**Row the Boat, Jack!**

**Text: Mark 4:35-41**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Years ago, when I was a boy, I was looking at some family photographs and I came upon one of my dad, age maybe 10, holding a fish. On the back it said, “Donald with his first fish.” And below that it said, “Row the boat, Jack.” Thinking there might be a story here I said, “Dad, what’s this all about?”

Before I tell you the rest of the story, I have to tell you this. My dad was a patient and gentle soul, who was always willing to listen. He had a lot of good ideas, but if you had a reasonable idea, he’d often go with yours. If it worked, great; if not, he still had his own idea in reserve. But occasionally, Dad would get his mind set on a particular way of doing something, and pity the poor person who tried to suggest otherwise. My wife would tell you that in runs in the family.

Okay; back to the picture. 10 year old Don Ervin holding the fish, says on the back, “Row the boat, Jack,” I say, “Dad, what’s this all that about?”

Well, Dad was out fishing with his dad and his Uncle Jack. Uncle Jack was at the oars when dad got a fish on the line. Dad’s never caught a fish before, but he’s got it figured out how he’s going to reel it in. In his mind, he knows exactly what to do. Meanwhile, Uncle Jack starts to lecture Dad on the proper way to land a fish. And Dad said, “Row the boat, Jack; just row the boat.”

 The disciples, likewise, would’ve done well to just keep rowing. Instead, they panicked in the face of the storm. Which, you know, on one level is understandable. They thought they were going to die! Of *course* they were panicky. But studies show that those who survive life-threatening situations *don’t* panic. They begin with the assumption that failure is not an option. They assume that they’re going to get out of this, somehow. And then they figure out what they need to do, and they do it.

Instead of panicking, the disciples would’ve done well to keep rowing. This especially makes sense when you consider the fact that these are seasoned fishermen. This is not their first storm. So, in that context, when Jesus asks the disciples, “Why are you afraid?,” his question doesn’t seem so off the wall anymore. Why, indeed, are they afraid? They have the skill and the experience to navigate through a storm. And they have, in their very midst, the One who has power over the storms of life.

Before we go any further, let’s think about not only the disciples’ context but also the context in which this story appears in Mark’s gospel. Mark’s Jesus, you’ll remember, spends a great deal of his ministry confronting the demonic. And I think that’s what this story is about. It introduces a new section of Mark’s gospel in which Jesus sends the demonic running in *dramatic* fashion. First, he heals the Gerasene Demoniac; then, he restores to life the daughter of Jairus; and finally, he heals the woman who’s been hemorrhaging for 12 years – or, better yet, he witnesses the woman healing herself – simply by touching his cloak. All of that goes on in the 5th chapter of Mark, and Jesus introduces that chapter with this story of Jesus calming the storm at the end of chapter 4. All of these stories are about demonic forces getting hold of people or situations and causing havoc. And all of these stories are about Jesus’ power and authority *over* the demonic; about Jesus equipping *others* to overcome the demonic. Whether you personify the demonic as the Devil, or you think of the demonic as impersonal forces that threaten and attack us, make no mistake about it: there are *many* situations in life when we feel threatened, when we feel endangered, when we feel overwhelmed. And it’s not just our feelings. There are, of course, objective forces around us that can threaten and even kill us. Like being in a small boat on a storm-tossed sea. Or a tornado bearing down on Bedford. Or even just so many challenges coming at us from multiple directions at the same time: work and family and community responsibilities and financial burdens and all the rest. Anything that threatens to separate us from the abundant life that Jesus has promised us can be thought of as the demonic. It enters a situation and causes fear and panic and chaos.

Like the time when I was 9 years old and I’d spent a week with a friend and his family in a cottage in Michigan. When we got back to Chicago, my family was out at some event and they wouldn’t be home until well after dark and I was supposed to stay with the same family for a few more hours. That would’ve been fine except…nobody told me the plan. After a while I got tired of playing with my friend – we’d been together for a whole week, for crying out loud – and I went home. Nobody was home. I sat on the back porch and waited for my parents. And they didn’t appear. Now it’s dark, and I’m sitting there all by myself, and I knew my parents were dead. They’d been killed in a traffic accident or something and I’d never see them again, and I’m weeping uncontrollably, and it was horrible! Of course, my parents weren’t dead and after another hour or so they got home but the point is that the demonic had gotten a hold of me; internally. I was experiencing an internal attack of the demonic. I was afraid and I was panicking and I didn’t know what to do. It was as if there was a *storm* raging within me.

But what if my parents really had been killed? What if some objective power really had separated us? That would’ve been an *external* attack of the demonic.

The point is that there are demonic forces that threaten us both internally and externally throughout our lives. They threaten to separate us from God, from each other, from the ones we love, and from the calm center that is the Holy Spirit within us. And no matter how you cut it, the danger is real.

In this story of Jesus calming the wind and the waves, the storm is symbolic of the demonic. And it reminds us of Jesus’ authority over the powers and principalities that seek to sink and destroy us. Did Jesus’ *literally* calm a storm out on the Sea of Galilee? Probably not. This may be an example of the Early Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, creating a powerful story that points to one of the deep truths of God. But whether we take this story literally or metaphorically, we know that Jesus has the power to calm the demonic storms *within* us so that we can safely navigate *through* the storms of life. Through prayer and scripture and liturgy; through the gentle touch of a friend and the calm wisdom of a colleague; through a multitude of ways, Jesus saves us from demonic forces because Jesus has *authority* over such forces.

I’ve been using my study leave this year to write the biography of one of my mentors. John Ramey was a social worker who worked with street gangs in Chicago. More than once he found himself caught between two gangs who were coming at him from opposite ends of the street; two gangs ready to rumble. Now John’s motto was, “Above all else, don’t panic.” Yeah, well; he needed to remind himself of that a whole lot. And he did. Caught between the demonic forces of knife-yielding young men, he was able to keep his cool long enough to diffuse the situation. It helped that he knew a lot of the rival gang members in the neighborhood, and they trusted him. So imagine the scene: John’s standing there, the gangs are approaching him, and he recognizes some of the guys in each gang. So he calls out to one of them:

“Hey Nicky, how you doin’? How’s your mom? I heard that she’s not well.”

Nicky: “Oh, she’s better now.”

John: “Good, good.” (Then, turning to the other gang). “Joey, you’re lookin’ good today. You know, I saw your aunt taking some food to Nicky’s mom last week. Seems like they’re pretty tight.”

Joey: (As the gangs move ever closer ) “Yeah? Hey Nicky, your mom know my aunt?”

Nicky: “What? That lady takin’ care of my mom is your aunt? I didn’t know that.”

So then, Nicky and Joey get to talking. Meanwhile, John would be calling other members of each gang by name, helping them make connections with somebody in the other gang, helping them to find common ground. He’d get the gang members talking with each other, he’d avert a fight; and save his own skin in the bargain!

That’s acting with authority over the demonic. That’s channeling the power of Jesus. John had been a Christian all his life. His faith and his mind and his heart had been formed in a Methodist church in Ohio, and in the neighborhood around that church. Throughout his life, John had been surrounded and filled by the authority and the power of Jesus. Through the love of family, being with friends, and the nurturing power of music, Jesus had so shaped John’s soul that in the presence of the demonic he was able to keep his cool and calm the storm.

“Why are you afraid?” Jesus’ question to the disciples, veterans of many a storm, is a question to us as well. Why are *we* afraid? Why do we sometimes doubt that we can do the things that God has equipped us to do? Because, make no mistake about us, God *has* equipped us to do a *bunch* of things. The One who wills that we have abundant life has equipped us abundantly to pursue it. The trick is trusting that those resources are right here, and staying calm long enough to use those resources.

Prayer helps. Especially a prayer where we just sit still for a bit and breath in the calming presence of the Holy Spirit. If we make a practice of this when we have the time and space for it, we’re more likely to experience Jesus calming the storm within when we *don’t* have the time and space for it; like when we’re caught between rival gangs, or rival children, or conflicting demands upon our time and energy. Sometimes we just have to go off by ourselves for a few minutes and take the advice of the psalmist and be still, and let God be God (Psalm 46:10).

You all have been through some tough times. And they’re going to be some tough times ahead. We’ve got a lot of work to do as we discern our mission as a congregation going forward. That’s what our Telling Our Story: Future Glory process is all about. As you know, we’ve organized ourselves into community study teams so that we can identify potential areas of mission in the community. There’s information that we have to gather in and digest and discern what it means for our future mission. And we may be tempted to think, “Oh man, that’s a lot of work. And things are going not too badly right now, so why don’t we just coast for a bit.”

Coasting is maybe what the disciples were doing. Sitting out there in the Sea of Galilee, middle of the night, probably had the sail up so that they could pick up a gentle breeze and they could coast to the shore by morning. And maybe they’d fallen asleep. They weren’t paying attention. They weren’t manning the oars. They weren’t doing the hard work that as fishermen they knew they had to do and they knew how to do. And the storm caught them unprepared.

That’s what happens when the church decides to coast: the demonic catches us unawares. And then we’re overwhelmed, and we panic. So we’ve got some work to do as we once again become aware of our community, and what God calling us to do in our community, and what God has *equipped* us to do in our community.

There will probably be some big waves around us. The wind is going to come up now and again. There will be powers within us and around us that will threaten to undo us. But Jesus has authority over those powers. Jesus has given that authority to the Church. There is a Higher Power at work within us that can do far more abundantly than anything we might face or imagine.

So when the wind and the waves do arise…row the boat, Jack! Just row the boat. Amen.