

Oh, for a Faith that Will Not Shrink!

A sermon based on Mark 4:35-41

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was little Billy's big day. Weeks of preparation had led up to this moment. Mom and Dad had spent countless hours rehearsing with him. He could say his part in his sleep. Grandma had made sure his outfit was just right. Friends and relatives had already commandeered a large cheering section near the front of the stage.

It was Billy's first school play. He was so excited, but he was also scared. When it came to his scene, he was nowhere to be found. He couldn't do it. He only had one line. He was just a background character, really, and yet, when it was his moment to shine, he couldn't do it.

Believer, have you ever been in his shoes before? You're on a slightly bigger stage. You have people (friends, relatives, co-workers) in your audience every day, listening to you, watching you. So, when it comes to your big moment, to let your faith in Jesus shine, how does it go? When no one's watching, how does it go? When you're dealing with life's problems, how does it go?

When it comes to our faith in Jesus, we have a long way to go. And so, today, I hope that your prayer for me is the same as mine is for you...that in these storms of life, Jesus gives you and me a faith (in Jesus) that will not shrink.

Unfortunately, I know firsthand what it's like to have a shrinking faith in Jesus. Ask any of the other twelve disciples. We all do. One time in particular that just seems to be seared in my mind is, well...let me tell you.

It was a dark and stormy night...no, literally, it was a dark and stormy night. It hadn't started out that way. It was a fairly normal day in the life of Jesus and us disciples. Jesus had just finished up a full day of preaching (I think you heard a couple of his parables last week). We could tell, he was worn out – no surprise there; I know your pastor usually likes his Sunday afternoon naps after preaching for just an hour! But anyways, Jesus was tired, so I would have thought he would have headed straight for a comfortable bed and just pass out for the night.

You know what he chose instead? The back of one of our boats. Odd, but Jesus, as exhausted as he was, was set on getting to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Ok, not going to argue there. So, we all hopped in our boat, pushed off, and set sail for the other side.

It was a gorgeous night for sailing. Not a cloud in the sky. The moon light gently glanced off the peaceful waters. I could see how Jesus might find the setting relaxing, although he was too busy sleeping to enjoy it. I nudged my brother John, "You couldn't ask for better sailing weather. If this holds up, we should make it to the other side by morning."

"If," he chuckled, "James, I hope you're right tonight. You know how quickly things can turn around. Look around you. We're in a basin, surrounded by mountains. We've been fishing these water long enough to know how susceptible the Sea of Galilee is to sudden, violent storms."

I didn't need the reminder. I just had to look up. No sooner had he finished speaking than some storm clouds started rolling in. The murmurs among the other disciples started picking up as the boat began to sway a little more in the swelling waves...and then a little more. All of the other boats who had launched with us, eager to

keep up with Jesus, they got their smarts and turned back to shore. We didn't. "Ok, just keep your cool James," I thought to myself, "You've been in this kind of weather before. Stay calm; we'll just have to weather the storm."

But this wasn't just your five minute downpour and then the skies open right back up. We were experienced fishermen. We had seen our fair share of those storms. We had been in even worse, some fairly dicey situations.

But nothing could compare to that storm...that night. It just got worse and worse and worse. The rains pelted us in the face mercilessly as we tried to tie down the ropes for the sails. Adding to the challenge was the slippery deck, where every time we thought we had good footing, we'd immediately lose it as the boat jolted up and down as the soaring waves effortlessly tossed us back and forth.

We were fighting to keep the boat afloat, but the elements kept pounding us down. We were desperately, literally holding on for dear life, and where was Jesus? Snoozing in the back. Now, I know he was exhausted, but really?!? In that storm?!? Matthew made his way to the back and shook Jesus. He started to come to, and we shouted at the top of our lungs, "Jesus, teacher, don't you care about us??? We're sinking! Save us!"

And he stood up, looked to the sky, and in a stern voice merely said, "Quiet!" And then, over the side of the boat, face to face with a wall of waves, commanded, "Be still!"

And just like that, literally the snap of the fingers, and that was it. The rains stopped. The clouds dispersed. The waves died down. It was as if there hadn't even been a storm, that we weren't just fearing for our lives moments ago. I saw more than a few of the disciples picking their jaws off the floor in astonishment. But should we really have been so surprised? The same God who at creation merely spoke and everything, everything in the universe came to be...that same God still had control over the forces of nature. Jesus spoke, and the winds and the waves obeyed.

We were more than impressed with Jesus. He was less than impressed with us. "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

That was hard for us to hear. Do you notice the tense Jesus is speaking in? "Why are you (still) so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" It's present tense, not past. We weren't afraid of the storm sinking our boat; that threat was over.

And yet Jesus could see into us, and he could see a faith that was shrinking. I know, it sounds odd, doesn't it? Jesus had just performed a miracle to save us! Well, on the one hand, through all our time with Jesus, witnessing his miracles, listening to him preach words of love and grace, and we believed them. We even trusted that Jesus was perfectly able to help those in need.

But when distress hit us, when we tried to do everything on our own to save ourselves, it was harder to imagine and truly trust that Jesus would keep his Word to us...that he could guard and protect and rescue us. And if we couldn't trust him to save us then, what about from the even greater, even more powerful storms of sin, temptation, and Satan?

Well, friends, I think Jesus' questions to us then are just as pertinent to you right now. So, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Now, it'd be unfair of me to say you have no faith. I firmly believe every one of you has faith in Jesus. But is it a strong, confident faith that always trusts in Jesus to provide, protect, and deliver us from every storm we face? Or is it a faith that tends to shrink back or waver when the waters start to rock the boat?

For example, when the fires down south started blazing a couple of weeks ago, how many of you were thinking along these lines, "Those fires are bad, but I know God will keep those people safe"? And then, once they started creeping north, but you still didn't have any smoke, "I just know that God can and will get us through this fire season." But then dense smoke finally hit the community, and suddenly the personal threat goes much more real. How many of you have started to hit the panic button, "We're surrounded by fires...dozens more are popping up each day...without rain, we're doomed" ...maybe even to the point of thinking, "God, are you there? Do you see what's happening? Any time you want to send rain now, would be great." Oh, for a faith that will not shrink.

Or, as a congregation, it's easy to see God's blessings when things are going great. But when we're consistently falling short of meeting our weekly budget, when cases of church discipline rise up and get heated, when efforts at both outreach and inreach seem to be failing, how many of you are ready to jump ship, wash your hands of this "mess," distance yourself from the ministry here because it sure looks like that's what God's doing? Oh, for a faith that will not shrink!

Brothers and sisters, your problem is just like the other disciples and mine. It's easy to trust in Jesus when the sun is shining and we're slowly floating along the calm seas of life, without a care or a worry in the world. But any of you who have even the tiniest amount of boating experience know how quickly a storm can come up.

And the same is true in our faith lives. If God wanted to, he could cure cancer, but truthfully, it's harder to believe that when you're the one he's allowed to endure that affliction. Since God's in control, you just know he's always going to make ends meet for you and your family. Are you always that confident when money's tight or you're about to be laid off?

And that's a symptom of a much bigger, a much deeper trust issue. I don't think any of you doubt for a second that Jesus died for your sins...that he has defeated sin for good. But what about when your sin is too great, and the guilt is overwhelming...he couldn't forgive that. Or when the temptation is a burden too heavy to bear. How will Jesus get me out of this one?

Friends, it's too easy to shrink back in faith when the storms come...to doubt Jesus and his love for us. And when our faith shrinks, then we're left feeling like we have to bail the water out of the boat on our own. We can't ever do that fast enough.

And the danger is shipwrecking our faith, just like Paul told Timothy when he wrote, "Some have rejected these [prophecies of God's Word and promises of God] and so have shipwrecked their faith. The very real danger is a shrinking faith that could shrink all the way to no faith, and you know what the eternal result of that would be.

Day after day, the storms rage in our personal lives and our spiritual lives. The hurricane forces of temptation, sin, and Satan threaten to capsize us. And believers, as we take on water, we can do nothing but fall to our knees in humble repentance and turn to Jesus.

And guess what? He's not sleeping on us. As Psalm 121 says, "He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over [you] will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you...I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD."

And as we lift our eyes to our help...our Savior, in a stern voice, Jesus says, "Quiet! Be still!" to our spiritual enemies and to us. You see, the winds of temptation come and the waves of sin might rise up against us, but Jesus stops them before they can harm us.

There's no doubt that he can and he does. Why can we be sure? Others have tried to command nature and failed. As a young boy, my father told John and I stories about how the Persian King Xerxes once had the sea whipped and cursed to no avail, and his fleets were destroyed by storms.

But this is no earthly king we're talking about here. This is Jesus who travelled through those same storms as us and showed his power over sin, death, and the devil through his life, death, and resurrection.

Do you remember what he said on the cross? "It is finished!" It was completed. The perfect, sinless life he lived, exchanged for our sinful, doubt-filled lives, completed. His righteousness for our forgiveness, finished. And his resurrection on Easter morning was the stamp of God's approval on his work, perfectly done...completely done.

And if Jesus has not only calmed and quieted but obliterated the storms of our spiritual enemies, what does that say about the struggles and problems we sail through each day? Without even having to cry out to Jesus to help (because he's watching over us), Jesus tells us, "Quiet! Be still!" In other words, "Don't try to face this storm, these waters on your own. Trust in me. Put your faith in me. I'm not sleeping on your problems. I'm here, constantly watching over you and making sure things work out for your good.

We have tried to command Satan, but have failed. But Jesus has not. He has come out of the storm unscathed, and he promises the same for you and me. And not just that our spiritual enemies can't hurt us. But just as the winds and the waves obey Jesus, even Satan and his goons must bow their knee to Christ.

What does a promise like that do to our faith in Jesus? I'm sure you would join me and the other disciples, as filled with awe, we are left to ask, "Who is this?"

You know! This is Jesus. Master over nature. King of the universe. Savior from our sin. How kind of Jesus to put up with us! How gracious of him to wait with his help until we have learned that the only ultimate help is from him, a lesson we would never learn without suffering, without the brink of disaster or despair from time to time.

He lets us get to that point so he can bring us through spiritual storms, personal storms, every day storms. And when we pass through the storms, our faith will not shrink. No, it will be strengthened. It will shine as we take the stage in front of the rest of the world. It will shine brightly.

And as you sail with Jesus, let this be your prayers, "Oh, for a faith that will not shrink though pressed by many a foe, that will not tremble on the brink of poverty or woe. A faith that shines more bright and clear when tempests rage without, that, when in danger, knows no fear, in darkness knows no doubt. Lord, give us such a faith as this, and then, whatever may come, we'll taste e'en now the hallowed bliss of an eternal home. Amen.