

## A Curious Kind of Storm

*A homily preached by Emily Hull McGee on Mark 4:35-41  
on January 25, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

Good morning, First Baptist Church on Fifth, and any friends who are joining in today! I'm recording this before the storm, but I bet by now, you're looking out your window and seeing a thick and cold layer of snow and ice on your road.

Perhaps there's a part of you which is appreciating the change in rhythms that a winter storm brings, the limited expectations that come when the world seems to shut down, the soups and warm throws and thick novels that are within reach.

But maybe there's a part of you that sees the tree that's stretching too low for comfort over your roof or the branches drooping over the power lines, and has you stirring with anxiety. Anxiety over these cold days ahead, worrying about power outages, or how in the world you'll keep your children occupied when they're inevitably out of school next week.

More likely, though, this anxiety you feel stretches beyond this particular storm to the rest. Perhaps this storm reminds you of others: times when the ground of your life has irrevocably shaken, times when all that powers your living goes out without a warning, times when you are forced to be painfully still and quiet. Or perhaps your anxieties simmer just below the surface these days, as every click, every scroll, every report, every image you see in the news threatens to pull you under.

## II.

Let me read for you a familiar storm story – not of a winter storm, but a windstorm, found in the Gospel of Mark 4:35-41. Hear now these words of God for you, the people of God.

*On that day when evening had come, Jesus said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And waking up, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” 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?”*

“Let us go across to the other side,” Jesus says to his disciples there on the Sea of Galilee, that stretch of water in the center of Israel. On this side of the lake, the disciples had their bearings. They knew the landmarks, where they could pick up the best fish sandwich, what local handymen to call on if their boat sprang a leak. On this side, their place within the landscape of things was sure. On this side, fear and anxiety were held at bay if only for normalcy’s sake.

Yet Jesus had told them they’d be going to the other side. The Gentile side. The unfamiliar side. The side where they no longer occupied the status or the privilege of their home. The side where they can’t help but to feel threatened, because everyone around them would be strange, foreign,

unknown, alien. The side that you don't just drop into, certainly not at night, after a long day, with a boat full of Israelites.

"Let us go across to the other side," Jesus says, knowing his followers then and now might shrink away from such a crossing. Rare is the person, the people, the group among us who wants to cross all which divides us. Give us a fence, a wall, a boundary, we beg, to keep those people out and our people in. Shield us with cameras, guns, bombs, prisons, 401ks, rules, votes, orthodoxy to hold and keep that which is dearest. Let us keep choosing to see through a glass dimly so we don't have to see the other as equally bearing God's image in this world. But Jesus zigzagged from one side of the sea to another, one people group to another, one religious tradition to another, one way of living to another, his life in cruciform. Back and forth he went, as one pastor says, "as if with each crossing, he was making another stitch in the torn fabric of the world, mending the divide, binding one side to the other, creating a reconciling seam."<sup>1</sup>

"Leaving the crowd behind," Mark tells us, "they took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was." The nervous disciples weren't sure, while Jesus, perhaps tired or hungry or ready to wind down, was just as he was. "A great windstorm arose," the gospel says, "and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." With furious energy, that storm bore down on the boat. Waves poured in and caused it to swing wildly from one side to another. The sky was dark, the water was angry, those sea billows rolled, and oh how the disciples were terrified.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan R. Briehl,  
<https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20024ec/sermon for the 2nd sunday after pentecost>

### III.

We'd be terrified too. We are, in fact, when the terror of the diagnosis shreds our expectations. When the relationship turns raging and violent as the worst storm. When fear of the future, of threats to democracy, to our planet, to human rights, to our livelihood floods our lives and we can hardly come up for air. When the gusts of death howl through our living. When all that is in us cries for smooth sailing on a warm sunny day, for a long horizon resting lazily underneath the sunrise, for a familiar and steady shore.

These days, many among us find deepest terror in the particular storm of authoritarianism that rages all around us, betraying every hint of Jesus's life and message. Under the cloak of Christian exceptionalism, they demonize and threaten and kill their enemy in the name of the One who says, "love your enemy." Under the guise of Christian faith, they terrorize and traumatize and take their neighbor in the name of the One who says, "love your neighbor." Under the cover of Christian leaders, they grasp and hold and wield power in the name of the One whose power is made perfect in weakness. Under the banner of Christian nationalism, they rip away at that torn fabric of the world, tearing the stitches of Jesus's reconciling seam.

It is a curious kind of storm which feels at once, all around, and far away; threats from all sides, and far removed from the daily rhythms of our living; everything we see when on our screens, and nowhere to be found when we look out our windows.

Our hearts aching and our guts churning, we don't know what to do with this fear in this storm. Do we engage more deeply or step away more regularly? Are we catastrophizing or are we minimizing? What is ours to do,

and what is mine to do? And in the wind and the waves and the worry, we cry out to Jesus, “teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!”

#### IV.

A couple of months ago, I was given this little book by Hanna Reichel called *For Such a Time As This: An Emergency Devotional*. Reichel is a theologian and scholar of the Confessing Church’s resistance to Nazi Germany, offering here a “thoughtful framework for discernment rooted in scripture, historical wisdom, and the core commitments of the Christian faith” for this present moment.

Her first entry speaks of such a storm. It’s not easy to remain calm, especially when emotional flooding immobilizes us in the face of the overwhelm. And the dangers of the storm are real, of course, but a distraction too. “No one can pay attention to all the things all the time,” she says. And “no one can live in a constant state of emergency; energy and attention are limited goods.”

Let me read you what she says here:

“Keeping your focus, feelings, and thoughts your own is hard. But it is itself an act of resistance. Be strategic with your attention. Knowing that a storm is brewing will allow you to be prepared. Losing sight of the horizon under crashing waves won’t. Checking your social media feed every hour will not help you. Having spaces and times free from it will.... Keeping some areas of life from the all-extending grasp is hard. But it generates spaces where other thoughts can be thought, other feelings can be felt, other priorities can reign than those dictated by emergencies real or staged.” Or in the words of Karl Barth, “a short, sharp glance suffices.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hanna Reichel, *For Such a Time As This: An Emergency Devotional*, p11.

Perhaps that's what Jesus was doing when he slept through that storm, slumbering through the tossing tempest, resting through the crossing, resisting the urge to let the discipline of hope drown in the tides of fear.

And perhaps that is a gift that this storm might offer us today and in these cold, icy days ahead. Time for sabbath instead of dizzying preparation for ice storms or ICE storms. Time to train our eyes on Jesus Christ, who he loved, how he loved, what he did, why it matters... instead of allowing our eyes to be mesmerized by the floodlights of 24/7 news and opinions. Time to be uncomfortably still and awkwardly analog. Time to cultivate our ordinary, faithful lives in confession of an extraordinary God. Time to remember that Jesus never leaves us, no matter the storm, and that we're in this boat together, no matter its impact. Time to trust that God is God and we are not.

So that when the storm subsides, when the horizon clears, when we shake out the sails and dry out the stern, when the ice melts and the ground begins to warm, when the new day dawns and the chaos of today unfolds toward bright hope for tomorrow, we cannot help but to turn to one another in awe to say, "who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Amen.