring as the first. And finally, we reached our destination. Just north of where I-40 crosses the river at Topock, AZ, we turned east off the Colorado into a side basin. At first there was a marina, then we paddled back north along a very narrow channel, under one side road, then under another, which opened into a little lake – only about 1/3 of a mile wide by ½ mile long – which was called “Catfish Paradise”. This is where the van was going to pick us up.

Well, the weather was exactly what you would expect in the Arizona desert – hot, no breeze, sunny without a cloud in the sky. I was in the lead canoe as we entered Catfish Paradise, and even though I only had to paddle a half-mile to the campground, in that very short distance, the weather changed like *that*. First, I noticed that the wind was picking up – from the north, right in our faces. Then I noticed clouds covering the sun. And then – I’m not kidding – out of nowhere there were waves – whitecaps! – kicking up on this little lake.

Well, I got to shore and pulled up our canoe, and looked back to see how the other 8 canoes were doing. And they weren’t doing well, because now it was a fierce storm. The wind kept getting stronger, the waves kept getting higher. And the youth group kids couldn’t keep their canoes straight into the wind – everyone was being blown around the lake. So, we hopped back into our canoe to help pull them out.

Easier said than done. Canoes started to get swamped, canoes started flipping over. As soon as we would get to one canoe to help them out, another canoe would flip.

And then – the rain started coming down. In buckets. The kind of rain where you can’t see very far. By this point I had rounded up 7 of the canoes, and only one more needed help. In the bow was the captain of the cheerleading team – cute, blonde, petite, and up a creek without a paddle. In the stern was the football team captain, who decided to try to do something heroic. Since this little lake was quite shallow, he decided to jump out of the canoe! He figured he’d have a better chance standing in chest-deep water, holding on to the canoe, then trying to steer the canoe in the fierce wind. Well, he was wrong. The minute he jumped overboard, the canoe tipped heavily towards the bow – the cheerleader was the only person in the canoe, the weight was no longer evenly distributed – and the wind ripped that canoe out of the football captain’s hand. And pretty Miss Cheerleader was blown like a pinwheel across the surface of Catfish Paradise like nothing I’d ever seen.

Well, she got blown up against the shore and got stuck. We paddled up alongside her and she climbed into our canoe. Then I hopped overboard to untangle the empty

canoe and tie it to our canoe, and just as I was reaching out to grab that 15-foot Grumman aluminum canoe – the lighting started. I’m standing chest deep in water, holding onto to a metal canoe, while lightning is flashing all around me!

Clearly I lived to tell the tale. We roped up the loose canoe, paddled over and picked up Mr. Football. And by the time we pulled into the campground at Catfish Paradise – it was like nothing had ever happened! There was no wind. The sun was shining. The sky was blue. There was not even a ripple on the surface of Catfish Paradise.

So, yeah – I know *exactly* what the disciples were going through. Picking back up:

Soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.

Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re going to drown?”

When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Silence! Be still!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. Then he asked them, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

The disciples were absolutely terrified. “Who is this man?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and waves obey him!”

* * *

There are a several things to be said about this encounter with Jesus.

First: This whole scenario should not have been a problem. Jesus had been teaching a crowd of people, standing in a boat anchored close to the west shore of Lake Galilee, most certainly a boat owned by either Peter & Andrew or by James & John. Remember, at least 1/3 of Jesus’ disciples are fisherman – *local* fisherman. Peter & Andrew and James & John fished on Lake Galilee – they had grown up fishing there, they knew this lake like the back of their hands, they knew where the best place to throw their nets was and when the best time to throw them. They had been through all kinds of weather events on Lake Galilee, and their fathers had taught them all the tricks to navigate safely through the storms. In other words, there should never had been a problem – it was their boat, on their lake, in a situation they had been in dozens of times before. But for some reason, this time it was beyond their ability to handle it.

We know what that’s like. Most of us are able to handle our lives pretty well, we have the tools to deal with the curves that life throws at us. Most of the time. But we’ve also faced situations that exceed our abilities, that challenge our coping skills, that left us dazed and confused. Sometimes the only comfort we have is the knowledge that we have “Christ in our vessel”.

The second notable feature of this encounter is that Jesus sleeps right through the storm. Remember – Jesus is from Nazareth – 25 miles inland to the west. He was the son of a carpenter. He’s a landlubber. It would be more likely if instead of saying,

Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion.

it read,

Jesus was throwing up at the back of the boat with his head in a bucket.

But however we explain this, it is a scene of extraordinary calm in the midst of a violent storm – there is an *assertive peace* that surrounds the presence of Jesus.

A third feature of this encounter: when the disciples realize the situation is out of their control, instinctively they turn to Jesus for help – even though they’re mad at him!

“The disciples woke him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re going to drown?”

What a classic snapshot that is. We’re being threatened, we’re out of our depth, all of our skills and wisdom have failed us, we have nowhere else to turn but to turn to God – and we’re mad at Him. It seems *so obvious* that God doesn’t care about us because this situation is too much for us to handle. No. What *is* obvious is that we are graced, we are blessed, to have a patient God.

And then, Jesus stills the storm. He wakes up, he looks at the racket all around him, he stands up, and says, “Knock it off!” And just like that, the storm is gone, the waves have smoothed, and peace and order are restored. What had been a great storm becomes a great calm, such that the disciples can “go sailing home”.

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But to me, the most important aspect of this encounter with Jesus is the punchline. After the winds have ceased and the waves have vanished, the disciples don’t know what to make of it. Remember – this is only chapter four of Mark’s Gospel. The disciples have been following Jesus since the middle of chapter one. They’ve already seen Jesus perform several healings and exorcisms. The first half of chapter four is full of Jesus teaching in parables. So, the disciples are starting to form a picture of who Jesus is. He’s a healer. He’s an exorcist. He’s a rabbi. But this encounter on Lake Galilee is something entirely new. And the encounter ends with a question: The disciples ask each other, “Who *is* this guy?”

Who *is* this guy? *That* is the question that dominates the Gospel of Mark, and that dominates all four Gospels. In fact, “Who is this guy?” is the precise reason why all four Gospels were written.

- Because the Gospels don’t give us some information about God.
- The Gospels don’t give us wise words on how to live a good life.
- The message of the Gospels isn’t good advice for successful living.

No. The message of the Gospels is summarized in two words: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the focus of every verse of all four Gospels. The Gospels were written to give witness to the words and actions and life and character of this man, Jesus Christ. The earliest Gospel, *Mark*, begins as clear as it can: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, and the latest Gospel, *John*, ends in the exact same way: “These things were written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name”.¹

Because the message of the New Testament is a 27-book attempt to answer, in detail and in full, who this guy is. And its answer is both extraordinary and decisive:

- Jesus is the Son of the living God.
- Jesus is the definitive revelation of the God of the universe.
- In Jesus, God Himself lived a human life, so that God’s reality and truth would be lit up like a blaze right in front of our eyes.

Which means this: Christian faith, Christian living, Christian existence – it’s all about this guy, it’s all about Jesus.

* * *

So: whenever you pray; whenever you serve God; whenever you try to be God’s person in the particular circumstances of your life – keep yourself focused on Jesus. Because Jesus can calm your storm. Because Jesus is the answer to the question of life. Because Jesus, Himself, is the good news.

AMEN

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¹ John 20:31