

Will We Get on the Boat?: Mark 4:35-41

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It was Mrs. Parrish's 5 and 6 year old Bible class at the Pine Lake Church of Christ in Niceville, FL. I was 5 or 6 at the time. We had just finished our Sunday snack of animal crackers, when Mrs. Parrish pulled out the flannel board. We loved flannel board time. For those of you unfamiliar with the ancient technology of flannel boards, this was the PowerPoint of the 60s, 70s and 80s. The technology was really very simple. You see, it was a board, wrapped in flannel. And our teacher had somewhere along the way, perhaps at a teacher's convention, I don't know, but she managed to secure small cutouts of Biblical characters and scenes that were covered on the back with some sort of space-age technology that caused them to miraculously stick to the flannel board.

This was revolutionary stuff, and for a 5 or 6 year old in Mrs. Parrish's 5 and 6 year old class, there was no better way we could think of to get into this Bible story than the flannel graph board.

As I was saying, before I had to stop and explain flannel board technology to our young ones here, we had snack...animal crackers. She pulled out her trusty green flannel board and began to teach us vividly the story of Jesus and the disciples caught up in the middle of the storm. She placed the cut out of Jesus on the board, who was for some reason always in...this pose, here, and, of course, always dressed in a white toga with blue sash. She placed a cut out of the sea, complete with a boat. And she laid Jesus down in the boat, still posed like this. She added the stock cut out of the disciples into the boat, who were supposed to be scared, but had the same blank stare they always had. And then—the finishing touch—some storm clouds in the sky, complete with lightening bolts.

It was amazing. But there was more. She got to the part of the story where Jesus stands up, speaks to the storm, "Peace be still!", and it all calms down. Then she moved the storm clouds away, and there, behind them all along, was the shining sun. The end. It was phenomenal. Seeing the story painted before our eyes, on flannel board.

Okay, I'll be honest. It really wasn't that amazing. In fact, it was kind of boring. I had a TV at home, I was a faithful fan of Sesame Street. Flannel boards were nothing compared to Sesame Street. If anything, I think the flannel board flattened a vivid story.

Mark doesn't need a flannel board to tell us this story this morning. He's not interested in us keeping a safe distance, hiding behind our objectivity and our flannel boards. When Mark tells us the story, it's as if we're there, and as if Jesus is asking us—not just his disciples—to get in the boat with him.

Jesus is asking us this morning will we get in the boat with him?

But before we jump into the boat, we need realize a few things first. To begin with this is not the kind of boat that we'd call up Chet and Joni and ask them to book us cruise on. This is no cruise liner. Neither is this the kind of boat that we'd get on with our skis and inner tubes. This is no a tour boat, giving us a behind the scenes tour of the Sea of Galilee.

This is the boat that Jesus is on, and it's not headed to some hideaway in the Caribbean. It's headed to the other side of the sea. Jesus wants to know, will we get on the boat with him that leads to the other side of the sea?

But, but before we get on the boat, we also need to realize what this sea is like. There'll be no smooth sailing on this sea. We landlubbers, we romanticize the sea. The sea is the place we dream of getting away too. Who wouldn't rather be sitting on the beach this morning, the white sand under our feet, the waves crashing on the shore, the seagulls singing in the distance, the cool, salty breeze blowing through our hair as we recline in the beach chair, the novel in one hand, the beer bottle in the other. Ah...that is the life.

This is not the sea Jesus is asking us to cross this morning. To those in Jesus' day, the sea was not a place of relaxation and vacation. This was before the Love Boat, and before Kathy Lee Gifford sang, "Every morning, every evening, ain't we got fun?"

This was the day of sea monsters, creatures ancient cultures believed lived in the great, dark, abyss. Terrifying things that no person, no matter how brave they may be, would dare confront.

If the sea monsters didn't get you, the storms probably would. The Sea of Galilee was known for its fierce storms. Out of nowhere, squalls would appear, often capsizing boats and drowning fisherman.

The sea wasn't the place you went to relax. The sea was a formidable place. Those who ventured out on the sea, like Jesus' disciple fisherman, did so out of necessity, to earn a living, not for leisure.

Yet, it is *this* sea that Jesus is inviting us to cross this morning. We must know ahead of time, before we ever step foot on the boat, this will be no easy trip. It's risky. There are threats, serious threats, yet Jesus still wants to know, will we get in the boat?

We get into the boat. It's not the most sturdy boat we've ever been on, that's for sure. We can feel underneath our feet the splintering wood forming the deck. The water is not but a few inches below our feet. Between the cracks in the

deck, we can see the water leaking in as the boat moves up and down on the waves.

But then it happens. You can see it in the distance. The water up ahead seems rougher. Before you know it, your boat is leaning, almost parallel with the water. The waves crash into the deck of the boat. The salty spray of the sea stings our faces, and our eyes begin to burn. Our hands grip tightly to the edge of the boat, white knuckles. We're holding on for dear life.

Scared for our lives, we look up, and see Jesus, fast asleep. We run to his side, shake him. Jesus, Jesus, wake up! What are you doing? Can't you see we're drowning out here? Don't you care? Get up. Do something. Grab a bucket. Throw something over board—do *something*.

Jesus stands up. He doesn't grab a bucket. He throws nothing over board. In fact, he doesn't seem worried at all. He just stands up and speaks: "Peace! Be still!" Within seconds, there is a dead calm.

In the midst of this dead calm, Jesus looks at us, dripping wet. We're speechless, our hearts still pounding out of our chest. We let go of the side of the boat, and he looks at us with confusion, and perhaps disappointment. "Why are you afraid?" he asks. "Have you still no faith?"

Have you still no faith?

If we're going to get on the boat with Jesus, cross over to the other side— there's one thing we've got to have, church. We've got to have faith.

Sometimes we forget this. Sometimes we forget we ever got on the boat with Jesus in the first place. We expect our ride with Jesus to be comfortable. We were hoping he'd book us on one of those nice cruises, with shuffleboard, and poker, and all you can eat buffets. After all, Jesus, life is hard. The job is tough. The family is difficult. We need a break, and we come to Jesus looking for that very thing—a break. When we get on the boat with Jesus, we're not expecting storms—after all, this is Jesus! We didn't follow him so that he would lead us *into* the storms; we followed Jesus so that he'd keep us far away from the storms.

Yet here we are, his disciples, caught up in the boat with Jesus, in the middle of a storm. It doesn't make sense. Is this what we signed up for? Is this what we left everything behind for? Is this the life we expected, the life he promised?

We don't expect the storms. We don't expect trouble. Yet, the storms come, and when they do, we're caught unprepared. Jesus, what are you doing? Are you asleep? Don't you see I got stuff going wrong down here? I got bills I can't pay, Jesus. I got a boss that just won't get off my back, Jesus. I got tests that I don't

have time to study for. My girlfriend broke up with me. My car died on the side of the road. Oh, Jesus. Are you asleep? Don't you care that I'm drowning?

We don't expect the storms, and because we don't expect the storms, when they inevitably come, we don't have the faith to get through them. The wind starts blowing even a little bit, the boat rocks, and we're crying for Jesus, Jesus.

I want to tell you the truth this morning—Jesus didn't come into this world, die, and live again so that you and I can sit here and be comfortable. "You want to find your life," he says, "you got to lose your life." "Take up your cross and follow me."

Jesus didn't come to this world so that we could be comfortable. He came into this world to stir things up a little bit.

I heard a pastor recently describe his job as a pastor in two ways: he says I do two things at this church: I put out fires, and then I start fires.

That's what Jesus does. He puts out fires, for sure. People burning up inside, lost, sick, in need of healing and salvation, and he puts out their fire, gives them peace. But he also starts some fires too. He heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath in the middle of church. That's starting a fire. He calls a tax collector to be his disciple. That's starting a fire. He rebukes the religious leaders for caring more about laws than people. That's starting a fire.

And when the disciples gather with him by the sea, the crowd gathered around, hanging on every word, he speaks to them parables, heals the sick. There's plenty of ministry to be done on this side of the sea. Plenty of lives that need changing. Plenty of people that need healing. Yet he asks his disciples to get into the boat, row out into the storm, and head on over to the other side of the sea. That's starting a fire.

The other side of the sea was not the place good Jews went. Oh, they may go out to the middle of the sea, do some fishing, and go home. But they didn't cross over, get off the boat, and live with the people on the other side of the sea. The people on the other side were unclean. They didn't dress like the disciples did. They didn't talk like they did. They didn't eat like they did. And they sure didn't believe like they did. There's plenty of ministry to do on this side of the sea, Jesus. Plenty of religious folk who need help. Let's stay on this side, and do all we can for our own people.

Jesus goes to the other side of the sea, and he wants to know, will we get in the boat?

I don't get it. Why is Jesus always pushing the boundaries? Why is he always going places he shouldn't be going, eating with people with whom he's not

supposed to be eating? Is he trying to offend the religious folk? They're doing the best they can. They're sincere folks, after all. Why does Jesus keep rattling their cages?

I'll tell you why. It's because their vision of the kingdom of God is too narrow. As they see it, they are fine with a Messiah coming to save *them*. They are fine with Jesus doing miracles for *them*. After all, weren't they God's chosen people, those whom God dearly loved? If you want to build a kingdom, Jesus, here it is, waiting for you. Just gather the folks who look alike, think alike, worship alike, and let them be your kingdom!

But Jesus will have nothing to do with this sort of vision of the kingdom of God. His vision is bigger than this. As Jesus sees it, the kingdom of God is for all people—all people—not just people who look like him and think like him. All people. People from every nation, every tribe, every tongue—people from both sides of the sea—this is where Jesus gathers the kingdom of God.

That's why Jesus goes to the other side of the sea. Because on the other side of the sea are people who are different. As we'll see next week, the first person they meet when they get off the boat is a demon-possessed, crazy man in a graveyard, wearing nothing but chains, running around screaming, and spitting, and cutting himself. This is different. This is not like home. But this is what the other side is like, and this is where Jesus is, and where he's calling us to be.

I watch the news, read the paper, and I see, we are a people who are afraid. There's a storm of change blowing our way, and we're scared out of our minds. We're scared of crime. Scared of losing money, declining property values. Scared of feeling uncomfortable, out of place. We're scared of our neighbors, scared of what's happening to our schools, scared to go out at night.

The world on the other side is scary. It's strange. The people there are different than we are. They don't speak the same language we do. Their ways of doing things, of living, of thinking—these are unfamiliar to us. There is a lot of unknown on the other side of the sea, and the unfamiliar and unknown scares us.

We sometimes feel like a ship, lost at sea, moments from sinking. We want to scream out to Jesus, "Wake up! Don't you care that we are perishing!"

It's not that he doesn't care. It's just that he knows what's going on. We're not perishing. This storm that's surrounding us, this is nothing unexpected. Jesus knew there would be storms when he called us on the boat, and he knew we'd make it through the storms. That's why he is asleep. He has faith, faith that will carry him through the storms.

After all, he's the one who asked us to get on the boat in the first place. He wanted to go to the other side. It's not easy crossing over to the other side. It's not easy getting in the boat with Jesus. But just because there's some storms along the way. Just because it's difficult, and scary, and it pushes us out of our comfort zones—this does not mean that Jesus doesn't care.

He cares for us—he cares too much for us to allow us to be comfortable sitting on the shore. He knows what's best—and what is best is for his disciples to get in the boat, go through the storm, and head to the other side. This is the way of Jesus.

It's time, church. It's time to stop running scared. Jesus has a mission for us. He has some exciting things in store for us. While the rest of our community is running scared, Jesus has called us to be a voice of peace. A place of unity in the midst of diversity. He has called us to enter into the kingdom of God.

Such a voyage will not be easy, but he never promised us easy. To enter into the kingdom of God, it will push us out of our comfort zones, but he never promised us comfort. If we do this, there's going to be some danger and risk, but he never promised us safety.

But he did promise us a new world—a world that breaks down the false barriers of race and culture within our world. A world that transcends fear, transcends prejudice, transcends hate.

He's calling us to live in this new world, but there's one catch. This new world...it's on the other side of the sea. And Jesus wants to know, will we get on the boat?