In the Storm
Mark 4:35-41

To avoid some of you parents having to answer awkward questions in your living rooms on a Sunday morning, we're going to take a break from 1 Corinthians and look at something different.

We're going to look at the passage read to us about Jesus calming the storm, and consider where can you find hope when life is not going the way you want, and circumstances seem out of control in ways you don't like? Where can you find solid ground to stand on when life gets scary, maybe even when life is threatened?

Acknowledging Reality
So Jesus and the disciples are in a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. When Marks tells us that, v37, 'A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.' In his account Matthew says, 'the boat was being swamped by the waves' (Matt 8:24). And Luke says, 'they were filling with water and were in danger.' (Luke 8:23)

In one of Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas, HMS Pinafore, Sir Joseph Porter, the first Lord of the Admiralty, the Commander of the Queen's navy, pays HMS Pinafore a visit. And in his song, he explains how he knows absolutely nothing about the sea. In fact, he started out as a clerk in a lawyer's office. And he climbed the greasy pole in the office until he became a partner in the firm:

Of legal knowledge I acquired such a grip
That they took me into the partnership.
And that junior partnership, I ween,
Was the only ship that I ever had seen.
But that kind of ship so suited me,
That now I am the Ruler of the Queen's Navee!

And then he entered politics, and he was so good at always voting as his party wanted, and never thinking for himself at all, that he finally got rewarded with the job of running the Navy. And he finishes his song by singing,

Now landsmen all, whoever you may be,
If you want to rise to the top of the tree,
If your soul isn't fettered to an office stool,
Be careful to be guided by this golden rule-
Stick close to your desks and never go to sea,
And you all may be rulers of the Queen's Navee!

Now, while a disciple like Matthew, the former tax-collector, had spent his professional life stuck close to his desk and never gone to sea, the same could not be said for Peter and Andrew and James and John. And so at least four men in that boat were fishermen. So when we're told the storm was great, that the boat was being swamped and they were in danger, this wasn't a bunch of soft handed, pale-faced business men from the Galilean version of the A1 Business centre over-reacting, was it? They knew the sea. This was their area of expertise and they knew the circumstances they were facing were beyond them, that they didn't have the resources to deal with it. They had read this situation right. If things carried on like this, they would die.

Back in 1969, the Swiss Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described five stages of grief. And the first is denial. You're given some bad news, maybe your doctor tells you you have terminal cancer, and you think 'nah, they've got it wrong, there's been a mix up, I'm fine'.

And when things are going wrong in our lives, we can go into denial. There's no money in the bank, but we live as if there was. Relationships are at breaking point but we carry on as though nothing's wrong. Some habit has got a hold of us, and we can't break it, but pretend all is fine.

But for these guys to survive the storm, to come out intact, the first step was to acknowledge how bad things were. That this was beyond them.

Why point that out? Because as Christians we should have no fear of facing the reality of how bad things are. The New Testament writers had to write to Christians facing serious persecution. But they don't sugar coat that. They don't over-exaggerate it: the writer to the Hebrews says, things could be worse, you've not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. But neither do they pretend things are better than they are: Peter describes what his readers are facing as a fiery trial.

So, rather than burying heads in the sand like the Ostrich, there's an honest facing of just how bad things are.

But when you do that you've got to face other things too.

The Negative Influence of Circumstances

I grew up sailing. My dad was a national champion, and we spent virtually every weekend sleeping on a boat or sailing or sitting in yacht clubs. And of all the things I miss living here, the sea and the smell of the sea probably top the list. I mean, the lake is beautiful, but it's just not the sea.

But we do have a little sailing dinghy. And not long after we moved here, the wind got up on the lake. And I'd had enough of sitting becalmed on lac leman, trying to persuade the girls that sailing really was fun. So I said to Naomi, who was then about 12, come on, we're going sailing. And I took her out in what was pretty stormy conditions. And she thought it was great. Except the conditions were much worse than I'd anticipated and, like here, the boat was filling with water, and trying to bail the water out, while keeping the boat upright, was getting more and more difficult. And I remember trying to work out whether we could swim back to shore if the boat went down, all the time saying to Naomi, 'Isn't this amazing! Don't you just love sailing!' while inside I was scared.

And the disciples display two very understandable reactions to the life threatening circumstances they're facing.

And the first is fear. Look at v40, where Jesus says to them, "Why are you so afraid?" What would they have answered to that? '*Why?!* Look at the circumstances Jesus! Because the storm is great and the boat is filling and unless something changes we're going to die, that's why!'

And fear, like its cousin anxiety, is natural when you're feeling threatened; when things are spinning out of control and an outcome you really don't want is hurtling towards you.

Now there are some things that make fear worse worse. Look at v35, 'On that day, *when evening had come*…' So this is happening at night, in the dark. Now, when you go for a walk in the woods, and the sun is shining and rays of sunlight are making the leaves glow green, and the birds are singing, you wouldn't even notice the sound of a twig snap, or the leaves rustle. But if you were walking that same path at night, every noise would spell danger.

And some things just naturally exacerbate our fear. There's the way you're wired. Some people are just more happy-go-lucky than others, and they could walk through a wood at night and it wouldn't bother them at all. But others of us by nature are more timid, more anxious. Then you can grow more fearful with age. Ecclesiastes 12 gives a moving description of growing old, when 'those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut' (12:3-4) - when vision and hearing deteriorate. But one result is fear, 'one rises up at the sound of a bird' - innocent noises like a bird tapping on the window become alarming - someone's trying to break in; 'they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way' (v4,5) - even the simple tasks of going about life become ordeals. And at a time like now, age, and pre-existing medical conditions, or mental health problems can make you more afraid, either of the pandemic itself, or the confinement that comes with it. Elijah, a giant of a man in faith and character, won an incredible victory against the false prophets, but almost immediately crumbled and ran to the wilderness in fear of his enemies. Why? Probably because he was emotionally exhausted. It just made him more vulnerable to fear.

And here in the boat, we see strong men fearful, because the circumstances have exceeded their ability to cope.

But they also show a second reaction: they doubt the goodness of God. Look at v38, the wind is howling, the boat is filling, 'But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

And when you're being engulfed by a storm sometimes it can seem like God doesn't care. Maybe your job is threatened, or your plans are unravelling, or the outcomes you wanted are becoming less and less likely and the outcomes you didn't want are looking more and more likely; or you see people you love suffering, or the sheer scale of the world's brokenness, and you can question and doubt the goodness of God.

Job knew that all to well. He had spent his life being faithful to God, and in a matter of hours all he loved was taken from him, his health was broken, and his friends turned on him. And in the midst of his sorrow he questioned the goodness, the justice of God.

Because, when the world, or life, is like this - where is he? How can a good God be asleep on a cushion when people are dying, and life is unravelling? It's what others have called the God-forsakenness of the sufferer. That feeling that when you needed him most, God has abandoned you.

Now, how are you supposed to deal with such times? The world will tell you, you need to draw on your inner resources. You need to display grit in the moment of trial. And that's right. But for these disciples, this has gone past that. They know they don't have the inner resources or the physical strength to go on fighting. So what do you do when that happens? Look for support from those you know you can depend on. Absolutely. But what if they're in the boat with you? What if they're as emotionally and physically challenged by this as you are? Or maybe you're told to take a cold look

at the facts, that if you write down all the positives and the negatives, things are not as bad as they look. But what if they are? What if the positives - we're in a boat! - don't cancel out the negatives - yeh, but the boat is filling with water! Well, 'don't worry, be happy! Eat and drink for tomorrow we die!' Sure, but what happens when the restaurants and bars are all shut and you can't eat and drink! Or what happens when your coping strategies of comfort eating and opening another bottle of wine create their own problems?

The One to Look To

Now the gospels don't tell us how long the disciples battled the storm on their own before deciding to wake Jesus. We don't even know if they woke him out of frustration, 'could you not at least lend a hand?' or out of belief that he could do something they couldn't do. But wake him they did. And whether they fully realised it or not, acknowledging the reality of their circumstances, recognising they couldn't save themselves, and turning to Jesus for help was the key to getting out of the storm.

The lesson for you and I is clear, isn't it? There are times in life when every other support, every other way we would normally deal with a situation fails, and anxiety is growing. And in those times we need to turn to God - because nothing short of God doing something will work. But how long does it take you to get there? One mark of growing humility and maturity is that the time gap between the start of the storm and going to Christ in prayer grows less. That the time you battle on in your own strength, getting more frustrated, or more anxious, or more questioning of the goodness of God shortens.

Because Jesus does wake up and he does calm the storm. And if you can picture in your mind's eye what happens it is an incredible scene. The sea is chaotic. If the ancients saw the sea as the embodiment of chaos, on this night the disciples had every reason to agree with that assessment. But Jesus wakes and with his voice, his voice above the howling wind and the crashing waves, speaks, v39, '"Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.' And the storm which was great has become a calm which was great. There's an expression, 'the silence was deafening'. And the calm that came on that lake must have been overwhelming.

Look what Mark tells us. In the silence of the calm Jesus questions them: "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" and then Mark says, v41 , 'And they [the disciples] were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?"' When their lives were in danger, when everything was spinning out of control, they were afraid. But now they are *very* afraid. Now their fear has turned to something even greater.

Why? Because they realise they're in the presence of one they can't control. One who all the forces of creation can throw everything they have at and cannot harm. Who is this man?

You know, there is a fear that calms every other fear. There is a fear that comes from seeing who Jesus really is, that all the power and the glory is his, and in comparison you realise you have no power or glory, and you see him as he is and yourself as you are, and you're afraid. But it's a good fear, because the One you fear is good. Because the One you fear has the power to calm the storm. Because the One you fear holds your life in his hands and his hands are good hands. And he will not let you experience anything outside of his loving plan for your life.

Job was convinced he had been unjustly treated, and had multiple questions to put to God. But then God overwhelmed him with his power and glory. And Job didn't get the answers he wanted, what

he got was God, and that proved far better than answers. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42: 5-6). I knew you but I didn’t know you. And knowing you is enough.

You see, how does this whole episode start? Verse 35, ‘On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”’ So, Jesus had told them, that is where we’re heading. And if the disciples had looked to the One who said that, rather than only at the storm, their circumstances may have been no different, but their fear and doubt would have been.

King Jehoshaphat and all Jerusalem were surrounded by an enemy army described as a vast horde, and the chances of them surviving the onslaught grew smaller by the hour. But Jahaziel the prophet brought a word from God: “Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed… the battle is not yours but God’s.” (2 Chron 20:25). And the next day, Jehoshaphat led his people out to battle against impossible odds, saying, “Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed.” And they did. Why? Because they trusted the character and the word of God. The Lord and his prophets.

In Christ you and I have greater promises than even Jehoshaphat had. And as you look to the goodness of God and the promises of his word, they have the power to steady your nerve because you know the One who has said, ‘we’re going to the other side’. You know the One who has said, I will never leave you or forsake; no-one can snatch you out of my hand; that all things work together for your good; that the pestilence that stalks in the darkness is not to be feared. Now, that doesn’t mean we won’t suffer, or even die, it means we know that even in suffering and death there is One far greater. One more to be feared than suffering or death because he is infinitely more terrible, and infinitely more beautiful and infinitely more good and infinitely more loving.

But how can you know that?

Well, one of the remarkable things about this event are the parallels to the story of the prophet Jonah. Fleeing from God - away from God’s word, not towards it! - he too is caught in a boat in a storm. And he too is sleeping in the storm. And in words remarkably similar to those of the disciples, the captain of the boat goes down into the hold to wake Jonah and says, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish” (Jonah 1:6). Don’t you care Jonah that we’re perishing? But to calm that storm Jonah must be thrown into it. He must die to save the sailors.

Except of course God rescues him. But at the cross, Jesus wasn’t rescued. At the cross he really did experience the God-forsakenness of the sufferer. The One greater than Jonah, the One with power over winds and waves was thrown into the storm of God’s wrath for our sin and gave his life to save us.

In Philippians 4 Paul says that we don’t need to be anxious when life is out of control because we can go to God in prayer and experience ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding [that] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.’ (v7)

Why does God’s peace in Christ surpass all understanding? Because all the circumstances are saying, be afraid, be anxious, doubt God’s goodness, but instead you can look to the one whose

hands were nailed to the cross for you. You're engraved on those hands, you're held by those hands. And peace fills your heart.

But there's one last thing this account tells us:

Better Things Lie on the Other Side

Jesus didn't set out on this overnight boat trip on a whim. When they did get to the other side waiting for them was a man whose life had been trashed by the powers of darkness. Whose life had been reduced to a number, legion, a statistic of satan. And with a word Jesus set him free. And if the calming of the storm is one of the most remarkable events in the gospels, seeing this once broken man sat at Jesus feet, clothed and in his right mind is one of the most moving.

But sometimes you have to go through the storm to get to the other side and see God do those greater things. Sometimes you have to go through a time when you are feeling swamped by the waves before something wonderful happens on the other side.

You and I don't know how bad things could get over the next few weeks. We don't know how badly those we love could be affected. What we do know is that God has far greater things up ahead. So let's turn to him. Let's pray that he would calm the storm, and save lives, and let each of us know the all-surpassing peace of those who trust the One who is infinitely powerful and infinitely good.