

When What You've Always Dreaded Actually Happens

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Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for songs of praise written by Christian people with particular gifts to serve us in order that we might worship you. We thank you that the Christian Gospel throughout the ages has caused people to sing and to create melody and to praise you. We thank you for the beauty of the music that it has created, so expressive of the beauty of our Savior Jesus Christ, and the beauty of the holiness of our heavenly Father, and the sweet grace of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We come to you recognizing that you are a God so great and far beyond our ability fully to grasp. But we thank you again and again that in the mystery of your person we have come to see so many of the mysteries of life and history resolved, and we pray as we come to you tonight that as you have spoken through your word and as you love us as a heavenly Father and seek us, we pray that in your word tonight we may begin to feel that we have been sought out, that you are looking for us as a Shepherd looking for sheep, and that you are calling us as a Father might call his children home from a distance and that you have sent your Son to fetch us home. So we pray for hearts that are stilled in your presence, for minds that are made clear in all their confusion by the truth of your word, for wills that are eager to do whatever you tell us to do because you are our Lord and our Master. And most of all, our Father, we pray that we may know your presence for all things will become insignificant to us in this room this evening if only we know your presence with us and the voice of Christ speaking to us. So come and hear us and answer this prayer for us because we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now, you'll find the Scripture lesson this evening in the Gospel according to Mark 4, and verses 35 through 41. Mark's Gospel, chapter 4, and you'll find the passage is in the Pew Bible on page 839, and if you don't have an English Standard Version, our Pew Bible is that translation and you'll be able to follow along as we read it together. Mark's Gospel, chapter 4, and beginning to read at verse 35. Jesus has been teaching. It's obviously been a long day and we are now told in verse 35,

35 On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them [he's speaking to his disciples], "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other

boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he 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?" 39 And Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Our sermon title this evening as you'll notice is "When What You've Always Dreaded Actually Happens" and that refers, I would imagine in all of our lives, to something. You may never have disclosed it to anyone else but you would be verging on inhuman if there wasn't something in your life at some point or even now in your life that in your most honest moments you would confess, "That's the thing I've always most dreaded." It can vary. It may be something completely trivial.

I remember speaking of things that are completely trivial and as somebody who has never been in the position prior to marriage of being able to collect Valentine's cards, I remember I think I was in elementary school at the time when one of my friends bounced up to me with great glee and said to me, I will cover over the name with reference to a girl in my class, "She," he said with great glee, "has just announced to everyone in the class that she is going to send you a Valentine's card." Well, this was the end of my ambition to be the great romantic of the late 20th century because what caused his glee was he said with an enormous smile, "Lucky you getting a Valentine's card from the ugliest girl in the world." Now, bad enough to get it from her, but for a very shy and easily embarrassed youngster, bad enough to get it from anybody and so on the 14th of February, 19-whatever it was, who do you think was the first up in the house because mail arrives early in Scotland to make sure that he was the first to get the mail? My parents were like your parents, a card on Valentine's Day when you were eight years old would raise the question, "And who is the card from?" And I don't know which I dreaded most, but that morning I dreaded three things: 1. that the card would come; 2. that the card had come; and 3. that my parents might ask me that fatal question. So much for being the great romantic.

But it could be something more serious than that. It could actually be that the thing you most fear is actually to be disappointed in love. It may be, if you're a youngster, failure to get into the particular school or track or as is true probably of the majority of us, failure to make the team. It seems so trivial to other people but it carries such enormous weight for our sense of who we are that it can easily become the thing that we most dread. And some of these things that we dread are very forgettable and getoverable and recoverable from, and others haunt us for many years. The child who hears his or her parents constantly bickering and arguing, who shelters the deep-seated sense of insecurity and the great fear that one day his or her parents will divorce. Or the fear that many of us know, the fear of the knock at the door or the phone call or the communication that tells us the news that someone we love as much as life itself has died. Or perhaps the fear of having

to be the person who breaks that news to other people. Well, if you had asked the families who were involved in this incident in the Sea of Galilee what was the thing they most dreaded, the answer would almost certainly have been because they were fisher folk, the thing they most dreaded was a storm at sea.

Interestingly and this is the reason why we read this passage from Mark's Gospel, it seems that Mark's Gospel was actually what we today would call a ghost written Gospel. In other words, the material that is supplied in this Gospel was not Mark's material but actually Simon Peter's material. We have word from almost the earliest days of the Christian church that John Mark who apparently had short stubby fingers and was known as stump fingered, was the person who wrote the memoirs of the Apostle Peter and was his interpreter and it rather seems that Mark's Gospel is essentially Peter's story of Jesus. Actually if you go home and before you go to bed tonight, you turn this little passage from the third person into the first person singular or plural, you will get a wonderful sense that this is a story that has been told by an eyewitness. It would be difficult for you to imagine perhaps even dream that you are listening to Simon Peter in one of the early Christian churches and he's saying as older apostles perhaps were want to say, "I remember the night we were with Jesus." And one of the clear indications that this really is an eyewitness account, after all, you wouldn't expect Matthew even if he had been called to follow the Lord Jesus, you wouldn't expect a tax collector to be in this boat. There are all kinds of little evidences that you don't find in Matthew's Gospel or in Luke's Gospel that this is somebody looking back and in this dramatic experience he has had, there are details he remembers that aren't in the other Gospels. For example, the fact that it was evening. A rather interesting fact that there were other boats caught in the storm with them. But this was the whole combine of James and John and Simon and Andrew. This was the little fishing company gone out to sea to catch fish on the Sea of Galilee and there were other boats and perhaps the most touching little detail that's not found in the other Gospels is that when Mark tells us Jesus was asleep in the midst of the storm. We are given this little detail as though the picture were as clear in the eye as it were happening before his eyes: Jesus was asleep in the stern on the cushion.

So what we may see in this story in all its marvelous vividness is an event that this fishing family, and we know from the Gospel that Simon Peter had a wife, the event that all fishing families dread most of all. If you live in a fishing town and this event takes place, there is a kind of pall that comes down upon the town, a mourning comes down upon the town and the grip of fear becomes palpable. I remember as a youngster for reasons I am not sure, having to learn sections of a poem by the 19th century poet and historian, Charles Kingsley, author of "The Water Babies" for those of you who know 19th century English literature, and the refrain in this poem which was about three fisher women. I discovered the other day that of all people Joan Baez recorded it, although she changed the words a little. "Men must work and women must weep." And its last verse goes like this,

"Three corpses lay out on the shining sands
In the morning gleam as the tide went down,
And the women are weeping and wringing their hands

For those who will never come home to the town;
For men must work, and women must weep,
And the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep -
And good-by to the bar and its moaning."

So in the lives of these men, this is undoubtedly the thing they had always dreaded and now it was actually happening and I want to see how Simon Peter, who I think is behind Mark's narrative here, I want us to try and see what Peter sees in this incident as he looks back on it now probably after many years. The first thing is this, it's rather paradoxical: it is his recognition that they were not in this storm, they were not in this crisis accidentally. You notice how casual everything seems? After all, they were fishermen. On that day evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let's go across to the other side," and they simply go. They are master sailors. They surely would be able to have a sense of weather. They had lived by the sea all their lives. Their people were fisher folk and their people were fisher folk and they had doubtless gone to and fro on the Sea of Galilee hundreds if not thousands of times. And I don't suppose at the time Simon Peter or any of the others noticed what he now noticed, as though it were happening just that very morning: he remembered that it was actually Jesus who had taken the lead and that this whole incident in which they had found themselves crying out in terror was at the end of the day an instrument of Jesus' purposes in their lives; that this crisis which had come upon them suddenly did not come upon them accidentally but somehow or another in the midst of it all, Peter began to see that there was a larger hand at work here, there was a deeper purpose at work here, and that actually to his astonishment, it was because he had begun to take an interest in Jesus, that he and his friends had found themselves in the midst of this storm.

Actually what Peter remembers is almost the very opposite of how sometimes people read this story. This great event that if you ever went to Sunday school, has been probably one of your favorite stories for all time about this terrible storm that came down on the Sea of Galilee completely unexpectedly, and the little detail that Peter is fixing our attention on is this, I don't want you to lose sight of this: if Peter pointed as I'm pointing when he preached in pulpits probably unlike the one in which I'm preaching tonight, I'm sure he would have gesticulated, knowing Peter he would have gesticulated vigorously, "We didn't realize it at the time but we were not in that storm accidentally." I wonder if as he spoke about this he went on to make the obvious application that with Jesus nothing happens accidentally. Nothing in your life good or bad, bright or dark, nothing in your life has taken place accidentally. That is not to say that some of the confusion of your life is not your responsibility. It is entirely your responsibility and yet at the same time in the sovereign providences of Jesus Christ, it has not taken place accidentally and it has never taken him by surprise. It's the very reverse of what you would expect. After all, for all we know this was Jesus' first trip on a boat. These were the fishermen, the storm took them by surprise.

But, of course, one of the evidences that it didn't take Jesus by surprise was that he was the only one who was able to sleep through it. No crisis is ever an accident in your life. Actually, the fact that you panic is the evidence that you believe it's an accident in your

life, but it wasn't an accident to Jesus because, of course, he wanted as he worked in the lives of these young presumably men, to bring them to the place where they were asking Jesus the most vital questions of life and especially this question: doesn't God care and don't you care either? Actually, it's the most instinctive response, isn't it? You hear it from the most successful businessmen you've ever met. You hear it from all kinds of people, people who have never used the word God in your hearing before and suddenly they find themselves in the midst of the event that they dreaded most of all and immediately they ask the question, they may say it to you if you're a Christian, spitting it out, "Doesn't God really care?" And of course that was the very question the Lord Jesus wanted to lead them to ask.

You're probably like me, you read stories like this in the Gospels and you associate them with particular events in your life. I associate this story, I don't know why, I associate this particular story with the first person who ever came to me as a young minister. I was 23 years old. The church I was serving stood in the middle of the second most prosperous street in the United Kingdom. It was passed by by endless thousands of people each day and my boss had the very bright idea that we should have a service that would start before people went to work. He had even the brighter idea that I would take it two weeks in the month, he would take it one week in the month, and the theology students would take it in the other week of the month. And I still remember going back to the minister's room at the end of one of these services, "Worship Before Work" it was called, a man knocked on my door, he was probably 10, 14 years at most older than I was in a state of enormous distress because he had just heard the most awful news about his wife's health. And he told me of the success of his life, it was to me mind-boggling. He told me of all that he was able to provide for her but the thing he didn't know was whether God really cared. I suppose the reason I remember that particular event was because in my humble stumbling way as a boy minister, I tried to point him to Christ and I never saw him again, and so for 40 odd years now, I have wondered what happened to the man who was in the storm whom I pointed to the one who cared? Did he ever come to the Lord Jesus? Because it was no accident that he was asking the greatest question of all, "Does he really care in this crisis?"

So the first and, in a sense, the most obvious thing to learn from this passage is that whatever the disciples thought at the time, they were not in the storm accidentally. The second thing that is obvious from this story is that the storm tested where they were spiritually. They were not brought into the storm accidentally but the storm tested where they were spiritually. I'm sure afterwards Peter loved to imagine back into that picture where Jesus had fallen asleep. He had had a long day. He deserved some rest. Perhaps they had said, these confident fishermen now, "Jesus, while we are sailing to where we think the fish will be tonight, why don't you just lie down and have a rest?" And can you imagine the picture of the Lord Jesus lying down there on the cushion looking up into the night sky over the Sea of Galilee at the stars shining in the heaven, what do you think his last thought was before he went to sleep? It wouldn't at all surprise me if it was this, "I wonder how long it's going to be before these characters are shaking me and screaming at me through the storm and the tempest and saying, 'Don't you care? We are perishing here, Master!'"

But, you see, he was testing them. When Jesus goes to sleep, he doesn't lose control of what he's doing. He was very deliberately testing them. He's a master craftsman. You see, he was a carpenter. He was treating these fishermen as a carpenter would treat something that he was making and he was testing them to see whether they were able to take the weight, to take the strain, and he was doing that in a very telling way because he was doing it in precisely the area in which he was not master and they thought of themselves as total masters, and he was seeing what was in them. That's one thing to speak, isn't it, one thing to talk about faith, one thing to say how much you trust Jesus when things are going swimmingly well. Most of us, my dear friends, have very little awareness of how much we are really trusting Jesus when things are going well. Actually, what we may be trusting is that things are going well. It's when things begin not to go well, when things begin to crash down around us or the earth beneath us seems to be like sand underneath us, that's when it becomes clear whether we really trust him.

So the very things that Jesus brings out in his questions to them, do you notice, are kind of obvious questions. He says, "Why are you afraid? Why are you afraid?" Apart from anything else the poise of that is staggering, isn't? I mean, they're about to drown. "Why are you afraid?" There is a missing link here somewhere, isn't there? Either the missing link is in Jesus and he doesn't understand reality or the missing link is in the disciples and they don't understand Jesus and that, of course, is the point. Actually, it's the point of the whole of Mark's Gospel and he gives us a little hint of this. I'm sure this must have been the way Simon Peter would have ended his sermon on his experience in the boat that night. When the whole thing was over, what was the question they were asking? "Who is this?" And that was the question Jesus was asking them, "Why are you afraid? Is it because you don't really know me, who I am? Is it because you don't understand the significance of my presence in this boat?" And then the other question he says, "Do you still have no faith?" Now, half an hour before as they stood on the shore, "Let's get into the boat. Let's get over there. Let's catch the fish." They had all the faith in the world. "Of course I believe. It's almost indecent to think I didn't believe. Me, not a Christian? Of course I'm a Christian." And you see, Jesus leads them into the storm in order to expose the heart reality of their lives. There is no place to hide in a boat, is there, in the midst of a storm? And so he penetrates down into their real spiritual condition and he says to them, "Why do you still have no faith?"

Now, how did he know that? Because of the question they asked him. His question, "Do you still have no faith in me?" is a question he knows to ask them because the question they have asked him is, "Don't you care?" I think that's probably the harshest question in the whole of the New Testament to Jesus who is in this world and in this boat and is destined to be on that cross for one reason and one reason only: because he cares.

And you see what Jesus has done. He has begun to unravel the real truth about their lives. I mean, after all they were now part of the disciple band. Everybody thought, didn't they, "Now these are the men who are with Jesus wherever we see him around Galilee here." There is this group. He's got groupies following him and he's actually encouraged them to follow him. What faith they have. Of course, he's been doing miracles, he's been

preaching to great crowds, but now that there is no miracle taking place here yet, there are no crowds here, you can't even see the shore here, all there is is this storm and this little boat and their fear and this Jesus and they are taking hold of him and saying. This is who they really are deep deep deep down: they do not know he cares.

It's very revealing, isn't it? Storms like this whether they be physical storms or storms of providence into our 21st century lives are profoundly revealing and here's the question I think Peter needed to have answered and I want to have answered: how can you be sure he cares? How can you be sure he cares when everything that you might naïvely have trusted to be the evidence of the fact, "Of course he cares for me because things are going well for me," how do you know he cares when all of them are taken out of your life? That's the real question. How do you know he cares when the thing you most feared would happen has happened? And the answer here, of course, is because the Jesus who was with them in this storm was destined for a storm of his own.

You know, the Psalms are frequently cited or alluded to in the New Testament but one of the most interesting statistics about Psalm citations and allusions is that there is one Psalm in the Old Testament that stands head and shoulders above all the other Psalms in terms of the way the New Testament writers use it to portray what Jesus did for us in his suffering and dying on the cross of Calvary. It's the 69th Psalm and a very interesting thing, very telling in this context is, it's actually the description of an overwhelming water ordeal in which the Psalmist feels that the billows are going over him and he is being overwhelmed and he is in this great trial of his faith and there seems to be no help for him. And again and again in all kinds of little ways and sometimes in very obvious ways, the New Testament writers, the apostles draw upon this to say, "This is what Jesus was going through on the cross." Actually, the New Testament's verb that's translated "baptized" has as its basic meaning the idea of being overwhelmed. In the case of baptism, being overwhelmed with whatever it is; as we would tend to think, being overwhelmed with water. And you remember how Jesus who was overwhelmed with water in the river Jordan spoke about his real baptism on the cross of Calvary when he would be overwhelmed by the judgment of God. Not water poured down upon him but the judgment of God poured down upon him. As Simon Peter himself would say, "bearing our sins in his own body to the tree." What a picture that is of Jesus steadfastly making his way from the overwhelming baptism of the river Jordan when he was overwhelmed with the symbolism of the sins of the people that, as it were, symbolically had been washed into the river Jordan until the day would come when on the cross of Calvary he would be overwhelmed by the water ordeal, the baptism of the judgment of God.

But they didn't know that yet. He said to them, "Do you still not believe?" They didn't yet grasp. Later on Simon Peter would argue to his face, "It mustn't be that way," and Jesus had to say to him, "Simon Peter, the only way you or anyone else will ever be ultimately persuaded in the midst of catastrophe in personal life that I really care is if I go all the way to the great baptism ordeal of the cross and experience the overwhelming storm of God against your sin." And that's it, isn't it? That's what Paul says in Romans 8:32. If he didn't spare his own Son for us, then we can be sure in any circumstance, and he names

some of the circumstances, in life or death, things present, things to come, heights, depth, any other creature that ranges itself against us, we can know that God is for us because he didn't spare his only Son but gave him up for us all and we therefore know that with his Son he will freely give us all things. You see, in the midst of catastrophe and a storm and the thing you have dreaded most, emotions are no use to you. You need logic. You need Gospel logic. You need to be able to see it right through and to be able to say to him, "Father, if you didn't spare your Son but sent him to the cross for my sins, if you have gone to that length, I know you will not stop short of seeing me through for your glory." Later on, of course, perhaps it's particularly helpful that this teaching comes to us also from the Apostle Peter who himself failed so badly but that's the logic of the Gospel and you need to be able to learn to think with Gospel logic when you find yourself in a storm.

So this didn't take place accidentally. It tested them spiritually. And the third thing this storm did was it brought them to see Jesus' glory. Of course this was the whole point. This is why he went to sleep perhaps with a little smile playing around his lips, "These boys ain't seen nothing yet." And he arose in the midst of the storm and he rebuked the elements. He showed his mastery over them. He told them to be quiet, to be silent. What a majestic sight that must have been. The momentary light switched on in the darkness on the Sea of Galilee of Jesus showing his power as Creator to bring recreation and normality to this catastrophe and the display of Jesus, the Savior, showing grace and bringing these fishermen safely to the shore. No wonder they end up saying with awe, I don't think this is so much of a question of seekers, it's what we would call a rhetorical question, a question that carries in the question its own answer, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him." Do you see what they're saying? "This can be no other than the Lord. This can be no other than the Savior. This is the one to whom we must go. This is the one who silences the deepest questions of our hearts when life collapses around us, 'Does nobody care?' and shows us by his dying on the cross for our sins and rising in triumph over sin and death and Satan and hell and darkness and chaos, that he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him."

There is another thing I usually wonder when I read this story because it's so dramatic and it's so Simon Peter and I wonder at what point Simon Peter was in the boat saying, "I wish I had never come." But, of course, if he had dug his heels in and said, "I am not following him into what may be dangerous territory," how much he would have missed, how little he would have known of the glory, the majesty, the grace, the poise, the saving love of the Lord Jesus Christ. So presumably as Peter ended telling this story which I imagine he told on many an occasion, hey, if this had happened to me, it would come out in every fourth sermon, he would say, "It was then I began to see his glory."

Some of you are familiar with Rembrandt's great painting of this scene, Christ on the Sea of Galilee. I hope none of you has it at home because it was stolen, I think, was it Boston some time at the end of the 20th century? And I don't believe it has ever been recovered so if you've got it hanging on your wall, you need to take it to that television show and get it valued and then wait for the Boston police to arrive at your door. It is a brilliant Rembrandt style, dark and light. But one of the most fascinating things about it is as Rembrandt sometimes does, those of you who are Rembrandt scholars will know this, he

paints himself into the picture. He's there in the boat. And if you've seen that picture, he's the little fellow with the round face who is almost out of the picture and unlike the others who are all here and there, this little fellow is turning around to watch the person who is looking at Rembrandt's picture of Christ on the Sea of Galilee. And it's one of those moments, you know, this could be like one of these newspaper competitions, "Write underneath what it is that he is thinking or saying," and I think what he's thinking as he looks out from this storm is this, he is saying, "Spectator of this scene, where are you in circumstances like this? To whom do you turn in circumstances like this?" And I'm sure if Simon Peter had seen the Rembrandt painting, he would be saying there is only one place to go when what you've always dreaded happens and that is to go to Jesus.

Actually, when the next thing Peter dreaded actually happened, Acts 12, he was imprisoned because he was a Christian. He was in prison. He was a Christian preacher. They stuck him in prison and they were going to take him out the next day and probably what is intended is they were going to take him out and execute him the next day and God sent an angel to get him out of prison. Do you know what the angel did? The angel came along and found Simon Peter fast asleep and he shook him just as Peter must have remembered the disciples shook Jesus, and said, "Peter, God cares. He has sent me to bring you through this storm." Of course there was a storm still to come in Peter's life as Jesus himself told us and I wonder if that night too before his crucifixion, Simon Peter was able to fall asleep and say, "Lord Jesus, in the storm tomorrow, you will be there and then beyond all storms I will be with you in glory."

I said there were several things in this passage that indicated that it came originally from an eyewitness: the fact that it was evening, the fact that there were other boats, the fact that Jesus was asleep in the cushion, but there is another thing that I have always found especially attractive because it is so expressive of what happened and it's in verse 36 in these words, "they took Jesus just as he was." That's everything, isn't it? That's what it means to become a Christian, to live as a Christian. They took Jesus just as he was. Have you ever done that? You might even be in the midst of the thing you have always dreaded. If you're not in the midst of it, then there are things you still dread. Where are you going to turn? How are you going to get through it all? "Here," says Simon Peter, "is the answer: you take Jesus just as he is. He'll lead you through the storm. He'll show you things about yourself that you never dreamt you would ever see. He will show you things about himself that you never imagined could be true and you will know that he really cares because he died for our sins, he rose again to be our Master, and you and I therefore need to take him just as he is." Will you do that? By God's grace? Then pray with me.

Lord Jesus, what a wonderful Savior you are. What majestic power you display. What care you show for us who are so fragile and frail within although often so full of bravado and strength without. We who are so strong when life goes well but so broken when life goes badly, so full of fears, so conscious in our best moments that we are all weakness within, Lord Jesus, we come to you and we confess our deepest need for a Savior because we are sinners. Our lives, whatever they seem before men, our failures before God. We need your grace. We need your forgiveness. We thank you for dying for us on the cross. We come to you in faith. We take hold of you by faith. We say to you, "Lord Jesus, we

believe in you. Help us in any unbelief." And we pray that by your grace as we take hold of you, we will discover that you have long taken hold of us and have brought us to this very place where as you reach out your hand towards us in the word of the Gospel, every instinct within us is to reach out our arms to you and to hold onto you as our Savior and our Lord. So hear us as we pray in this way and help us on. We ask it in your name. Amen.