

## THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL PRESENCE

### (Mark 4:35-41)

5.30.21

#### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been scared, I mean, really right down to your socks terrified? I can remember one time — the first morning in Marine Corps boot camp. The Marines have a unique way of welcoming you to what will be your home for basically the next three months — which I experienced the night before. But after all that chaos, they let us get to sleep. So, the next morning, we're all sleeping in our squad bay when, all of a sudden, it seemed like every drill instructor in the world came running in, screaming and hollering like I'd never heard in my life. Now when I was growing up, a raised voice meant I was in trouble. So, at first, I'm thinking, "Man alive, how in the world can I be in trouble? I just woke up." But it continued. And then, once we were standing at very petrified attention in front of our bunks, they started knocking a bunch of our bunk beds over and scattering all the stuff in our foot lockers all over creation, and getting right in our faces (or ears as the case may be) and hollering with words and volume I'd never heard in my life. Right at that moment, two thoughts collided in my head: First, what did I do? And second, I'm about to give my parents a reason to commemorate Memorial Day.

Now eventually the drill instructors left (still hollering incidentally; I think they were on their way to another platoon's squad bay to do basically the same thing as they did to ours). We're left there, still at attention and still trembling, when three more drill instructors walked in the room — and those guys started hollering at us for what a disaster of a mess our squad bay was. Such was our introduction to boot camp, and the three drill instructors that would be training us for the next 13 weeks. After all these years, I still remember the fear!

But what is also worth noting is that, for all of this, and this, and many things others, things done to us, and more than a few colorful metaphors shouted our way, the culmination of all of that was this: graduation day. I had made it; I was now — and the words still blow me away — a United States Marine. And one of the greatest privileges I had ever known was that first moment when I could stand with my drill instructors — no longer a recruit, a thing, a slime bucket (and some other things I wouldn't ever mention in church) — but as an equal — "the few, the proud, the Marines." I was one of them. And while I was obviously not their rank, it was an amazing thing to realize that, if we were ever in battle together, they would work just as hard to "have my back" as they would expect me to have theirs. And their confidence in me was based on the fact that they knew me; they themselves had trained me. One of the most awesome realities I have ever come to know in my life.

Well today, we're going to look at some other guys, and the fear that seized them in another situation. So, as we begin to look at that moment in Christ's ministry, **let's begin with a moment of prayer.**

#### TEXT (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 hHe was, in the boat. There were also other boats with Him — Mark 4:35-36.*

The phrase "that day" refers to the teaching day in which Jesus presented some "snapshots" from the kingdom of heaven "photo album" that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. Now some of those had been presented to a large crowd but others, if you remember, were presented to a

smaller group — the Twelve plus others — people who wanted to know more, who wanted Jesus to explain what the parables meant, those who had the “spiritual ears who wanted to hear.”

Regardless, “that day,” with all its teaching, was now coming to an end, and Jesus instructed his disciples to get in a boat so they could make their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. So, they left the larger crowd of people who had heard the initial parables and proceeded down to the water’s edge to get into a boat. Others who had continued listening to Jesus followed.

Now we have some idea of what their boat may have looked like partially due to Jewish archaeologists discovering a boat that dated back to the first century, in other words, to the approximate time of Christ and His disciples. That boat measured 27 feet long, 7½ feet wide and just over 4 feet in depth. It had a flat bottom which allowed for fishing in shallow waters. It was built to allow for up to four staggered rowers, and it had a mast to allow for sailing. A contemporary model gives us some idea of what a first-century Galilean boat might have looked like back then. This is the boat that they would be rowing from the west side of the lake to the east — a distance of as many as eight miles depending on their specific destination.

Now the Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake in northern Israel. It sits 13 miles long north to south and measures just over 8 miles wide. It’s just a little smaller than Lake Mille Lacs right here in Minnesota. It runs to a depth of approximately 141 feet (although there may be spots that measure as low as 200 feet). It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world, sitting approximately 700 feet below sea level. It sits on the northern end of an area called the “Jordan Valley,” which extends approximately 88 miles from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea (the lowest below sea level body of water in the world). Now, because of the geography of the area around the lake, very intense storms can come about with very little warning. The hills of Galilee rise to some 1,400 feet above sea level, while the nearby Golan Heights (an area called the “Decapolis” in NT times) extend up as high as 2,500 feet above sea level. The air surrounding these various heights is cool and dry, contrasting the air immediately above the lake, which is warm and moist — almost subtropical. This creates a wide variance of temperature and air pressure. When these contrasting air masses meet as a result of favorable winds, storms can come into being at an incredible speed. The winds can be funneled by the geography much like winds in a downtown area can be funneled and squeezed between tall buildings to an incredible strength. And relatively shallow bodies of water are much easier to stir up with such winds; waves of up to 10 feet have been recorded as recently as 1992, meaning the consequences for boats caught out on the lake in such conditions can be very dangerous — which is exactly what happened now.

***A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped — Mark 4:37.***

A storm quickly comes upon them, allowing waves to batter the boat and even bring water crashing into the boat itself — meaning a lake starting out very calm quickly became very stormy, sailing through all this in a very small boat.

But on top of all the problems that they can see and hear and feel, there’s another problem that may not have been immediately obvious to them: ***Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion — Mark 4:38a.*** Remember back in verse 36 where it says: ***Leaving the crowd behind, they [the disciples] took Him [Jesus] along, just as He was, in the boat — Mark 4:36a.*** This verse tells us what “just as He was” means — Jesus was exhausted. He had been up for hours, He had been teaching another huge crowd, then some had followed Him into a house where His teaching continued. And with what was at stake in His teachings, with all He was desiring His disciples

and others to understand, it's probably a pretty safe bet that He literally put everything He had — heart, body and soul — into these teaching sessions. And now, at last, He had a chance to get some rest. So, He went into the back of the boat and soon was gone into a very deep sleep. How deep? Well, this storm, with all the noise of its winds, and the waves crashing over the sides of their boat to the point that the Greek tells us that the boat was full of water, all while they were being tossed all over, storm enough to scare even these veterans of the lake who had grown up and made their livelihoods on these waters, and then maybe mix in some thunder and lightning — and Jesus remained just as He was. In other words, the guy could sleep!

But all they were focused on now was the imminent end of their lives. They needed Him awake. So, Mark tells us: ***The disciples woke Him and said to Him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” — Mark 4:38b.*** They were literally yelling at Him, “Master, don’t you care if we die; don’t you care if this storm destroys us all?”

Then the disciples got a picture of exactly how complete a master this Jesus of Nazareth truly was, and just how powerful and how far His mastery went: ***He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm — Mark 4:39.***

Wow! Can you imagine what it must have been like to witness that moment, when the storm that was battering them in so many ways instantly, in a single moment, simply by the command of His word, went silent — going from stormy to silent — reminding us (and possibly His disciples as well) of the truth of the words found in Psalm 107: ***He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed — Psalm 107:29.***

And the Greek word for “rebuked,” used here to express Christ’s lordship over the wind, is the same word used when Jesus would command evil spirits to depart from those whom they were possessing. It means literally to forbid — for evil spirits that they were no longer allowed to possess, that they were now refused entry into somebody, and likewise for this wind, that it was no longer allowed to do what it had been doing. Literally, “You’re done!” So, after everything had so quickly calmed down, He turned to His companions in the boat: ***He said to His disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” — Mark 4:40.*** Now this is where Christ’s parable of the mustard seed is so relevant. Mark places that parable immediately before Jesus and His disciples going out on the lake. By asking, “Why are you so afraid,” Jesus is expressing amazement: “After all you’ve seen, after all I’ve said and done, how is it that you are still letting fear rule your lives instead of faith? How is it that you’re not showing even a small, tiny, little faith, like the small, tiny, little mustard seed we talked about that eventually grows into a plant so big? You’re showing no faith. So, what’s it gonna take, guys? Please, somebody tell Me; what’s it gonna take?”

In taking the disciples to task, so to speak, Jesus is asking them three (3) really challenging questions that will get to the heart of who they really think this “Radical Rabbi” is:

- 1) Do you understand what the parable of the mustard seed was really saying about faith, or did you just hear a cute little story? In other words, the kingdom of heaven — including faith — is supposed to look like something.
- 2) The power of My works is always meant to reflect the power of My words. So, if you’re not going to believe and put your faith in My words, and if you’re not going to believe and put your faith in My works, what are you going to believe? What are you going to put your faith in?

- 3) And this moment's questions are every bit as explicit as the question He will ask them prior to heading toward Jerusalem and Gethsemane and the cross, Exactly who is it that you say that I am?

And then the story concludes (borrowing some phrases from Matthew and Luke): ***They were terrified [amazed] [in fear and amazement] and asked each other, "Who is this? [What kind of Man is this?] [He commands] Even the wind and the waves [the water, and they] obey Him!" — Mark 4:41.***

The disciples were overwhelmed with feelings of fear, but also with feelings of awe and reverence. Maybe for the first time, they began to grasp in some way exactly who this Nazarene really was. What particularly seems to finally impress them is that, in noting the obedience of the wind and the waves, they are seeing the forces of nature in actual subordination to Jesus; in other words, they are seeing that He in fact rules over them; He is their master. This man from Galilee is not just a teacher or a rabbi. They are beginning to grasp His divinity, for only someone with divine majesty and power could rule over nature — and, as they have just seen, Jesus does rule!

## APPLICATION

There are some amazing truths here for all of us as we look back to this moment from 2,000 years ago to connect it to our moment here, today:

First, yeah, storms are going to come. They are an inevitable part of living in a broken, fallen world. But notice how this storm broke: With Jesus very literally in the boat, the storm still came. King David was a man very acquainted with storms in his life. He famously wrote about them in his most famous psalm (words that would have been available to the disciples as well) where he was inspired to say: ***Even though I walk through the darkest valley — David, Psalm 23:4a.*** The New Living Translation words that same phrase: ***Even when I walk through the darkest valley.*** Not if, but when. People are very sadly mistaken if they think that Jesus Christ is some sort of celestial insurance policy to prevent rough stuff in their lives.

And, truth be told, storms don't even come our way except under the sovereign rule of God. Storms are allowed so that we will grow in our faith. Think of storms as spiritual resistance training. Now resistance training is a form of physical activity that is designed to improve muscular fitness by exercising a muscle or a muscle group against external resistance. Storms provide the external resistance for our spiritual muscles.

In fact, the Bible directs us to respond with joy and thanksgiving in the face of the storms that come. Paul, another person who knew a thing or two about the storms of life, said to the church at Rome: ***[W]e also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope — Paul, Romans 5:3-4.*** The apostle James concurred, writing: ***Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything — James 1:2-4.*** Are storms fun? Hardly — but the outcome is the point, as the author of Hebrews points out so clearly: ***God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness. No discipline ("storm") seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it — Hebrews 12:10b-11.***

Second, those inevitable storms don't really matter if Jesus is in the boat with us. As the disciples learned, Jesus is stronger and more powerful than any storm that may come our way. We can't

forget the next part of Psalm 23 where David talked about his response to being in the “darkest valley”: ***I will fear no evil. Why? You are with me — David, Psalm 23:4a.***

The fact is, if our lives have been surrendered to God through Jesus Christ, the Lord is always in the boat with us. Some of Moses’ last words with the nation of Israel were these: ***“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified . . . , for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you” — Moses, Deuteronomy 31:6.*** When Joshua was preparing to lead Israel into the Promised Land, God said to him: ***“[D]o not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” — God speaking, Joshua 1:9b.***

And there’s the key — the realization that a loving, gracious, perfect God is always with us, meaning that His past grace and His present grace reflect the promise of His future grace toward us in all circumstances. As I have meditated on this passage, a lot of thoughts have poured through my mind, but ultimately, they have all boiled down to the same thing; as a Rich Mullins song famously says: *My God is an awesome God,*” and that awesome God sovereignly rules over every last bit of His creation. You see, the Bible teaches that God created all things (***Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made — John 1:3,*** sustains all things (***[I]n Him all things hold together — Paul, Colossians 1:17b***) and in fact owns all things (***“Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours” — David, I Chronicles 29:11-12).*** Not much left after all that.

Now apply all that to this story: The storm belonged to God, as did the wind and every last wave, not to mention every last drop of water pouring its way into the boat. The disciples belonged to God and so did the boat they were sailing in as well as the body of water they were sailing on. And that’s the point that Jesus is striving to share with us: All of everything is Mine. So, if that is true, and if My love for you is true, and if My ways are perfect, and My plans for you are beyond reproach, then everything — every victory, every fail, every valley, every mountaintop, and everything in between — is for the growth and strengthening of the relationship between you and Me, and the very life you are living in My Name.

Folks, that’s why we continue to meet together for worship and learning. That’s why we encourage Sunday School and devotions and Bible study — all for the same reason that Peter encouraged his readers at the end of his second letter: ***[G]row in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ — II Peter 3:18a.*** Every moment of time we can spend with God and His word, we can learn something more — something more that will hold onto us when God’s path is not so easy to understand, and His ways seem so shrouded in mystery. Because God’s ways are not our ways and His thoughts not our thoughts, simply by the fact that He is infinitely beyond us, there is always more to learn and study and apply and appreciate. The more we study God’s word, the more we will become aware that our God is an awesome God, that He absolutely loves us better than anyone ever could, that He has designed us better than anyone ever could for plans drawn better than anyone ever could, and that every last bit of life experiences He directs our way is coming from a God who is completely perfect in all His dealings with us. And that’s why we encourage everyone to share with us however you have seen God at work. That’s the stuff that helps make God even more real and relevant in our world today. All those examples we share with others becomes a part of all we can claim in God through Christ. And the desired result of all this? That we would learn to trust Him — not as a last resort but rather as a first response. That even if we don’t understand the reason, we can

know and trust the God behind the reason. We can rest in what we do know despite however many things we don't know — because Who we know is really all that matters.

You see, if all of God's awesomeness is true, then what in the world do we have to fear? Nothing. Of what should we be afraid? Nothing. No matter how crazy our world or our culture, no matter how intent so many people are in choosing the pleasures of sin, our loving, gracious Perfect Ruler is bigger, stronger, wiser and more present than any other force in the universe. Paul said it so well: ***What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? — Paul, Romans 8:31.***

And what about those times where we do find ourselves wrestling with worry and frozen in fear? Well, those moments and those feelings are meant to drive us to our knees in prayer, to give a “shout-out” to all our brothers and sisters so that they can join us in prayer, and to remind us that, as children of our Heavenly Father, “Jesus is always in the boat.” In fact, He will never ever leave.

Thirdly, this story only makes sense if we look at life from the standpoint of eternity. The disciples were in a panic because they thought that their lives were ending. But nobody in that boat was ever going to die, anymore than anybody in this room is ever going to die. As Christians, we are promised that this temporary skin we all are in will someday make way for a glorious new body that will last us for all eternity, in a place with no more pain, no more sorrow, no more tears, no more sickness, no more death. Eternity, folks — all that is going to last for eternity. What is our life here on earth compared to eternity?

That's why Paul could state so emphatically to the Philippian church: ***For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain — Paul, Philippians 1:21.*** His citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20) was so much more gain than anything he could ever accomplish or acquire in this life. That's why he could be so casual about any of his merits before coming to faith in Christ: ***[W]hatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Tis more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ — Paul, Philippians 3:7-8.*** Trusting God in every moment makes any storm that comes our way of no consequence compared to the ultimate eternal joy of knowing God through Jesus Christ. So what if I have to give up something here? Something so much greater — and eternal — is waiting for me in heaven.

## CONCLUSION

As we close, take a look at the last two questions at the end of today's study guide: (1) How do you describe God to yourself, and (2) how does your description of God impact your daily life. That really gets us to the heart of the matter, because our actions and our responses reflect what we believe. If God is all the Bible claims He is, then, as believers, our lives should reflect that. If we don't believe that, our lives will reflect that. I beg you, if anybody here today is unsure exactly what they believe about God, let's talk after the service. Our awesome God is a God who absolutely can be trusted to always be with us, always love us, always bring the best things for us to us. God Himself said that in our “hammock” verse: ***“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength” — God speaking, Isaiah 30:15a.*** That's the only place to live — and, in God's strength and to the glory of His name, we can. Let's pray!