

Power in the Storm

Mark 4:30-41

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In the United States, we tend to love sports. We enjoy a wide range of different sports and many play sports as children, with some continuing to play as adults. But not only do we enjoy playing sports, we enjoy watching them as well. Some of the most highly paid people in our society are professional athletes. Often, we watch professional athletes play the games we love and imagine that we are somewhat like them. We recognize that while our skills are certainly not up to their level, sometimes we think that we aren't really that far behind.

Inevitably, however, if you get the chance to spend time with a professional athlete, you come to realize that the game they play is nothing like the game you play. Many of you may remember when John Earle lived here and was on staff at the church. John had played professional football and helped coach my football team in high school. I knew John was a big guy, but there was some sense in which I imagined I was too (we're roughly the same height). But I remember one day in practice when he demonstrated the proper way to hit someone...using me as his example. I was quickly reminded that we are not the same at all!

I think the disciples had a similar realization in our story this morning, though to a much greater degree than I had with John. In our passage this morning, we see Jesus' power on display for his disciples, who are quickly reminded of just who was in the boat with them. As we reflect on the power of God this morning, we should also be reminded that God can do a great deal with very little—a truth that is good news for people like you and me.

Mustard Seeds

Our passage this morning begins with Jesus sharing another parable about the kingdom of God.

³⁰ Jesus said, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed planted in the ground. It is the smallest of all seeds, ³² but it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches, and birds can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4:30-32, NLT)

Jesus says that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds but it becomes the largest of all garden plants. Some people take exception with Jesus' claim that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, because we now know there are even smaller seeds. They argue that this discredits Jesus, because what He said was wrong. But Jesus wasn't making a scientific claim here, He was speaking in a way the people of His day would have understood. The smallest seed that would have been grown by people in that time and place would indeed have been a mustard seed. And mustard seeds really are exceedingly small. Held on the tip of your finger, you can still barely see it.

And the bush or tree that grows from a mustard seed is surprisingly large. One source I read said that a mustard seed can grow into a bush that is ten to twelve feet tall in just a few weeks. You would not expect such a small seed to grow into something so large.

Jesus says this is like the kingdom of God. We tend to evaluate things based on size. We figure that bigger things must be more important, more powerful, and have more potential than smaller things. But Jesus reminds us that is not always the case—and in fact, in God’s kingdom, it is often not the case. Jesus reminds us that even though something seems small and lacking in potential, we must never discount the fact that God is able to take even small, seemingly insignificant things and use them to do great things.

At the time Mark wrote these words, they would have taken on a new significance to the church. Christians were being persecuted not only by the Jewish leaders, but also by the Roman empire. The Roman empire was the world superpower, so it would be tempting for these few believers to conclude that they could never be successful in sharing the gospel message in the face of opposition from Rome. But these words would have reminded them that even though they seem insignificant in comparison to the power of Rome, they should keep pressing forward. These early believers understood they were the mustard seed that God would use to do great things. And history has shown us how true that is. All the might of Rome (or other subsequent empires) could not extinguish the light of the Church in the world.

We should find similar encouragement as we share the gospel with a world that opposes us. The parable of the mustard seed should embolden us as individual believers, who are often told that one person can’t make a difference. It should encourage us as a small church in the middle of nowhere, who might think that nobody notices what we do and our efforts don’t really matter. We sometimes imagine that only the well-known, massive churches or Christians can accomplish real ministry and change. But Jesus tells us otherwise. He says that faithful believers are like mustard seeds. You may feel like your efforts for the kingdom don’t amount to much. You may think that what you do doesn’t matter, but God says otherwise. Be faithful in serving Him, and you may be amazed by what He causes to happen.

Mark concludes this section of parables by telling us about how Jesus tended to teach, ³³ Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand. ³⁴ In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them. (Mark 4:33-34, NLT)

Mark says that Jesus always taught using parables in His public ministry, but spoke plainly to his disciples, explaining everything to them. Inevitably, we wonder why Jesus would take this approach. Wouldn’t it make sense for Him to clearly explain everything to everyone? Why would Jesus speak to the big crowds using only parables?

I think there are a couple of reasons Jesus only used parables in His public ministry. **First, parables required people to invest time and energy into understanding.** The crowds who came to see Jesus were made up of all sorts of different people. Some were there to genuinely learn from Jesus. Others were there because they hoped to get something from Jesus. Some came to see the spectacle of Jesus. And still others were there to look for ways to attack Jesus. Jesus knew that those who wanted to learn and understand His teaching would put in the work to understand the meaning of these parables. They would dig into them and draw out the meaning He intended. Those who weren't interested in understanding would simply dismiss them. Jesus gave plenty of information to everyone—but the parables forced people to dig deeply to understand the fullness of what He was teaching.

Second, stories are easier to remember than lectures. Jesus understood that people generally don't do well with sitting and listening to a lecture. He knew that people would be more apt to remember His teachings if they came in the form of stories. We see this to be true still. Many people know Jesus' parables (for example, the parable of the good Samaritan), even if they can't tell you much else about Jesus or His teaching. Jesus was communicating the truth in a way people would remember, recognizing that they could dig into the nitty gritty of the meaning later.

Like Jesus, we should do our best to communicate the truth of the gospel to people in ways they will understand. Most people aren't really interested in a long, drawn-out theological discussion. So we should be creative in finding ways to communicate the message succinctly, clearly, and memorably. If, after doing that, someone wants to learn more, we can invest in them and teach them all we can.

That's what Jesus did with His disciples. He knew they were invested, they were eager to learn, to understand, and to plumb the depths of His stories. So, He was happy to teach them everything they could learn.

Which brings us to one last aspect of what Mark says—that Jesus taught the people as much as they could understand. This is a reminder to us that there are limits to what people can understand about the things of God. Some truths take years of study to grasp. Sometimes we can't understand some truths about God until we learn other, foundational truths. Sometimes people can't understand simply because they aren't willing to do the work. And still other things are so far beyond us that we will probably never understand them. Jesus recognized that people can only absorb so much. He was willing to give them as much as they were able to understand, but it was foolish to try to give them more than that.

The same is true as we minister to others. We must deal with each person individually. We need to recognize that different people are in different places in their faith journey and no one will be able to understand everything at once. So for those who are willing to learn, we should teach them as much as they can grasp right now, recognizing they may need time before we give them more. Teach people as much as they are able to understand—to try to do anything else is a waste of our time and theirs.

The Storm

After telling us about Jesus' teaching, Mark moves the story along and tells us what happened at the end of the day.

³⁵ As evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." ³⁶ So they took Jesus in the boat and started out, leaving the crowds behind (although other boats followed). ³⁷ But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water. ³⁸ 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?" ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ Then he asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" ⁴¹ The disciples were absolutely terrified. "Who is this man?" they asked each other. "Even the wind and waves obey him!" (Mark 4:35-41, NLT)

Mark tells us that this occurred at the end of the day, as evening came. We can't be sure how much of what Mark has just told us happened on the same day. It's distinctly possible that the day had started with Jesus being attacked by the religious leaders, called crazy by some of His family, healing people, and teaching. If that's the case, it would have been an absolutely exhausting day! Sadly, I suspect most of Jesus' days on earth were exhausting like this.

So it is not surprising that Jesus asks His disciples to set sail for the other side of the lake, with the intention of grabbing some rest while they made the journey. This passage reminds us of the fact that while Jesus was fully God (a fact that He illustrates clearly here), He was also a human being, susceptible to the same weaknesses we are. Like us, Jesus got tired—so tired, He simply couldn't carry on. We are told that Jesus got in the back of the boat and slept with His head on a cushion. This likely wasn't an exceptionally large boat, though large enough for Jesus and the disciples to all fit on it. Nonetheless, I imagine Jesus curled up in a spot out of the way, essentially passed out from exhaustion. Being exhausted, it is not surprising that Jesus didn't wake up when the storm began to pick up.

Storms on the Sea of Galilee were fairly common. The geography of the sea made it susceptible to sudden, violent storms. Here is how one commentator describes it,

The Sea of Galilee is an unusual body of water. It is relatively small (thirteen miles long, seven miles wide); but it is 150 feet deep, and the shoreline is 680 feet below sea level. Because the Sea of Galilee is below sea level and is surrounded by mountains, it is susceptible to sudden storms. Winds sweeping across the land come up and over the mountains, creating downdrafts over the lake. Combined with a thunderstorm that appears suddenly over the surrounding mountains, the water stirs into violent twenty-foot waves.¹

¹ Barton, Bruce B. *Mark*. Life Application Bible Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994.

Many of the disciples were experienced fishermen. Probably the boat even belonged to one of them. So the fact that this account says that this was a fierce storm with high waves and the boat was filling up with water leads us to believe that this was a genuinely terrifying storm. Matthew's gospel uses the word *seismos* (where we get our word dealing with earthquakes) to describe what the sea was like. This wasn't just another storm, even the experienced fishermen were starting to worry.

Jesus, however, was still asleep in the back of the boat. This is likely a testament both to His exhaustion from the day, and His faith in God. He knew that God was in control, so He was able to rest peacefully. The disciples, however, did not share the same conviction. Eventually they woke Jesus up. But instead of asking for Jesus' help, they instead rebuked Him. "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?" Of course Jesus cared about them. But He also knew they weren't going to drown. Jesus had no fear in the situation, even as the disciples were overwhelmed by it.

I find it interesting that Jesus, upon being woken up by the disciples, doesn't speak to them. Instead, He speaks to the storm. We are told He rebuked the winds and the waves, saying "Silence! Be Still!" I often wonder what Jesus' tone was like as He said this. Was it almost annoyed? Was it angry? Was it calm, but intense? Whatever the case is, we are told that the storm immediately stopped, and the sea was suddenly calm. Everything about this story makes it clear this was a demonstration of God's power. The storm didn't just begin to let up when Jesus spoke. Jesus spoke and in an instant the storm disappeared, and the sea was calm. It was so sudden, so unnerving, that the disciples were scared now for a totally different reason. They had been scared of the storm, but now they feared the One in the boat with them. They couldn't believe that someone could have such power authority as to make a powerful, life-threatening storm stop instantly...with just a word.

The disciples had witnessed Jesus doing all sorts of miracles, and they had spent a great deal of time with Him, but through all of these experiences, they seemed to forget something important—Jesus was God in the flesh. They had seemed to forget who they were dealing with. I wonder if they were even afraid since they were suddenly aware that they had just yelled at God—claiming that He didn't care about them!

After the storm stopped, Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Jesus was reminding them that nothing they could face was more powerful than Him. No matter what came upon them, there was nothing He could not handle. Even more shocking is to realize that the only reason the storm happened in the first place was because Jesus allowed it. During this one encounter, the disciples learned a very important lesson—nothing is outside of God's control. They also learned that they should never doubt that Jesus cared for them.

We will all face storms in this life. Most of the storms we face will not be quite so literal as the one the disciples experienced, but we may feel the same. Things may happen where we wonder if we can survive. We may find ourselves in the midst of the storms wondering if God has forgotten about us or if He even cares what we're experiencing.

We too may feel afraid. But when the storms of life come, I hope you will remember this passage. God cares for you, He sees you, and He hasn't forgotten about you. Sometimes God allows storms because it is in those storms that we will pay the most attention, and best learn the lessons He has for us. But we must remember that nothing is outside of His control. If God hasn't calmed the storm yet, it's because He still has a purpose for it. We must learn from the disciples to have enough faith to believe that God is in control, no matter what storms may rage around us.

Conclusion

As we look at these passages from Mark this morning, I think there are a few concluding lessons we should learn.

First, don't underestimate the "little things". Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, so we should remember that the seemingly insignificant things are anything but insignificant in the hands of God. You may feel like a little mustard seed, but God can use even people like us, even our small acts of obedience, even our small steps of faith to accomplish things far greater than we might imagine. It should drive us to serve the Lord boldly. And, it should keep us from overlooking the people the world tells us don't matter or aren't worth our time. God tells that the small things, the small people, are of great importance and value in His kingdom.

Second, don't underestimate the power of God. Sometimes people imagine God like a kindly old grandfather who is happy to give us whatever we want. But that's not a proper view of God. God is more powerful than we can even imagine. We should not take Him for granted, nor presume that we know better than Him. The Bible often talks about the fear of the Lord. The disciples were reminded of what the "fear of the Lord" looks like. They saw His power and remembered that He is not to be trifled with. We should approach the Lord with awe and reverence.

Third, we should have faith in the storms of life. The disciples' experience here is a pretty good object lesson for some of the trials we will experience in our lives as well. The disciples needed to learn that when Jesus is in the boat, there is nothing to fear. And we need to remember that Jesus is always in the boat with us. Storms will come, but God has not and will not abandon us. If the storms come, it is because He is allowing it. He has a purpose for it. He also has an end for it. Whatever you face, remember that God cares for you and sees you. And the scriptures clearly tell us that if God is for us, who can be against us? So learn to trust rather than fear.

Together these two passages remind us of the power of our God. It is easy to take Him for granted, or forget just what He is capable of. The wind and the waves obey Him, He causes small things to become great, and He cares about you and me. Passages like this remind us that God is greater than any problem or circumstance we face. He has promised to take care of us. So we should approach everything we face with faith, rather than fear.

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