



Little-Faith Disciples

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Matthew 8:23-37

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The people in today's story are afraid in a storm. Some of you will be able to relate to this story. You become afraid in a storm. This fear of storms isn't limited to children. Adults become afraid in storms, so do animals. I know someone whose dog howls in a thunderstorm.

A healthy fear of storms is normal; it causes us to take necessary safety precautions. Excessive fear of storms causes us to do excessive things. We become compulsive about checking weather forecasts, we panic whenever we hear thunder, and take unusual safety precautions until the storm passes. The technical name for exaggerated fear of storms is called *astraphobia*. It's the third-most common phobia in our country today. One in ten people suffer from its debilitating effects.

Fear plays a dominant role in today's story. Jesus and his twelve disciples are traveling by boat on the Sea of Galilee. They are suddenly caught in a "great storm" (Matthew 8:24). The Greek word Matthew uses to describe this storm, *seismos*, is where we derive our word seismic. It's a seismic, epic kind of storm.

The Sea of Galilee is equivalent in size to Washington, D.C. It's sometimes called a "lake" by gospel writers. It's the lowest fresh water lake in the world, some 700 feet below sea level. It's also susceptible to sudden storms. Hot desert wind from the west coupled with moist air off of the lake provoke sudden, violent storms.

The Hebrews are not seafaring people. While some of Jesus' disciples make their living by the sea, most live close to shore. The sea represents chaos and danger.

Matthew writes this story as an eyewitness. He's in the boat with the other disciples when the storm erupts. The waves are so fierce that they threaten to swamp their small craft. Matthew reports that Jesus is asleep in the boat during the storm. He's exhausted after a grueling day of healing people and teaching growing crowds. Not even a violent storm can awaken him from deep slumber.

The disciples panic and rouse Jesus from sleep. "Lord, save us," they say. "We're going to drown" (Matthew 8:25). There are only three words in the original Greek, "Lord. Save. Dying." This is no time for excess words. "Save us, Lord; we're going down." The contrast between the disciples' fear and Jesus' sleeping is rather striking.

Jesus' response to his disciples is vintage Jesus, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26) The phrase, "you of little faith" is a single word in the Greek. It literally translates, "little faith." Jesus calls out his disciples for being little-faith people. In case you are wondering, this is not a complement.

Jesus stands up in the boat to rebuke the storm. *Rebuke* is a vigorous word. The only other place the word appears is in the gospels when Jesus rebukes evil spirits. Jesus' rebuke returns the sea to "great calm." At the outset of our story, it was all about a great storm. Now, the sea has been restored to great calm.

The disciples look at each other with I-can't-believe-what-just-happened expressions. Matthew records their response, "Who is this man? Even the wind and the sea obey him" (Matthew 8:27).

I admire Matthew's candor in this story. He relays this account with unflinching honesty. Had I been in the boat with the disciples, I would have portrayed us in more flattering terms. I'd want to downplay our lack of faith. Matthew leaves their spiritual failures untouched. There's no attempt to Photoshop their shortcomings or airbrush sin from the story. One reason I trust the Bible is the courage of its writers to tell the truth about themselves.

We can identify with these little-faith people. Why are you afraid? It's relevant for us to ask in our day.

Our story closes with the provocative question, "Who is this man?" Matthew's gospel seeks to answer this essential question. In chapters 8-9, Matthew supplies us with three representative stories of Jesus' power. In today's story, Jesus demonstrates power over nature. In the verses that follow our lesson, Jesus demonstrates power over demons. In the story that opens chapter 9, Jesus shows mastery over sickness and sin. Jesus has power over nature, power over evil spirits, and power over sickness and sin.

Who is this man? He is altogether human, tired enough to sleep through a storm. Yet he also demonstrates superhuman power to calm the storm. He is human in his sleeping yet divine in his ability to calm the storm.

So what difference does this story make in my life? I have two applications to suggest to you today. One has to do with fear and the other with faith.

My first application concerns fear. I empathize with their fear in a storm. Traveling in a boat about to be swamped in a storm would provoke panic in me also.

The disciples lose sight of who is in the boat with them. They have just witnessed Jesus healing a man with leprosy, another man with paralysis, and a woman threatened with high fever. If Jesus displays this much power over sickness, he can be trusted in a storm.

Some of you may be living in a storm right now. You may be dealing with a health crisis or season of grief, an ethical dilemma or family emergency. It could be the mental stress of COVID-19 is wearing you down. The storm surge is about to swamp your little boat.

Fear is what drives us to panic in a storm. Worry disables our ability to think clearly. Anxiety propels us to do something rash and impulsive. I have watched, over the years, what fear does to a church. It causes us to become all spun-up in crisis moments. Fear breeds panic. Fear separates people. Fear is the devil's playground.

Jesus models something essential in this story. Jesus is not only sleeping because he is tired. He sleeps because he trusts God's provision for his life.

Do not react with fear. Trust God's provision. Don't focus on the storm. Focus on who is in the boat with you. Sometimes, Jesus calms the storm. Sometimes, he calms us in in the storm. Why are you afraid, little-faith people, when Jesus is in the boat with you?

My second application has to do with faith. “Why are you afraid, little-faith people?” Good question. No good answer from our side.

Fast forward with me to the end of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus is arrested in large measure because people are afraid of him. Jesus threatens the religious establishment. He is taken to trial on trumped-up charges. They execute him on a Roman cross and bury him in a borrowed tomb. Yet God raises Jesus to life. This means Jesus is alive again. Here and now. Today. Death has no hold on him. He reigns at God’s right hand.

I remember as a child that people used to tell me that Jesus lives in your heart. It was hard for me to wrap my little head around this concept. How is it possible for one person to live inside another person? How could Jesus live in my heart?

Our granddaughter, Juliette, is four years old and lives in Massachusetts. One early morning, she appeared at her parents’ bedside, her head a few feet away from her sleeping dad, our son, Andrew. “Daddy,” she asked, “Where is God?” Her dad wiped sleep from his eyes and explained that God lives in Jesus. “Jesus is here with you, Juliette, and lives in your heart.” She looked out the window and sighed, “I still don’t see God.” Later that day, she was still processing what her dad had said. “Daddy, I still don’t see God.” It didn’t quite satisfy her that Jesus lived in her heart.

God lives in our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit: the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son living in us

through the Spirit. When we invite Jesus into our hearts, the Spirit of God takes up residence in us.

I was 19 when I opened my life and heart to Jesus. I was in college, living a self-absorbed life. I was oblivious to God. I attended church, but nothing seemed to register. Following Jesus was an altogether foreign concept.

I was invited to a Bible study. For reasons I still can't explain, I attended. The group was studying Philippians. Someone had to help me locate Philippians in my never-before-opened Confirmation Bible. Then, I took a deep dive and read Revelation. A whole new universe opened up for me. This strange prophecy jammed my circuits and stopped me dead in my tracks. You mean to tell me Jesus is coming back and nobody ever told me about it?

I started hanging out with Jesus' followers. My center of gravity shifted; my priorities were rearranged. I had new motivation to make needed changes in my life.

That was 50 years ago now. In my wildest dreams, I could never, ever have imagined talking about it with you today.

I have lived life both ways, with Jesus and without Jesus. Life is better with Jesus. Not easier, but better. Way better.

Open your life to Jesus. Ask Jesus in prayer to come into your heart and life. If you have already done so, do so again. Give Jesus more of you. Don't hold back. He will change your life in ways you never thought possible.

I remember reading as a 19-year-old this verse from Revelation, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in...” (Revelation 3:20). I think of the children’s song, “Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come into today, come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.”