

The Most Important Question

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, I want to add my welcome to James and to say thank you again to our two brothers, our two fathers, for coming all this way.

As we were singing that song, I think, was that in Chilema? The song, what was it? Chichewa. It reminded me of the first time we had Archbishop Malungo with us, and he spoke to the children and sang a song.

And I asked him afterwards how many languages he spoke, and he said eight. He spoke English better than I do. And I said, do you have any degrees? He said, I have three PhDs.

I just thought, well, we have a lot to learn here. Well, now, if you want to follow along the passage, as Margaret said, it's in the bulletin in front of you.

It's just above the creed that we said. We're going to look at this passage from Mark chapter 4. It's one of the best known incidents in the life of Jesus, one of the most famous.

[1 : 09] The stilling of the storm and the wind, and I think it deserves to be. It's full of action.

There's the threat of death. It's the first time in the gospel that Jesus demonstrates power over nature.

And it's so remarkable that I'm going to take two weeks to look at it. And even after two weeks, I think you'll agree there's much more here. And you can tell how important and influential this episode is for the church.

It's represented in almost every church building that's ever been built. Do you know, does anyone know what this main central part of a church is called? A nave, thank you very much, from the Latin ship.

The idea being that it doesn't matter what the storm is like outside, if Jesus is with you in the ship, you will be safe. So as a child, I remember hearing this.

And I've been in many hundreds of churches. And as a child, I used to think, the only thing like a ship about this is if the flood comes and the church rolls over, it might float.

[2 : 22] But that's a child's twisted thinking. However, there's something very easy for us to identify with here in the story. And it's the fear of the disciples at being overwhelmed.

And the very strange thing about this little story that's told is that when Jesus stills the storm, their fear has not gone away.

It's replaced with an even bigger fear. That is, Jesus stopping the storm and the wind does not make them feel safe and cosy. It shows them a dimension of Jesus' power that is completely beyond their experience.

And they're terrified. You see the last verse? Verse 41. They were filled with great fear and said to one another, Who then is this?

Even the wind and the sea obey him. It's a very good question. It's the question that dominates every sentence in this gospel. Who is this? And I've set out the little passage, and you can see on your sheet, there are three questions that I've underlined and indented.

[3 : 35] The first one in 38, second in 40, and then the last one in 41. And I'm not going to deal with the second question today, I'm going to deal with it next week. We only have time to deal with the first and the last.

And these two questions tell us who we are and who Jesus is. The first and the last questions. So the first question deals with a very big fear, the fear of death.

You see verse 38, Mark begins the incident at the top by telling us exactly which day this happened on.

On that day, and he's referring to what's come before him, Mark chapter 4. You remember, Jesus has been teaching, teaching, teaching, teaching. Massive crowd, many parables, talking, answering

questions.

And it's likely, as his habit was, to be in a small boat, just off the shore, so that he wouldn't be crushed to death, and he'd spent the whole day teaching.

[4 : 38] And now as it gets dark, as you see, as the evening comes in verse 35, he tells the disciples to take the boat to the other side of the lake, dismissing the crowd. And in verse 36, they take him, and we have this little phrase, just as he was, which means he is utterly exhausted.

There's been no time to eat, no time for meals. He's been going all day. And he drops down in the back of the boat, and he falls into a very, very deep sleep.

And I just point out, Jesus is not Superman. He is entirely and completely a human being, perfectly human. He needed to eat. He needed to rest.

He had a body just as you and I do. He knows what it is to be human. He knows what it is to face temptation, to face demands without sleep, to feel pain.

And this really is remarkable fatigue. Verse 37, a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat so that it was already filling, and he was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.

[5 : 47] Now, the Sea of Galilee is proverbial for fast storms. Those of you who've been there will know, on the one side are the coastal hills, on the other side are sheer cliffs, 2,000 foot cliffs of Gennesaret, and the hot air from the desert sweeps up and meets the moist coastal air, and it creates a kind of a funnel.

And windstorms come very quickly, and the sea is raised up. And the thing about the winds in the Sea of Galilee is they're not one directional. And people who've survived storms in the Sea of Galilee speak about how the winds press the boats down into the water and then lift them up out of the water.

It's very, very worrying. However, the reason I'm pointing this out to you is that there they are in the middle of the night with waves breaking over the boat, being thrown around with the great noise of the wind, and Jesus is asleep.

That's tired. Fast asleep. And the boat is filling, so it's just about to sink. He's wet. Completely wet all over. But he's asleep. Now, I have only once been in a storm at sea in a little boat.

When I first came to Canada, I used to tell lots of sea stories, surf stories, until one of the members of the congregation took me aside and said, if you tell one more story about being in the ocean in Australia, I'm going to scream in the middle of the sermon.

[7 : 28] So here we go. I figure 18 years have gone, so I can tell another one. I was up the coast from Sydney at an outreach camp for youth at risk.

We had taken a little putt-putt boat, myself and another leader, and 12 teens, young boys. We had taken them out to an island a few miles offshore. We had a great time on the island, and suddenly the weather came over, and we realised we had to make it back to shore.

The island was just a little, basically a sandbar that would disappear. Well, we were in this little putt-putt boat.

I was at the front. I was at the back with my hand on the motor. There were 12 boys and the leader, the other leader at the front, and it's quite amazing to be hit by a real storm.

The first thing that strikes you is the motion, those of you who've been offshore several kilometres. The boat gets thrown around like a cork.

[8 : 33] There's very little control. Down into the trough of a wave, you can see nothing but the next wave in front of you. You come up on that wave, and the wave can throw you any which way, despite our little putt-putt-putt-putt boat engine at the back, which was pathetic.

And when you come to the top of the wave, you can't see anything but the next wave. There's very little control. And with every wave, I felt we could capsize very easily if we didn't keep the thing straight.

The noise was overwhelming. The wind was overwhelming. We did make it to shore. And when we got to shore, the other leader told me that in the midst of the storm, he was screaming at the two boys next to him this story from Mark's Gospel.

So you're a more intrepid man than I will, I'll tell you. And I can remember the fear. My fear was more that these boys would drown, I think, than my own drowning.

I mean, at least I had my hand on something. And we made it as it got dark. But for a week later, this arm was as sore as sore as I realized I'd been trying to grip this thing through the water.

[9 : 48] But these disciples, they're professional fishermen. They're big guys. They know what it is. They know this lake like the back of their hands.

They know it can kill people. Did you notice earlier in the Gospel, Jesus nicknamed two of these guys sons of thunder? It's a great phrase for two big, burly, can-do blokes, the kind of guys you want in your boat when there's trouble.

They have been bailing for hours in the dark. And this hurricane wind, which is going all sorts of direction, and the sea that's throwing them around like a cork shows no sign of stopping.

They are at the point of going under. And they look at the back of the boat at the stern. And in this life and death situation, they've got a passenger who's asleep. And they are irate.

And I think that's the sense of the first question in verse 38. This is very polite English translation.

[10 : 55] It is salty language. It's rough and blunt, and it shows their panic. They say to him, Teacher, we've seen you do all sorts of miracles, healing lepers and sick people.

This is different. We are literally dying. The words, we are perishing, is a violent, frightening, panicky death. What use they're implying are all your healings and sickness and your great teaching when our bodies are going to be washed up on the shore tomorrow.

Get a bucket and help us. That's the implication. Very understandable. These men are facing the basic human fear that's underneath all our other fears, and that is the fear of death, the fear of non-existence.

To be able to deal with death means to be able to live life. Carl Jung, who I don't often refer to in the pulpit, reckons that all our modern anxieties are symptoms of a disease whose primary cause is the fear of death.

It's the one thing we cannot beat. It mocks our achievements, our attempts at security, and it exposes where our faith really lies. But I think the question goes even deeper because it's deeply hurtful to Jesus.

[12 : 18] It's an accusation. This is a question that comes to the surface of all our hearts when the waves start washing into the boat and things are out of control.

I know it's my question. It's a double accusation. They say, don't you care? You don't care, and you don't have the power to fix the problem. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, it's a suspicion we all share in our hearts.

If God is there, he doesn't really care about me, and if he does care, he doesn't seem to be able to deal with the daily circumstances of my life. And we tend not to think these things when life is going swimmingly, but when there's a real threat and real danger and things are out of control, we wonder, is God really good?

Does he really want what's best for me? Perhaps you've been in a storm and the waves are washing over and you've been bailing for a very long time, but things don't seem to be getting any better.

Things seem to be getting worse. You can be battling with all sorts of things. You may be battling with trying to understand what's wrong in your marriage or why you were single or why your children seem to hate you so much or that profound hurt that just seems to come back and back and back and back and make you bitter and bitter and flood your life with bitterness.

[13 : 41] Well, your life seems to be going nowhere and the waves keep rolling and the current feeling you have is just being overwhelmed. You've prayed, but there doesn't seem to be any response and if Jesus is there, he's asleep.

He doesn't seem to care and the wind just howls and the waves rush in and it feels like he's asleep. That's what we'll look at next week. Now, I think it's a lovely touch that the fishermen call him teacher at this point.

We know you're very good with words but you're out of your depth here, Jesus. This is our specialty. Get up.

Do something useful. What use is it having Jesus in your boat unless he makes a practical difference? And even if he does care, he can't really, he can't deal with what I'm facing.

If Jesus cannot make any real change in my day-by-day anxiety, what can he do about this big issue in the face of death? See? So the fishermen are facing imminent death, a violent, choking death and they are terrified and it's this fear, it's the fear of death that's behind their question, teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?

[14:58] If God loves us so much, why does he keep putting us in these situations that are out of our control? This is the big fear, the fear of death. But in verse 39, the story shifts and I want to move to the last question.

And the story shifts where the fear of death is replaced with an even larger fear, something bigger. I just remind you, verse 39, Jesus awoke notice how simply this is told.

And rebuked the wind and said to the sea, peace, be still. And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. It's so amazing, it's so remarkable, it's easy to miss some of the details.

As the sea thrashes and the wind gales. And the wind gales. Jesus speaks not to the disciples, but he addresses the wind and he addresses the waves, the sea.

And this English translation is very polite, it doesn't come close to what it says in the original.

Literally, it's be quiet or it's shut up, stay, shut up.

[16:23] two words. And there is an immediate result. The wind stops and the sea becomes as smooth as glass. Two words, total transformation, sovereign power.

And I know in a storm, sometimes the wind can die down fairly quickly, never instantly. And even if it does, the waves take a long time to settle.

This is the instantaneous obedience of nature and these fishermen see it, verse 41, they were filled with fear and said to one another, who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Now there are a number of ways of dealing with this, aren't there? You can say, well, that's so far outside my experience it couldn't really have happened. Or I prefer Da Vinci Jesus who's more malleable.

Or more sophisticatedly, some might say, well, it didn't really happen but it's an important story with spiritual content. It's like a fable with moral lessons to it.

[17:31] The problem is there's absolutely nothing fable-like or myth-like in this gospel. In fact, this comes from an eyewitness who was there and I don't know if you noticed that there are several lovely eyewitness touches.

The most obvious is in verse 38 which tells us that Jesus was asleep on the cushion. Ever thought about that? It's a lovely eyewitness detail.

It's completely unnecessary to the story but it's something you'd expect to hear from someone who was there and saw it. But to have this ability to exercise authority over nature, to have the freedom and power to speak a word to the sea and to the wind and it obeys is God's alone.

The Bible opens, God speaks to the watery chaos and it obeys him. The psalm that the choir sang for us tells us the Lord made the storm be still and the waves were hushed.

Nothing that the disciples had seen comes close to this. They'd seen him heal thousands of people but this raises the stakes. They don't have categories for it.

[18:48] This exhausted man wakes and speaks with unexplained divine power, the power of God. I've got to say in our context, this is not like some superpower.

Jesus isn't one of the fantastic four where he's worked hard on a unique ability after being exposed to cosmic rays or something. Silly.

He's the son of God and if we draw a line and we put humanity on one side and God on the other, Jesus Christ is both man and God. He is the son of God and the men ask the only question that's really worth asking, who is this?

He's not just some first century revolutionary. He's not a guru in touch with some special consciousness. He's not an ascetic with magical powers.

He's the son of God. The power that he exercises in his word is not human power ramped up a couple of thousand or million times. It's the power of the creator, sheer, majestic, sovereign power.

[19:56] And I think that helps explain the reaction of the disciples. Don't you think it's strange that when the sea dies down and the wind stops, they're not happy.

They're not relieved. They're not excited and delighted as I think we would be. There's no back slapping and high fiving.

They are immediately, their fear is immediately replaced with something larger. In verse 40, Jesus says, why are you so afraid? In verse 41, we use different words.

They were filled. This is after Jesus has done what he's done. They were filled with great fear.

Literally, they feared with a mega fear.

because you see, Jesus' power, because it's the power of God, is not some neutral cosmic energy that we harness.

[20 : 57] It's the power of glory. It's the power of God. It's the power of holiness and light and goodness. Whenever God appears in the Bible to humans, the first reaction of humans is a deep, deep sense of the infinite chasm that exists between God and us.

An immediate knowledge that here is a goodness that we know nothing about. Deep down, we suddenly realize I'm fundamentally not a good person.

I've lived my life for all sorts of things, but here is the one that deserves all my focus and my love and my affection and worship. So whenever God reveals himself as Jesus does here, it's both exposing as well as compellingly beautiful at the same time.

That's what it means to really encounter Jesus. It's to be struck both by my own weakness and foolishness and by his strength and by his goodness and glory.

What does it mean for us now? Well, Jesus is the same today. He hasn't decreased in strength. All goodness. And this miracle in Mark's gospel is the first of four and in each one of them people come to Jesus facing death in different ways.

[22 : 21] In each one of them Jesus speaks a word and reveals his love and his power. In the last one there's a 12-year-old girl who dies and Jesus brings her back from the dead. And if you read to the end of the gospel, this Jesus who can drive back death with a word dies.

He's nailed, crucified and nailed to a tree. Not because he does not have the ability or power to avoid it. Not because he's out of control but because he chooses to lay down his life precisely because he cares.

See, he has to choose to give his life away. There is no power that can take his life away because he has the power of God. Why does he die?

What possible motivation could there be for him giving his precious life away? And he answers this later in the gospel. He says, it's for you. He endures the power of death to redeem us from perishing.

The only way that Jesus could defeat death for us, you see, is for him to sink under the waves of death and lose his own life.

[23 : 42] It's for him to enter into the very heart of death itself, to undergo and suffer death for us. Have you ever thought about this? Jesus did not need to die.

If he was just thinking of himself, he could have lived on and on and on and on and death could not have taken him. He was stronger than death. But that wouldn't have helped us. Jesus had to enter death. He had to sink under the waters of death. He had to be swallowed under all the waves of the powers of darkness and plumb the darkest death depths.

And he had to defeat death, meet death and defeat it there for us. You see, only then can he redeem us from death if he swallows death into himself. Only then can he offer forgiveness, new life, new hope.

That's why he died. And you know God raised him from the dead to show, yes, death is defeated. There is a door in death for everyone who has faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

[24 : 48] That's why I think the first question in this story is so powerfully wrong. When the disciples say, don't you care that we are perishing, this is exactly why Jesus has come.

It's why he left the glory of God and entered our world to become a baby. It's because of his infinite care and love for those who are perishing and he comes to give his life as a ransom so that we would not perish.

It's fantastic. He knows every wave, he knows every storm. And this is the point of this great display of glory in this story for us. It's not there just to entertain or inform us, it's to shake us to our foundations so that we would keep asking this most important question, who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?

It's very clear that Jesus wants us to put our faith in him, that's the second question we'll come to next week. Jesus wants us to see him as the one who does have power over every threat, every storm, death itself, that he has been overwhelmed and gone through the depths of the sea because of his love.

And when we begin to place our faith in Jesus Christ, it does not mean that suddenly all our fears disappear, but it means that the deepest fear that you have, and I know what it is, but it's likely to do with death, the deepest fear is replaced by faith in this one who stills the storm.

[26 : 21] it doesn't mean life will be smooth sailing, the sea will become glass before you. There is a sea of glass, it's in heaven, putting your faith in Jesus. It doesn't mean you stop trusting other

people or stop loving other people, but it's to see that there's nothing else and there's no one else who deserves our love and deserves our worship, who has the power of everything that we do fear, and who has sunk to the very depths and understand so that we don't need to, and he will be with us in the midst of it.

It's looking to Jesus for what life is really about. It's bringing him into your life to deal with the reality of the storm, bringing his word, his word of power to bear on the circumstances of your life, trusting his words to change you, loving him and trusting him and hoping in him above everything else. So let's kneel and pray.