

Introduction

This brief passage packs a powerful punch—so much so that I was only able to make it half way through it last Sunday. And the second half is just as potent as the first. So let's jump right in.

[Read Text; Pray]

How do you conceive of God? That is a big question. It is one that would take you more than just a few words to describe. But if you could use just one word, what would that one word be? I have no doubt that many would say love. After all, the Bible says God is love. But the Bible also explains to us that God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. The Bible declares to us that God is just. It also says that he is patient. Moreover, we learn that God is sovereign. He is Lord over every molecule in the universe he has created. But there is one aspect of the character of God that I believe the current generation has largely overlooked or minimized more than the others. And it is a critical failure. It is critical because in overlooking this attribute, the current generation has arrived at a disturbingly diminished idea of who God is. I would further submit to you that many of us who do not overlook this particular attribute of God also get used to it or take it for granted to such an extent that the weight of it gets lost from time to time. We need to regularly re-acquaint ourselves with this attribute and strive with our minds to grasp it. Without doing so I am afraid we will develop a domesticated view of the Lord, and the gravity and weight of who he is will become diminished in our minds. The attribute of which I am speaking is the attribute of holiness. God is holy, holy, holy.

The narrative at which we are looking this morning is an account of an event so astonishing that it brings us to see the holiness of God through the eyes of his disciples. It shows us something of the holiness of God by bringing us face-to-face with the response of the disciples to the exhibition by Jesus that he is the king of all nature. There are three sections of this narrative which lead us to this precious refresher of the magnificence of God. There are two rebukes and a response.

First . . .

I. Jesus Rebukes the Disciples.

A storm of extraordinary proportion had blown across the Sea of Galilee. It was so violent that the waves were spilling over into the boat and the disciples absolutely thought this was it. They were all going to perish. So these seasoned fisherman, who had been out on the sea countless times and had seen storms, frantically awoke a sleeping carpenter as a last resort so that they might find their way to safety. "Save us Lord, we are perishing," was their cry. And he heard them. What the storm was unable to do, the cry of the disciples accomplished. Jesus rose from his sleep. And he rebuked the disciples.

A. It is worth noting that Matthew presents Jesus' rebuke of the disciples before his rebuke of the wind and the waves. For Matthew the rebuke of first importance is the one he made to address the disciples themselves. One might think that in the midst of such a violent storm, the first order of action would be to deal with the storm. If a child is running out into the street, the order of first importance is not teaching the child but rescuing the child from oncoming traffic. Then you can take the time to explain why the child should not do that. And if a storm is swamping a boat, you might also think the order of first importance is to deal with the storm. But Jesus first addresses the disciples to rebuke them for their little faith. In this way Jesus is poignantly clear that the matter that concerns him most is not the ferocity of the storm but the weakness of the disciples' faith. The greater threat to the disciples is not the storm but the dinkiness of their faith.

There is a very, very practical lesson for us. The greatest threat anybody faces is never the storm on the outside, but the faith factor on the inside. Cancer is not the biggest threat you could face. Financial struggles are not your greatest enemy. Neither is keeping your job or weathering life's wheelbarrow-load of stress. The greatest concern is faith. Do you trust God? Do you really rest in Jesus? Most urgent in every storm is not bringing the storm to an end but trusting in the One who is sovereign over the storm. What is your prayer in times of stress and challenge? Is it "God get me out of this?" Or is it "Lord, I trust you!" Is it, "This cannot be happening! I will never make it out of this!" Or is it, "Lord, thank you that you will never leave me nor forsake me." The fact that Jesus addresses the

disciples' faith before addressing the wind and waves declares that responding to trials and afflictions in faith is more important and much more urgent than escaping them.

Here is a fact for every believer in Christ: storms are temporary but his care and compassion and deliverance are eternal. Listen to the testimony of David in Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord."

What matters most is not how quickly you get out of the storms of this life but how greatly you trust in him who alone can get you out.

B. Now let's look at Jesus' rebuke itself. It comes across through a question: "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" The insinuation from Jesus is twofold. First, the disciples have no business being afraid. And, second, the explanation for their fear is their lack of faith, or to be precise, the small size of their faith. He is seeming to stress the weakness of the faith. They have some faith. After all they did call upon Jesus. They did come to him to seek deliverance from the storm. Jesus does not say, "Why did you call on me, O you of little faith?" but "why are you afraid?"

We read of no response from the disciples. It would seem their answer had already been given when they roused Jesus from his sleep. "Save us Lord, we are perishing!" They were afraid they were going to die. Jesus' rebuke then is a declaration to them that they should have grasped by faith that they have no reason to be afraid. He has given them everything needed in order to be assured that no storm was going to take them to the bottom of the lake, at least not at this point. To be subject to that kind of fear was not to believe the things he had been teaching them and showing them.

Now I just want you to know that I understand the fear of the disciples. I mean I can identify. Can you? Though no answer is given by them, I can hear it ringing in their hearts: "Jesus, is it not natural to be afraid of a storm, especially when it is of such proportion that we have never seen

before on this lake? Why would we not be afraid? And isn't it wise to try to escape the threats of nature?" Absolutely it is. Jesus again does not chide the disciples for trying to manage their vessel in the midst of the storm. He chides them for their fear. They should not have been so discombobulated.

There are several problems with the disciples' fear. First, it disregarded God's sovereignty. The Old Testament was the Bible of these fishermen. And the OT clearly teaches that the Lord is sovereign over the earth. Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." Proverbs 16:33 declares, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The OT is replete with examples of God's miraculous delivering care for his people in the midst of great threats. David declares in Psalm 23:4 "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." But the disciples' eyes were fixed on the intensity of the storm rather than the boatload of assurances from the word of God about his sovereign protection and care.

The second problem with the disciples' fear is that it was blind to the authority of Jesus over nature. They had seen him heal every sort of disease and deliver those who were oppressed by demons. They had heard him declare that they should not be worried about food or clothing or shelter. But they did not yet translate this to the ability of Jesus to control nature with his words.

The third problem with their fear is that they let it get the best of them. They panicked. The disciples gave in to the fears that were raging in their hearts. I am not suggesting that Jesus is insinuating that the disciples should not have experienced a temptation to fear, that they should not have experienced a wave of nervousness and intensity as they struggled with the ferocity of the wind and waves. Rather, Jesus rebukes the fact that they let their fears take over and drive their actions.

The rebuke of Jesus is really a lesson in how handle anxiety and fear in our lives on a very practical level. No temptation has taken you but such as is common to man. But God is faithful. And shouldn't we seek shelter from life's storms and take protective measures? Absolutely. But Christ's followers should not give ourselves over to fear. We should not panic.

Even if a storm should take our lives, it cannot take our soul. We trust the one true God who is sovereign over every detail, who is wise about every circumstance and knows what we need most, and who is compassionate and cares for his people with an unrivaled care so that he will insure that what transpires in our lives is truly for our good.

What was wrong with the disciples' fear was what was wrong with their faith, and that becomes evident in their ultimate response to Jesus which we will see later.

So let's turn next to Jesus' second rebuke . . .

II. Jesus Rebukes the Storm

A. Verse 26 recounts that Jesus rose and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a great calm. What a staggering change of circumstances! The great storm as it was described in verse 24 is now replaced by a great calm! The calm is as profound as was the storm. Try to get this in your imagination. Can you wrap your mind around a ferociously turbulent sea suddenly, in an instant, becoming completely calm? This is not the way things work. When weather changes take place, it is gradual. Even when we experience sudden temperature changes here in southeast Wisconsin, it can happen quickly but it does not occur instantaneously. Generally, waves and winds die down and only gradually ease up. However, this was a calming effect like no ordinary one, because it was brought about by Nature's King.

Over in the gospel according to Mark, we are told the words with which Jesus rebuked the wind and waves. He said, "Peace! Be still!" These were orders given by Jesus. The King was commanding his kingdom. Everything that exists is under his dominion. Winds and waves are subject to his will and command. As with the voice of God at creation, a command is given to inanimate, non-living elements of creation. And they obey.

B. Think for a moment how perfectly creation responds to the will of God. When he speaks, creation is a perfect servant. It responds accordingly. "Let there be light." Aha, light becomes. And here he speaks to wind and to waves, "Peace. Be still." The calm that results is perfect and complete. Now that is obedience. That is submission.

There is a striking distinction between the obedience of creation in general and the ones created in God's own image. Jesus speaks to light, and it shines. He speaks to the land and it comes together. He speaks to winds and waves stirred up in a frenzy, "Peace," and they completely and instantaneously comply. The obedience of these are a strong rebuke to us. We have his good and right commands, but we break them over and over.

Storms did not exist before the fall. The curse upon the ground included a curse bringing all types of natural disasters, upheavals, chaos, and tumult. It is a groaning of creation. Yet anytime, anywhere he wants peace, he commands and it happens. How different is humanity! He says "Do not kill," yet people murder and violate one another with murderous hatred. He commands, "Do not steal," yet humans from birth are thieves from the heart. He commands, "Do not commit adultery," yet men and women spend their days inventing new ways to find immoral physical pleasure. It does not matter to humans what God says. We want to be independent of our maker. We want to do things our way. Every sin is a refusal to do what even winds and waves know to do, obey the King. The obedience of the rest of creation puts us to shame over our sin and reveals how despicable our sin is. Rocks obey God. Dirt obeys God. Water obeys God. Winds obey him. But how unthinkable—human beings made in God's own image respond to his commands saying, "who, me? No way!"

Think about that the next time you are taken by temptation.

C. When Jesus speaks and creation responds, it becomes abundantly clear that his position with respect to creation is that he is at the top. He is its ruler. He is its king. He possesses sovereignty, dominion, and authority over it. No ifs, ands, or buts.

Now we need to notice that the two rebukes of Jesus, usher in a response.

III. The Disciples' Respond to Jesus

Verse 27. "And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

A. What do you imagine the disciples were expecting when they called on Jesus to save them? Do you suppose they expected him to give them expert advice on how to handle the boat in the midst of such a storm?

Maybe he could do something that would weaken the storm just enough. Frankly, I do not know what they expected. I just think they did not expect what he did because what he did made them marvel. It is clear that the sovereignty of Jesus over the storm caused them to wonder about who he was. It looks very much like he is God. And wait a minute, if he is God, then how could we be talking to him? If he is God, how could we not be consumed? If He is God then he is . . . holy, holy, holy. God among us as a man? How can this be?

B. The gospel according to Mark provides additional information about the response of the disciples. Mark reports that the disciples were filled with great fear as they marveled. Jesus had asked them why they were afraid. And now that he stilled the storm they are even more afraid—filled with great fear. The storm was great. Then the calm was great. And now the fear was great. This is the kind of fear that emerges when humans encounter holiness. When the transcendence of God breaks over us, it is a fearful thing. It is undoing.

When Jacob was unexpectedly visited by the Lord in a dream, he awoke and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place!" He was gripped with the fear of God. He had been oblivious, but now he was stricken with the greatness of God.

When Isaiah saw the Lord in a majestic vision of glory, the seraphim were calling out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Isaiah was gripped by God's holiness and said, "Woe is me! I am undone! I am a sinner. And everyone around me is a sinner. I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

When the holiness of God is manifest, people fear. In the early days of the church, a man Ananias, and his wife, Sapphira, conspired to deceive the church. They pretended to give all the proceeds from the sale of their property to the church, when in fact they kept part of the proceeds back. One by one as each was confronted before the apostles, they fell dead for lying to God. This was a manifestation of God's holiness in demanding purity of heart among the early believers. And the result was great fear upon the whole church.

The holiness of God was manifest right here by Jesus, not in wrath but in power. And the response was the same—great fear. And in this response we might begin to understand better why Jesus rebuked the disciples so strongly over their fear of the storm. They had been afraid of a storm but had overlooked the fact that the one in the boat with them was King over the storm—holy God, himself. To fear him is the beginning of wisdom. He is such a one whose holiness lays bare the iniquity of our rebellious, untrusting hearts and the vulnerability that is ours before him.

C. So in the end the disciples are speechless. They have only to respond in reverential fear. And they communicate to us that Jesus is not someone to take lightly. His name is not to be used as a swear word. He is surely a kind shepherd and he calls his disciples friends, but he is not a buddy. He is savior and redeemer, but he sits enthroned in holiness, and we must all appear before his judgment seat.

We need to see Jesus as he is—High and Exalted. We must recover in our generation a biblical conception of the person of God—that he is holy, holy, holy. He is to be revered. His standards of righteousness are perfect and unchanging. He is a consuming fire. And our sin calls for his unbending judgment. Nothing is a threat to him; he is God overall.

If you do not experience some sense of awe in your conception of Jesus Christ, you are missing who he is. It is true he is merciful. It is true that God demonstrates love through him. It is true that he is gentle. But here is what leads us to understand how deep is his love. It is because it is the love of the holy for we who are unholy and his willingness to undertake to reconcile us with him.

It is the holiness of Jesus which magnifies the enormity of the fact that he died for the unholy. This one who cast out demons, healed all manner of disease, who exhibits authority over storms, willingly subjected himself to the hostilities of arrogant rebellious humanity. What condescension! What humility. And he took on himself the unholiness of his people to reconcile us with God. This is a wondrous mystery not to be taken for granted.

Conclusion

R. C. Sproul writes, "Yes, human beings are afraid of floods, fires, earthquakes, and disease, but in the heart of every creature made in the image of God, there is a threat far greater than any force of nature can present. It is the threat of falling into the hands of the living God."

And yet Jesus is the refuge God has given to protect sinful humans from himself. So long as we call upon him to save us, we will be spared what we should rightly fear the most.