

Sermon – Mark 4:35-41  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
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“Into the Maelstrom”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The communist-era train, whose air conditioning had given out long before we took our seats that day, had been stopped at the border for some time. My friend and I were returning to Slovakia after a day trip to Budapest, and I, in the heat, had dozed off. I woke to the sound of our compartment door sliding open. My eyes opened to see a young man, younger than I was even when this happened twenty years ago, standing there in a crisp uniform with a semiautomatic weapon slung on his back. “Passport,” he said, his cadence turning the simple word into a demand. I patted my pockets, realizing in groggy horror that I didn’t know where my passport was. My eyes, sleepy no more, widened in worry. The stale air in the train compartment hung heavily, barely moving, but a storm broke upon my mind. Where was it? I was at the border. I had come this far and couldn’t go back. Suddenly, it seemed, I couldn’t go forward either. Just as it seemed that I might be stuck on the frontier forever, my friend nudged me in the ribs and pointed up to the luggage rack above our heads. “Dude,” Phil said, “you put it there so you’d know where to find it.” Calm washing over me, I grabbed my passport and handed it over to be stamped, safe passage assured. The storm lasted only a few seconds, and in retrospect I know that I wouldn’t have been stuck in-between countries forever, but for a brief moment the outcome seemed uncertain. Would I be able to cross over?

2. The disciples find themselves in a crossing-over moment today, in a few different ways. At the conclusion of a time of preaching and teaching, healing and casting out demons, Jesus decides it's time to move on. They get into a boat to cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. If you've stood on Galilee's shores, you know it is not a large body of water. "Sea" seems too grandiose a term for something that is only eight miles across. Nevertheless, the sea is plenty big enough for large storms to roll in and threaten small fishing boats. The winds and the waves blow and crash. What a storm it must have been to strike such terror into the hearts of the disciples, at least four of whom were experienced fishermen who had worked these waters since childhood. The storm puts their outcome very much in doubt. They had come this far and there was no turning back. But was there a way forward? And come to think of it, where's Jesus? They find him in the back of the boat, sleeping. Without, it seems, a care in the world. They shake him awake. One might expect them to say, "Jesus, we need your help," or, "Teacher, how are we going to get out of this one?" Instead, they ask, gesturing at the waves cresting the gunwales, "Don't you care that we are perishing?" Jesus, don't you care?
3. Here, with the storm still raging and the outcome, as far as they can tell, very much in doubt, the disciples find themselves wondering whether or not Jesus cares for them. Have such thoughts not arisen in our hearts when outcomes are uncertain? As we wait for a diagnosis or a test result, worry over a job interview, or wonder whether a broken relationship can be restored? For many of us, I think, the question is not so much if God is real. The question is, does God care? Is God at work? Or is God sleeping at the back of the boat while we try to make it across on our own? Jesus, with miraculous clarity, provides an answer today. He wakes and speaks, "Peace! Be still!" Immediately the wind ceases and a calm falls dead upon the sea. The storm that seemed it would be their undoing is itself undone. Safe passage is secured. They will reach the far shore.

4. It is still true that not all outcomes will be good in our eyes, or what we hope for. Despite our faith, the diagnosis will not always be good; the job will not always be landed; the relationship will not always be healed. We live in a world of wind and waves, and our boats do not always get where we want them to go. Guaranteeing a good outcome in this world, however, is not the lesson of faith that Jesus is teaching us in the boat. There is more going on today. Jesus is not simply bringing the disciples across the sea; he is bringing us across into a new understanding of himself. "Who then is this," we ask, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?" The answer, even if they don't yet see it, is implied in the disciples' question. Who was it that spoke over the waters and moved as wind over the sea, bringing order out of chaos in the act of creation? This Jesus is more than teacher and healer. This Jesus, this friend of theirs who just moments ago was taking a nap, is none other than God. His command, "Be still!" is the Lord's command from Psalm 46, spoken to the raging, rebellious nations, bringing stillness by making wars to cease as peace breaks forth.
  
5. God is in the boat with us, even as the storms rage on. Do you not care, Jesus, that we are perishing? Jesus, they will later see, cares so much that we are perishing, cares so much *for us*, that he is willing to perish for us. The boat in the storm is prelude to the cross in the maelstrom, as Jesus charts a course directly into the storm of sin and death and evil that has long been our undoing. Jesus, to atone for our sin and faithlessness, perishes, dies, for us. As the storm overcomes Christ on Calvary's cross, the outcome seems very much *not* uncertain. Death, that most certain of eventualities, has done its work. But as God once spoke to the sea, so now God speaks to death: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped." Death is not allowed to claim the victory, not over this Jesus who is also God. Jesus moves us through death, over to the far shore of life abundant

and eternal. Forgiven and freed by Jesus' death and resurrection, we see just how very much he cares for us.

6. Hearing afresh the good news of this Jesus, the question changes from, "Does Jesus care?" to "Do we?" As those who have been given new life in Christ, do we care for those who are perishing? As those who are in the boat with Jesus, we are called, compelled, to care for our neighbor, wherever and however we find them. We do so by sharing the good news of Christ, of the mercy and grace that can be found only in him. And we witness to Christ by living lives of grace and mercy. We do so by steering into, not away from, the storms of this world; by getting into the boat, so to speak, with those most in need. Today is World Refugee Day, a day to remember that there are more than 26 million refugees throughout the world, about half of whom are children. Every minute, *every minute*, twenty people leave everything behind to escape war, persecution, or terror. That means that every minute of every day, families not so different from mine or yours are forced into the impossible choice of fleeing their home, escaping one storm by heading into another. In Christ, we are free to show our care for these fellow children of God. At Grace, in partnership with RefugeeOne, we are embarking on a journey to help a family build a new life in Chicago, a life of safety, dignity, and self-reliance. We do so to witness to the God who is present for these people as they journey through the storm; the God who calls us to join in this work for the sake of Christ. May God bless this new journey of ministry.
  
7. We live in a world of uncertain outcomes and unbidden storms, but Jesus has claimed mastery over wind and waves, won victory over sin and death. So have faith, friends, for whatever befalls you in this life, the far shore is guaranteed. In Christ, go forth in faith and with good courage to do good work. He is in the boat with us, and he will not forsake you. We've come this far, and there's no need to turn back now. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.