

## Chapter 1

# DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them, just as he was, in the boat. And other boats were with him.

—Mark 4:35-36

I don't know about you, but I like to know what lies ahead. When faced with a list of options, some people like to be surprised, but I don't. It goes against my controlling nature. Fortunately, God knows that it's sometimes good for me to be surprised. And despite how I feel about it in the moment, I know that it's a good thing that he doesn't play by my rules. He knows what I need better than I do. In order to help me, he sometimes surprises me and leads me into unexpected situations. Jesus had to do exactly the same thing with his apostles.

After a full day of teaching the crowds, Jesus instructed his apostles to get into a boat and cross over the Sea of Galilee. It sounds simple enough, doesn't it? For those

who were fishermen, it was just another day at the office. At least, that's what they thought. In reality, they were on their way to school. They would soon be learning an unforgettable lesson about fear. There are a few extra seats in the boat. How about if we accompany them? We just might learn a thing or two.

## TRAVELING IN THE DARK

When I travel, I always prefer to do so during the daylight hours. There's something about darkness that makes traveling a little more complicated, especially if you're heading to an unfamiliar destination. Sometimes, however, traveling at night is a necessity. In 1987, my mother threw a surprise sixty-fifth birthday party for my father. It was scheduled for a Sunday evening, the same day that I had to fly to the West Coast for a software conference. Missing either of these events was not an option, so I scheduled my flight for late in the evening. I was not an experienced traveler, so the thought of arriving in Southern California at midnight, renting a car, and driving thirty minutes to the hotel (no GPS in those days!) filled me with anxiety. It all worked out, but there's just something scarier about traveling at night.

Jesus chose to begin this trip across the Sea of Galilee in the evening. It was not an accident. He had to teach his apostles something and knew that the evening was the best time to do it. Why? One possible reason is that the lack of light would take away some of their confidence. They would be more willing to recognize how much they needed him. Try to imagine the difficulty of a carpenter's

son trying to instruct fishermen on their home turf. Jesus needed a way to overcome the home-field advantage.

Sometimes the Lord does the same thing with us. He often seems to choose the “worst possible time” to teach us a lesson. What might be a bad time for us, however, is often the best time to learn. Although we profess to be followers of Christ, many of us have become convinced that we are self-sufficient. We become used to handling (or worrying about) our problems.

In order for Jesus to work with us, he sometimes has to take us out of our comfort zone. Yes, he will sometimes ring the school bell at inconvenient times, but he really does know what he's doing. We might not be able to see in the dark, but he can. And since he's the teacher, he knows the best time for class to begin. Questioning his timing will only cause frustration. Instead of asking, “Why?” (Why is this happening?), it's more effective to ask, “What?” (What is the Lord trying to teach me?). Some lessons are better learned in night school. After all, the Light of the World shines a lot brighter in the dark than he does in the daylight!

## LET'S GO!

If God wants you to do something, he will let you know. Sometimes this involves a lengthy discernment process, but other times he thrusts us into a new or challenging situation with little or no warning. Don't be alarmed when it happens. It's one of his favorite teaching methods.

Jesus wanted his apostles to cross the Sea of Galilee, so he told them to get in the boat. There's no mention in the

Bible of any prior notice or any additional details. All we know is that, when evening came, he instructed them to hop in the boat and “go across to the other side.” He provided no details, other than what they needed to know. Without asking any questions, they obeyed and set sail.

When my wife, Eileen, was pregnant with our twins (Elizabeth and Mary), she spent a great deal of time under observation from various doctors. It was a very high-risk pregnancy, and the girls were only given a 10 percent chance of being born alive. When Eileen entered her twenty-eighth week, we went to the doctor for our regular Monday office visit. After reviewing the ultrasound and determining that the girls were still alive (they could have died at any time), he told us that everything appeared “normal,” so we breathed a sigh of relief and headed home. We were scheduled to be reevaluated on Wednesday.

After lunch, we got a call from the doctor. He had spoken with one of his colleagues and recommended that Eileen be hospitalized for the duration of the pregnancy. Less than an hour later, we were sitting in Eileen’s hospital room waiting for the doctor to come in. We knew nothing other than the fact that Eileen would be here for the duration of the pregnancy.

At last he entered the room, smiled, and asked if we were ready. “Ready for what?” Eileen asked. “Ready to have two babies!” he answered. We were stunned. The two of us had been so focused on taking one day at a time that we hadn’t seen this coming. When we got that phone

call an hour earlier, we had no idea how short the “duration of the pregnancy” would be.

Just as Eileen’s doctor didn’t give away his plan, Jesus didn’t mention anything about a storm when he told his followers to get in the boat. Being presented with too many details can cause our brains to become overloaded and take our focus away from the matter at hand. It might not seem like it, but sometimes it’s better that we don’t know what’s coming. Eileen didn’t have to know what her doctor was thinking. She needed to get to the hospital. The apostles didn’t need to know what Jesus was thinking. They needed to get in the boat. As a result, everyone was spared unneeded anxiety and the plans fell into place nicely.

## LEAVING THE CROWD

Whether we realize it or not, we are greatly influenced by the world. And, for the most part, that’s not a good thing. Many of the concepts we accept without questioning—even those that are not intrinsically sinful or do not directly oppose the teaching of Jesus Christ—are false beliefs that can greatly hinder our efforts to grow closer to the Lord. Concepts such as self-reliance, luck, control, negativity, and comfort can be extremely harmful to our spiritual growth. The more we believe the message of the world, the less we’ll believe the message of Christ.

Jesus had an important lesson to teach those in his inner circle: He wanted to teach them that he (the son of God) was more powerful than the forces of nature. Additionally, he wanted them to get used to the idea that they

could turn to him in times of trouble. And the only way for Jesus to impress these lessons upon his followers effectively was to leave the crowd behind and to silence the competing voices, many of which contradicted the lesson Jesus wanted to deliver.

In order to overcome the harmful (and false) message of the world, it is essential that we find a way to escape from the crowd and spend time with Jesus. Otherwise, his words get drowned out. Instead of hearing God tell you, “Do not worry,” you’ll hear all around you voices saying that you have every reason to worry. You’ll be encouraged to practice self-reliance instead of relying upon God. The world’s standard of truth, “seeing is believing,” will be proclaimed so loudly that you’ll lose sight of the invisible (but very real) kingdom of God.

Getting time away from the crowd can be done in many different ways. A formal retreat (where you spend time alone with God as part of a directed program) is ideal, but is not practical for everyone. For the busy parent, leaving the crowd behind may simply involve limiting social media, Internet, or TV usage. Waking up early and spending time reading scripture or praying is also effective in retreating from the world. Other possibilities could involve taking a walk or turning off the car radio. Anything that enables you to hear the voice of Jesus more than the voice of the world will do the trick. You need to be able to hear the Lord speaking and teaching you, especially when you’re in the midst of a storm.

## IN CONTROL (FOR THE MOMENT)

Fishermen are at home on the water. Earning one's living on the sea makes it necessary to understand weather, sailing, and the behavior of fish. A seasoned fisherman knows the best place to catch fish and can anticipate an oncoming storm. Therefore, it's no surprise that when it was time to cross the Sea of Galilee, Jesus let the fishermen be in control of the boat. When Mark writes that "they took him with them," we can conclude that the apostles were in charge of the boat. Only after they were well on their journey did Jesus need to shake things up a bit to teach them to be dependent on him.

For some of us, giving up control is a difficult process. In order to become a follower of Christ, however, it is absolutely necessary. Delivering a subtle (or sometimes, not so subtle) reminder that we're not in control is one of the Lord's favorite techniques for inviting us into a deeper relationship with him. And, because each of us will respond in a different way, the intensity of his reminders (or "storms") will vary. I have seen a variety of these storms in my life—my best friend going away to college, a health crisis, an unexpected job loss, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jesus knew what it would take for the newly appointed apostles to surrender their lives fully to him; the desire to be in control of their own lives would have been a major obstacle to this. As fishermen, they were used to calling the shots, especially when it came to life at sea. So Jesus knew exactly where to strike. He shook things up by reminding them just how little they were able to control

what happened to them. As you'll see in the next chapter, a furious storm would get the job done. Somewhere between the time they got in the boat and when they arrived at their destination, they learned that they weren't in control. More importantly, they learned who was.

Whether the storms we face are literal or situational, we all know what it's like to find ourselves in trouble and realize that we're not in control. You may be going through such a storm in your own life now. Don't be alarmed. Jesus is trying to get your attention. We'll discuss how to respond in future chapters. For now, just realize what's happening and recognize that he is working in your life. You don't have to feel grateful, but you might want to thank him for the reminder about who is in control of your life. It really is a good thing.

### WRAP-UP

It was evening when Jesus instructed his apostles to get the boat ready. They would be leaving the crowd behind and taking a trip across the Sea of Galilee. With the experienced fishermen leading the way, Jesus joined them in the boat, and they set sail. There is no reason to believe that anything was unusual about this journey. It was just another trip out to sea. In reality, however, they were about to experience something they would never forget. What appeared to be a typical boating expedition would turn out to be a crash course in trusting Jesus.

When Jesus wants to teach us something, he often uses a storm. It's an extremely effective way of making us aware that we need him. It often occurs without warning.



Don't panic if you're in the middle of a storm right now. It might look dark, and you may feel overwhelmed. That is by design. You are right where you're supposed to be.

Before we get ready to move on to the next chapter, we need to consider one more thing. Sometimes Jesus leads us into the storm (as he did with the apostles), and sometimes he doesn't. By making bad choices, we often create our own storms. That's totally fine. In the eyes of Jesus, one storm is the same as another. No matter how the storm came about, Jesus can and will teach you in the midst of the rain, wind, and crashing waves.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think the apostles would have reacted when Jesus asked them to get in the boat if they had known a storm was coming?
2. None of us can predict the future. Why do you think God designed it that way?
3. Why do you think Jesus instructed the apostles to get into the boat and head out into the darkness? Couldn't he have taught them the same lesson on the land?

PRAYER

Dear Jesus, as I look around me, I am surrounded by darkness and uncertainty. I may be unable to see or feel you, but I know that you're with me. With you by my side, I know I can handle whatever comes my way. Please use this storm to teach me the lesson you want me to learn. Amen.