

King's Cross, 4 The Power

Mark 4: 35 - 41

** That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

** The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

** We're continuing our summer journey today through part one of Tim Keller's book, King's Cross. This is a study of who Jesus is, based on the Gospel of Mark. Now, if you are reading along with me, and haven't checked the series outline on the home page of our Web site, you might not have noticed that I'm skipping a chapter in King's Cross - so, this is the **fourth** message in our summer series, but we are now on Chapter **five** in the book. The simple reason for that is that I did a sermon from Luke's version of the 'the Lord of the Sabbath' teaching, just a short time ago (the first week of June), so even though Keller (as usual) adds a unique perspective on that passage, it was a little close for my 'preaching comfort', so I'll leave that for you to read on your own.

** One of the most popular tourist attractions for Christian pilgrims in Israel is to take a boat trip on the Sea of Galilee. There are a number of guides who will take you far offshore in a replica of a first century fishing boat (with the addition of a well hidden Diesel engine!) And typically, once you're out there, they will shut down the engine, and just... drift for awhile.

What is striking to people who experience that and are somewhat familiar with the Gospel stories is how peaceful, beautiful and ... calm ... it is on that lake. But then all of the guides - to this day - keep an eye on the weather reports, because the peculiar geography of this area makes it prone to sudden and violent Thunderstorms.

We've been seeing some pretty ferocious storms ourselves in recent days, haven't we? Two weeks ago on a Sunday afternoon I tried to leave the church (came over to collect my guitar). It was sunny when I went into the building, and when I came out, I saw this:

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** (see slide)! It rained like that for well over an hour, and completely filled the catch basin.

Well, the sea of Galilee is about 700' below sea level, and is just south of Mt. Hermon in Lebanon - which rises up over 9200' to its snow covered summit. Again, to this day, cool air from those heights frequently rushes down the slopes, colliding with the dry, hot air of northern Israel, creating perfect conditions for some serious Thunderstorms.

** Anyone who made their living on this lake - from ancient fishermen to modern tourist boat pilots - would have experienced these storms on many occasions. No matter how careful you are, you inevitably were going to get caught. But *this* storm was one for the record books - you can tell that it was different, because this one scared these well seasoned fishermen to such an extent that they were convinced that they were going to die. This was *it*.

And in the midst of this terrifying moment, as their lives are "flashing before their eyes" as they prepare to meet their Maker, (and any other cliché that you can think of) they look in the stern [the back] of the boat... and there is Jesus. Curled up on a cushion.

** Sound asleep. In their fear and panic they wake him up. Did you notice how totally 'human' the question they ask is? "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" Wasn't Jesus also in as much danger as they were? They weren't waking him to calm the storm - they had no clue what he was able to do (that was obvious by their reaction to what he actually *did*). I guess they were somewhat offended by Jesus' sleeping through their death? Ah... maybe there *is* a point here?

"We're going to die... where are you?" (We'll come back to that...)

** Jesus wakes up and he speaks to the wind and the waves. He simply say, "Peace! Be still." As Keller points out, in this age where so much is hype and overdone, Jesus demonstrates here a "quiet power". There are no theatrics, no shouting, wild waving of his arms. There's also no build-up, no preparation, no music to get the people 'ready'...

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Just two words (in Greek). And nature obeyed - so not only did the wind die down, (which, I suppose, could have been a co-incidence) but the waves also immediately stopped crashing. That's the reason for Mark's seeming redundancy - 'the wind died down and it was completely calm'. He was referring to the wind *and* the waves. We would say it was a *dead calm*. Immediately.

Keller makes the significant observation that Jesus spoke to the storm with an absolute authority that came from within. He didn't call on some 'higher power', there was no 'in the name of _____ I command you', kind of thing. He simply says, "Be still".

One of the points that Keller made in an earlier chapter (which we didn't have time to get into in a message) is the fundamental difference between 'religion' and 'Christianity'. And the difference is basically this, he says, - religion is ultimately *advice*. It is someone's ideas, suggestions, commands, on how you can/ should/ must live in order to gain some sort of spiritual or material benefit. Here's what *you* need to do!

But Christianity is not advice, it is *news*. The Gospel (which means 'Good news' is not a list of rules, suggestions, commands, or advice; instead it is the announcement of what God has done for us. The operative word here is *done* - as in 'finished', complete. We don't do *anything*, we *receive*. We accept what is offered to us in Christ. That's the essence of the Christian faith. (Our obedience comes afterwards, as a response of gratitude for that grace.)

So, as we've been seeing over the past few weeks, Jesus came to invite us into the Dance of the mysterious triune God - to experience what God experiences in himself - by allowing him to love us, forgive us, cleanse us, lift us up out of the muck of our self-centeredness, and *give us* new life. He isn't then, simply the *messenger* who has come to give us advice or direction - he *is* the direction. He is the center, the focus. Life is about Jesus.

Along those lines, in this week's chapter, Keller writes:

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"When Jesus was with the Pharisees on the Sabbath he said, "I am not just someone who can instruct you to take rest; I am rest *itself*. Now [i.e., in the calming of the sea] Jesus is demonstrating, "I am not just someone who *has* power; I am power *itself*. Anyone and anything in the whole universe that has any power has it on loan from me."

He goes on to (rightly, in my opinion) point out that this kind of claim leaves us with two clear options. One option is to believe that the world exists out of pure accident, the chance occurrence of sheer energy that has always existed. So, when we die, we are done, that's it. "...in the end there won't be anyone around to remember anything that you've done, so... whether you're a cruel person or loving person it makes no lasting difference at all."

"However, if Jesus is who he says he is, there's another way to look at life. If he's Lord of the storm, then no matter what shape the world is in - or your life is in - you will find Jesus provides all the healing, all the rest, all the power you could possibly want." (p. 52, ePub edition).

** Before this, as the boat was quickly filling up with water, the disciples were afraid. But as they find themselves standing knee deep in water in this boat, but with the air still, and the sea like glass... they are *terrified*.

We can all relate to the deep and significant spiritual symbolism of the moments just before Jesus is awakened. The waves are crashing over the low sides of this boat, each one could be the one that sends them to the depths. The wind is howling so that they have to shout to be heard. The wind-driven rain stings their faces and burns their eyes. So they look to the sleeping Jesus and ask him, "Don't you care if we drown?"

Haven't we all felt like this at times? We endure the normal ups and downs of life, we're OK with some setbacks. But then comes a series of 'waves'. The wind *keeps* blowing in the same direction, and the boat is filling up - now, *everything* seems to be going wrong, and where is God? Asleep? Unaware? Unconcerned?

Keller forms the disciple's thoughts like this...

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God... "if you loved us... you wouldn't let us go through this. If you loved us, we wouldn't be about to sink. If you loved us, you would not be letting us endure deadly peril. Jesus calmed the storm, and then he responded to them. Did he say, I can understand how you felt? No, he asked, "Why are you so afraid?" Can you imagine what the disciples must have been thinking? What do you mean, why were we afraid? We were afraid we were going to drown. We were afraid you didn't love us, because if you loved us, you wouldn't let these things happen to us". (Keller, p. 53 ePub edition)

Isn't Jesus telling them that their premise is wrong? Again, Keller puts it like this: "You should have known better. I *do* allow people I love to go through storms. You had no reason to panic."

** (blank) There isn't a person in this room who doesn't know through personal experience that God allows his children to experience the storms of life. We are not shielded. So, we sometimes make bad choices, and we have to bear the consequences. Other people do hurtful, and evil things, and we are affected. We get troubling diagnoses after medical tests and while we've seen the occasional wonderful healing, we frequently have to endure long treatments, and eventually, we will all die - for one reason or another.

But the point that Jesus is powerfully making in this chapter is that, while we are affected by the uncaring, impersonal forces of Nature, ultimately, we are surrounded by the very personal, unending love of God. We may not understand *why* he allows certain things to come into our lives, but we never need question God's presence, and God's love for us. In the end, no matter what is happening in the world around us, we are safe in the will of God. Jesus asks the disciples, in that context, "Where is your faith?" I think Keller's observation about this question is very important. "... Jesus [i.e., in this question] is prompting them to see that the critical factor in their faith is not its strength, but its object."

** So he uses this illustration. Imagine that you're falling off a cliff! And as you plummet into the deep chasm, you see a branch sticking out of the side of the cliff. It's strong enough to hold you, but you really don't know that. You have just enough time to grab a hold of it. So

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he asks, "How much faith do you have to have in the branch for it to save you? Must you be totally sure that it can save you? No, of course not. You only have to have enough faith to grab the branch. *That's because it's not the quality of your faith that saves you; it's the object of your faith. It doesn't matter how you feel about the branch; all that matters is the branch. And Jesus is the branch.*

** (blank) This reminded me of a book that I read years ago, a classic book on Christian Healing by Father Francis McNutt. That book was one of those 'paradigm shifters' in my own spiritual journey. In that book Father Francis made a distinction between 'having faith in Jesus' and '*having faith in our faith.*' You know, sometimes we get these confused, and we kind of beat ourselves up, or 'blame' others when things don't happen exactly as we ask when we pray. So you hear people say things like, "If only you had *more* faith...", or, "if only **I had** believed a little *harder*", this thing could have been avoided, or this other thing would have happened, or, this person (or *me*) would have been healed. There's something wrong with *me* with *my faith*.

But McNutt points out (as does Keller in this chapter), that this puts the emphasis on the wrong thing - it's not *our faith* per se that saves us, it is the *object of our faith* that saves us. So, Keller writes: *People who believe more must not be hard on those who believe less. Why? Because faith ultimately is not a virtue; it is a gift.*

Just this past week I was talking with some friends, and we recalled a woman who was part of our faith community a number of years ago, Kathy Morrisy. Kathy was an extremely intelligent woman, a prosecutor for Burlington County, and for most of her life, she was (to use her own terms) an 'informed agnostic'. I.e., she came to that conclusion by reading, and careful thought that we can't know anything beyond this life. And, I'd add that she also was pretty much convinced that there was nothing to know.

Then she discovered that she had a very terrible, aggressive form of breast cancer. Kathy lived just around the corner from the church, and one Sunday morning (again, as she shared with me later) completely against every fiber of her being... she walked into the 9:30

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service. And she said that she was so overwhelmed by the presence of God that she cried the entire service. Someone leaned forward, handed her a tissue, and said, "Don't worry, honey, I do that all the time!" Bless you, whoever you are!

Well, we began meeting, and talking about faith. Her cancer went into remission for a time, and we continued to meet. We read C. S. Lewis and other important writings. I would visit her and she'd have a legal pad with objections and questions. Finally, she realized that her questions had changed focus, and she was a believer. Her cancer recurred, and she sent a memo to those in her office to the effect that 'I was so outspoken about my agnosticism that I think it is only right to tell you that I am now a believer, a Christian. And, no matter what happens to me, I count it a blessing to have this disease, as it brought me to this point.'

Now, that's a good story, but honestly, Kathy's great intellect, and mind kept her raising questions and doubts right to the end. And I remember especially one day, sitting in her living room, talking about faith in the dark because the chemo made her very light sensitive, and she said, "I don't know if I believe any more. I don't know if I have enough faith."

** And the Holy Spirit laid a response on me that I've shared a number of times since then - maybe even with some of you. I said, "Kathy, in times when your faith wavers, and doesn't seem like its enough, lean on those who have more than you. You can lean on me - and I'll believe for both of us."

Now, you know, that's a hard statement to defend theologically! But she got it, and she died shortly afterward, in peace with God.

Keller writes in Chapter 5 another response that I could have given to Kathy, but it's along ** the same lines. "If you want to believe but can't, stop looking inside; go to Jesus and say, "Help me believe." Go to him and say, "So you're the one who gives faith! I've been trying to work it out by reasoning and thinking and meditating and going to church in hopes that a sermon will move me - I've been trying to get faith by myself. Now I see that *you're* the

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source of faith. Please give it to me. If you do that, you'll find that Jesus has been seeking you - he's the author of faith, the provider of faith, and the object of faith."

When the disciples awaken Jesus in that boat, they were afraid, their world was coming apart, they thought they were about to die. Jesus wakes up and says, "If you knew how I love you, you would have stayed calm."

** As we think about Jesus, the one making these claims... we can't help but look ahead in his life. Every act, every day took him one step closer to the ultimate Storm - the Cross. A storm that he allowed to sweep him away until our price was met - and it was calmed. When we know - I mean *really know* - that he did not abandon us in that ultimate storm, we will also know that he will not abandon us in the smaller storms, the things we're experiencing right now. And one day, he will calm *all the storms*... permanently.

Here's Keller's closing words: "If you let that penetrate to the very center of your being, you will know he loves you. You will know he cares. And then you will have the power to handle anything in life with poise [confidence... and grace]."

We'll sing these words in a few moments:

*When through the deep waters I call you to go,
The rivers of woe shall not overflow;
For I will be with you, your troubles to bless,
And sanctify to you your deepest distress.
The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!*