

Chapter 1



WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID?

Based on Mark 4:35–41



I watch the sun dropping down to the hills, and the shadows lengthening. Clouds on the horizon catch the orange and red tones of the setting sun. A small breeze, cool against my cheeks, ripples over the water, gently bobbing the boat up and down. It's a welcome relief from the cloying heat of the day, hotter than any I recall from

my years fishing these waters. But then, sitting in a tethered boat as Jesus speaks to the crowd isn't exactly the same as sailing. I gaze out at the enraptured faces, softened by the last light of the day, and realise that despite the heat, none of us would have chosen to be anywhere but here.

Jesus's voice still carries across the water, but I can hear the tiredness in his words. I glance at him just as he lifts his hands in a farewell and blessing. Voices call back to him—blessings mixed with pleas for healing or invitations to homes.

Jesus turns to Simon and says softly, "Let us go over to the other side."

"Yes, Rabbi." My brother is already reaching for the steering oar. "Andrew, the ropes!"

I clamber over the side and wade to the shore, careful of my footing on the slippery seabed of moss. *Where is the rabbi going? Will he be back tomorrow?* I shrug at the people's questions as I undo the knots and stride back through the water to the boat. Levi mutters when I toss my legs over the side, splashing water onto his sandals and robe.

"We'll get some water into that land-blood of yours," Thomas says, giving Levi a good-natured jab as he works the ropes to unfurl the sail.

"Impossible!" I laugh, stepping past them to the oar at the bow. "He spent far too long sitting in that tax booth to make even half a decent sailor of him now."

Alongside us, James, John, and a few others of our group—who had listened to Jesus from the shore—are clambering into Zebedee's boat. Behind them, I notice others wading to Enoch the Younger's boat.

Simon has seen the third boat, and he scowls. "They're following us again, Rabbi. Should I tell them not to?"

Jesus shakes his head and asks Simon for the cushion we keep under the seat. He lies down with it under his head, his knees bent and his back against the side panels.

As the gentle wind fills our sail, I feel the familiar response of the

boat. We leave the shore behind and I stare at the distant, dark hills of the Gerasenes. I breathe deeply of the air, which carries the smell of seaweed and life, thinking how good it is to be heading to deep waters again.

James soon catches up with our boat, and he and Simon engage in a playful race, reminiscent of our boyhoods. We call and laugh across the water at each other.

It's John, standing at the bow of their boat, who breaks the spell. "Squall!" he shouts, pointing to the west.

My gaze follows his to the ominous black sky and the dark water churning beneath it.

"I think we can outrun it!" Bartholomew shouts back, but I catch Simon's eye and know what my brother is thinking. We've seen the fury and speed of these sudden storms before. We know all too well the stories of weathered Galilean fishermen who never came home when the sea storms blew up.

It's not long until the wind is whipping noisily at our sail. The air has suddenly grown cold, and the mood on the boat, sombre. Simon gives curt commands as he tries to keep us on course, but eventually it takes all his effort just to keep the bow pointing into the waves. Thomas and I struggle with the sail as we're tossed up and down. The largest waves break over the boat, drenching us in spray. I cast a worried glance at the increasing level of water sloshing into the boat and grab a bucket to bail it out, shouting for Bartholomew to do the same. My voice hardly carries over the wind and crashing waves.

"Rabbi!" Levi's terror-stricken voice pierces through the storm. Jesus still lies in the same place as when we left, and I marvel that he can sleep through a storm such as this. "Rabbi!" Levi calls again. "Don't you care if we drown?"

Jesus sits up, looking across the waves. He grabs the side of the boat and pulls himself to his feet. His gaze sweeps from Levi to the rest of us. I try to keep my fear from showing on my face.

Jesus turns to the waves and speaks loudly over the wind, as if

rebuking a disobedient child. “Quiet! Be still!”

Instantly the wind dies. In the stillness, the waves gradually settle to a sheet of calm, and the boat rocks quietly until—like an empty crib—it lies motionless. The silence is so deep, so pervading, that all I feel is the pounding in my temples.

Jesus turns back to us, his gaze searching out each of our own. “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

His softly spoken words pierce into me with force. Haven’t I seen him heal the blind and lame? Haven’t I heard him speak of faith the size of a mustard seed moving mountains? Haven’t my own lips called him Messiah, the anointed one? Yes, to all of these questions—yes! Then why should I be afraid when he is here with us? Why would I think his silent slumber means he doesn’t care? Why do I doubt his protection or his power to act?

But still...

I look again at the subdued sea and then back at the rabbi. As he holds my gaze steadily in his own, a wave of awe-filled fear sweeps through me. Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him?

Only one possible answer echoes through my heart.

Invitation to Pray

Close your eyes and imagine that you are on a boat far from land. The wind is picking up strength, blowing wildly through your hair and whipping the sail loudly above you. The waves are dark and wild, splashing icy water into the boat. It sloshes around your feet as you cling to the mast. The boat dips and sways uncomfortably on the water. A crack of lightning flashes overhead. As the storm grows louder and wilder, you realise there is nowhere to hide.

Then you remember that you are not alone in the boat. Jesus is sleeping near you. You call on him and he sits up, rebuking the storm. He looks at you as he says, “Quiet. Be still.” Let peace replace fear as you simply sit with him in the calm boat. After a while, he reaches forward and takes your hand, asking “Why are you so afraid?” Tell him your deepest worries and fears, then listen for his reply.

Reflection

“Jesus brings us the assurance that the universe is a perfectly safe place for us to be” (Dallas Willard).

Think about that statement for a moment. Do you believe it? I can’t say that I—living in a city known for its high crime rate—would agree. Or take the fact that I am writing this just as South Africa is facing another intense wave of COVID-19 cases. In the middle of a pandemic, going out for a cup of coffee with a friend is risky business. Perfectly safe? I don’t think so.

Yet Jesus, sleeping peacefully in a boat in the middle of a storm, believed it completely. And his words, “Quiet. Be still,” were not just commands for the wind and waves, but also for his terrified disciples and—down the ages—every person overwhelmed by the storms of life. That includes you and me.

Jesus slept because he knew that God had everything under control, be it boats in the middle of storms or lives in the middle of pandemics. But lacking his faith, we too may cry out, “Wake up! The boat is about to sink!” And we may even mutter under our breath, “Don’t you care?”

The truth is, boats do sink, and in the storms of life we may even lose our lives or the people we love the most.

Does this mean God isn’t in control or that he doesn’t care? No!

Paul wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Neither death nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

If we have accepted Christ and his love into our lives, we are perfectly safe, even in sinking boats.

So let us take Jesus’s questions into our heart. *Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?*

Let us allow them to expose our fear and its root—a lack of faith in God.

And then let us ask him to give us his peace that surpasses understanding, and the faith that allows us to sleep through storms.

Prayer

My Lord,

Our world is a-grip with storms,
skies dark on every horizon.

Sometimes the rising waves are detached:
growing peaks on a pandemic graph.

Sometimes the squall is far on the skyline:
rockets ripping across the sea you once sailed.

Other times the storms are fiercely close:
lashing our boats in ice-cold pain and grief
setting our life's compass spinning wildly
every sail we lift, every rudder we wrestle
useless to steer us safely to harbour.

Often it's only then, in the dark confusion
that we call on your name: *don't you care?*

The age-old echo of doubt and disbelief:
in your wisdom
in your love
in your faithfulness.

Only to perceive you have been here all along
and we—unaware—were watching
the storm instead of our Saviour.

My Lord,

I'm grateful you're in my boat
but how I wish you would rise to rebuke
this lashing wind and these crashing waves:
just three words
filled with sovereign power.

Quiet. Be still.

Then every assaulting wave would bow low before you.

But Lord,
Even if you don't speak to the storm around me,
speak to the tempest in my heart:
just three words
filled with sovereign power.

Quiet. Be still.

Then fear will flee and faith will rise
and I will surely know that
you are
my true north
my safe harbour.

Amen

Deeper in the Word

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind (Psalm 107:28-31).

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat (Isaiah 25:4).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust” (Psalm 91:1-2).

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39).