

FEARLESS FAITH OR FAITHLESS FEARS

Dr. George O. Wood

Mark 4:35-41. Statements before I begin to read.

During the summer I've been preaching through the minor prophets and fully had intended on completing that series. Along the way having been waylaid by an appendectomy. I got a couple weeks behind and really feel a tug in my heart to go another direction as well as next Sunday. Then two weeks from now we begin a series in Luke. So I'm just going to save the last of the four minor prophets that we didn't get to for a special kind of little mini series some other time down the road.

Also after I had arrived in my heart at the message that I should bring you this morning and the text I should preach from I learned that two weeks ago Wayne used the same text. So evidently the Lord is wanting to say something twice.

Mark 4:35-41 "Jesus said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' Leaving the crowd they took him with them just as he was in the boat. Other boats were with them. A great storm of wind arose. And the waves beat into the boat so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern asleep on the cushion and they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?' And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace be still.' The wind ceased and there was a great calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?' They were filled with awe and said to one another 'Who then is this that even wind and sea obey him?'"

I recall my first serious encounter with this scripture came 11 years ago. I'd been selected as the senior student preacher at Fuller seminary for the last chapel of the year. I was frightened for two reasons. First, I faced one of the world's most distinguished theological faculties who could spot the slightest error I might make in any kind of interpretation of the scriptural text. And secondly I faced my fellow students who by that time as all students had learned to be geniuses in the art of sermon criticism.

These two things did not contribute to making me very comfortable or at ease for the occasion. In an excited voice and trembling body and two hands that clutched the full manuscript lest any golden word drop unspoken, I delivered my heart for the theme of this text "High Winds, Desperate Voices, and an Unexpected Word." That has three points like any good sermon.

High winds – the unexpected reverses, the unexpected circumstances of life that assail us in a moment we do not expect. That threaten our existence and our faith.

Desperate voices – our cries to the Lord in the middle of the storm and our resentment of the Lord's having gone to sleep on us in the whole process of things.

The Unexpected word – the Lord rebukes the storm and he rebukes us because we have not had faith in him in the midst of the storm.

The sermon was especially real to me at the time. This text has always been real to me since then. I was completing 7 years of formal academic training for the ministry. I had gone the route you were supposed to go. Four years of college and 3 years of seminary. I was now ready

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to offer myself to the church, the Lord and the world. Nobody wanted me. I have yet to find a church who wants a 24 year old, single pastor. I was in the boat and the Lord was asleep.

When the chapel sermon ended the people were very kind and gracious come up and shake your hand and tell you what a magnificent you preached. You feel adequately humbled and awed and all those kind of things. But among those that day who came to shake my hand was a favorite teacher of mine, Dr. Harrison, professor of New Testament at Fuller Seminary. Brilliant man and insightful scholar of the scripture. Yet a humble man who walked with God. It was said around campus if Dr. Harrison's courses just consisted of the opening prayer he gave at the beginning of every lecture it would be worth the cost of tuition alone. He prayed not for show but he really prayed to the Lord.

Dr. Harrison came to me and in his very kind and non critical way shared that Mark 4:35-41 had always been his favorite text in scripture. He went on to share that the reason why it had been such a favorite of his that when you get into circumstances of life, the threatening storm it is easy to forget that Jesus began the journey by saying in a very calm voice, "Let us go across to the other side." He told me that when you forget the word of Jesus the result will always be fear and a lack of faith. Essential to getting through any storm is the realization that Jesus told us "We are going to the other side." In the middle of the storm they'd forgotten his words. Because they forgot they were filled with fear and they were rebuked because they had no faith.

I felt humbled. Dr. Harrison had pointed out to me the thing which my whole carefully crafted sermon had missed – the central point of the whole story in this gospel of Mark. That you have lack of faith when you forget the word of Jesus.

Although I missed the point in that sermon that day that lesson has remained with me as kind of a bulwark for my life.

Two weeks after that sermon I was, of all things, signing a contract to teach full time at Evangel college something totally out of the blue. Three months after the sermon I was meeting Jewel. Six months after the sermon I was marrying Jewel. In a very quick time the Lord brought me through a lot of storms. After 4 years of teaching and campus ministry at Evangel college I felt the Lord telling me to go again to the other side, back over the lake. The Lord keeps telling us to go back and forth across the lake. Back to Fuller seminary in California to finish my doctrinal work. That whole year was a storm. Jewel was sick about all the year. There were unbelievable financial pressures, work schedule begin about six in the morning and finish about twelve midnight for days and months on end. Because of the busyness, the absence of friends and the absence of long time friends, the morning after they put the diploma in my hand, the family and I (the four of us) got in our little Renault and headed down the interstate back again to what we felt was the right side of the lake, back to Missouri. Back to Evangel college where I would again become campus pastor, it's first full time campus pastor.

But of all things within five months the Lord started calling me back to the other side of the lake. A letter arrived in mid November 1970 from Glad Tidings Assembly of God pulpit committee: Would I be available to candidate at the church? Would I be interested?

My immediate response was no. I'm not interested. I've gone through all of this and come back here. I've just started. I'm happy doing what I'm doing here. Touch the lives of students on an

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individual level and I have a captive audience of 1000 students to preach to every week. They've got to attend and hear me.

But 10 weeks after receiving that letter I had said yes to the Lord's command, "Let us go across to the other side."

I was 29 years of age. My pastoral theology professor at Fuller Seminary had warned us young, preparing-for-the-clergy people that we should never pastor our first church more than two years. Because, he said, you're going to make too many irreversible mistakes. It's well to make them and get out.

Six years have now nearly gone by and I've made my share of irreversible mistakes! When I first came to this church the Lord had put within my heart a vision of what he wanted for our church and for this community. He called me to get in the boat with some other folks who had the same vision. He wanted us together to fulfill his destiny for this church.

From time to time I have to recharge myself with that vision or I'll forget it and I'll begin to drift. The past few months I have felt in my own heart some drifting. And some need to get regvanized in my spirit, to recognize what God's called us to do and to get on with it and keep going.

At the beginning I felt that the church is meant to continue the ministry of Jesus. We're not to do the same things he did for only one can die for the sins of the world. But Jesus came into life to glorify the Father, to make disciples, to save sinners, and to meet human need. It struck me that the church ought to be doing this same task. Making disciples, reaching the lost, those without Christ, and meeting needs according to our level of ability and as the Spirit supplies the energy and power.

But underlying these purposes has been throughout the dream and the prayer that God would make us as a church a place and a people who our love for Christ and our love for one another is greater than any differences that we possess. Five years ago, nearly six, I began praying for a heterogeneous church. Five years ago on Sunday night at Glad Tidings I preached a sermon in which I compared our church then to the three stages of the New Testament church. I said Acts 1:8 says that they were to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world. This first stage was what was then the Jewish stage. People getting together with similar cultural backgrounds, similar ethnic groupings, similar theological views. The Jewish phase.

The second phase was the Samaritan phrase. We began taking in half sisters and half brothers kind of a mix.

The third stage was the world. Reaching people from every background and walk and previous understanding of life.

At that time our congregation of about 125 persons were as I said, kind of in the Jewish stage of the church. Most of us came from the same denominational background. Assemblies of God. Most of us had the same kind of feel toward life.

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Then I said, kind of prophetically, the next stage of our church would be the Samaritan stage where we found people coming to be a part of our body, to make one body, who were from various church backgrounds and denominations and walks of life.

Finally the third stage would come. Witness to the world. Persons without any previous background in church or with the Lord would come to know the Lord and be a part of our fellowship.

Of course I want everything to happen instantly. I little realized that it took decades for this to happen in the book of Acts in the New Testament church. But it was kind of a prophecy of what I wanted the Lord to do. I wanted the Lord to see this church to be kind of a microcosm of the church universal. If in the church of Jesus Christ all over the world there are people from all walks of life, all cultures, all races, all church affiliations and gospel divergences, if these make up the true body of Christ all over the world then why can we not do something daring and in one body see those same divergences expressed. If we could do this I thought, what a witness to the world. Not a verbal witness *per se* but a witness of love which is what Jesus prayed for. That our love for one another would be the means by which the world would come to believe that the Father had sent him.

Within weeks after I'd expressed this vision to the church the Holy Spirit powerfully moved upon the church body to change its name to more accurately reflect its identity, Newport Christian Center. I underline "Christian" for it is the most foundational word and takes precedence of theological viewpoint or any denominational nametag. By secret ballot in business meeting the congregation voted unanimously to change the name of the church.

A visitor that evening thought she was coming to a worship service. She later related she felt the presence of God in a unique way. And was shocked/surprised that when she came into the sanctuary that we were holding a business meeting. Never had she been in a church business meeting that was marked by such unity, love, purpose, anointing. And neither had I.

So we prayed for the Lord to give us diverse people who would find unity together in Christ. And the church grew. Three years ago a transplant took place for both Newport Christian Center and First Assembly of God right here in Costa Mesa. Both joined together as Newport-Mesa Christian Center in order to strengthen the witness of the Lord to this community. In the natural I don't believe this could have been accomplished. There would have only been bringing of two groups of people together but not a true unity. Yet we have seen the Lord bring to pass what we've prayed for. We have seen the Lord create one body and all along the way keep on having diversity so that as these three years have gone on we have seen increasing diversity within our church family.

Lately however I've been reading literature from the field of the church growth movement. This is new emerging among evangelical Christians which is dedicated to finding out through research what is it that makes a church grow and what is it that makes a non-growing church. They've done research among growing and non growing churches all over the world to come up with some basic principles that pertain to what makes a church grow. One of the principles expressed is this: the vital sign of a healthy growing church is that its membership is composed of basically one kind of people. Even in church, birds of a feather flock together. In church growth terminology this is called the homogeneous unit principle. People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers. A homogeneous unit is simply a

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group of people who consider each other to be “our kind of people.” They have many areas of mutual interest. They share the same culture, they socialize freely, when they are together they are comfortable and they all feel at home. The churches most likely to grow are those which bring together in the local fellowship those of a single homogeneous unit.

I have enough appreciation for scholarship to realize that may be a valid principle if you’re measuring growth in terms of numbers. But simply this means persons with similar prejudices will be together. The idea is the church should provide a safe social environment where people can feel at home with others just like ourselves.

I have one problem with this whole theological assumption. It is the problem did Jesus really want his church, *this church*, to be that way? Does he desire narrowness or breadth in his body? Would he be more pleased if we kept our prejudices or shed them? Would he be happier if we made friends with people just like us or if we bridge the gap and practice love for those who were different from us? Would he have us set down only with the righteous or also with sinners? Or vice versa? Would he want us to fellowship with only those who look like us and think like us and act like us? Or would he want us to keep an open heart and open mind and open hand toward people who are divergent from us?

In the notes of the sermon I preached five years ago concerning the vision for this church I found a little thing I had penned in: “Be prepared for the tension of the heterogeneous church.” I had no idea what that meant. I’d never been a part of any church like that. Now I know. Yet I praise the Lord for every tension within this church body which is truly reflective of our divergence and our diversity. I believe diversity fills the heart of Jesus and I believe our diversity, as a congregation, is the result of answered prayer.

To all over these years, we have extended and we continue to extend the word of welcome which Jesus gave. “Come unto me all...” Our church does not seek a specialized ministry to any one age group or even to a few age groups. Babies to children to teens to college students to young adults, adults, middle, older age people, senior citizens we have said Come within the framework of this church and let us be co-laborers together. This does not mean we are 100% effective in every ministry, to every person, to every age group. We certainly are not. Our hearts are sensitive to being used of the Lord to a greater degree. But at least within our church family we see expressed the expansiveness of the generations so that within the church family, in the Lord, you can find grandparents and grandchildren, parents and children, and in the Lord brothers and sisters.

Our church does not seek a narrow and specialized ministry to the married or to the single. To the never married, to the formerly married, to the widowed, parents with partners, parents without partners, the newly married, the married for some time. Parents with children, couples without children, to all the range we say in the name of Jesus, Come.

Our church seeks not a specialized ministry along denominational lines although the church has denominational affiliation, it is not predominant and it is not crucial to the word “Christian.”

To those with and without church background in the name of Jesus we have said come. Come Catholics, Protestants, orthodox, Jew. Come all. Come to Jesus. Come to one another.

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We believe in the word that Paul writes in Ephesians 4 “Let us maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace until we all attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. Our church does not even seek to separate believers from one another on doctrinal questions which all fair minded Christians recognize are not essential to salvation. We take our stand with the basics. We believe in the inspiration of God’s word. We believe in Jesus, his virgin birth, his sinless life, in his saving and atoning death, in his physical resurrection from the dead, in his ascension into heaven, and his literal return to the earth. On these there is no compromise.

But we say in respect to issues which fair minded persons agree are not essential to salvation even though this church may have a doctrinal perspective on that issue, Come and see the Holy Spirit bridge the differences which we may possess.

We believe that the unity of the Spirit precedes the unity of the faith. If I understand anything about Paul’s use of the word “unity” it means unity of doctrine. So the unity of the Spirit, the unity of fellowship in Christ precedes that time until we all come to the unity of the faith and the full knowledge of the Son of God.

We welcome all. We’re going to worship together in heaven if we confess the same Lord and believe together that God has raised Jesus from the dead. So if we’re going to spend the ages worshipping together in heaven why in the world can’t we start doing it now? Our church seeks not to specialize in reaching any particular class of people. Among us are the rich, the middle class, the poor and in a separate category all by themselves, the student. We have the laborer and the teacher. The secretary and the executive. The doctor and the nurse. The architect and the mason. The unemployed, the self-employed, the employee, the employer.

Our church seeks no alignment with a political philosophy. We welcome the political conservative and the political liberal. The Democrat, the Republican and the independent. Only when an issue is in the area of moral concern is there a statement from the pulpit or the official position of the church. We believe we are unique in that we can embrace that wide a range. Somehow the Lord Jesus, can love that person who is on the opposite end of the political spectrum from me. Our church does not seek to impose a uniformity of spiritual response upon its people. Worship quietly, audibly, worship with the traditional music of the past or with the music of the present. With hymns, with choruses. However you worship and however you express your freedom in the Lord above all “Love your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, with all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Our church seeks not to impose the unity of dress upon its people. Within the bounds of Bible teaching on attractiveness and modesty we say express your freedom. Formally or casually.

God has placed us as living stones in this body as Peter declares. That means we’re not prefab or preformed material. We’re the real stuff. Quarried out of real rock. Because some of us are such rocky people there are a lot of edges. Not smooth. We’re kind of jagged. I know I am.

You know what the Lord wants to do with all these living stones? He wants to fit them together in his church. His beautiful mosaic. His variegated mosaic of shape and size and color so that we might together become the building of God. If he’s going to fit us together that means one of the tremendous functions this church has is to help do a little sanding and a little cutting so that some of the impatience and impertinence and spiritual ego and pride and self-sufficiency and all these kind of things in my life that I need my brother to criticize and to work on will make me a

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more pliable person. I need my brother who is divergent from me or I'll become smug and spiritually super satisfied.

God did not call us to be like each other. God called us to be like Jesus. The more I become like Jesus, the more I become myself and the more I'm able to love my brother and appreciate his uniqueness. But the more I try to become like someone else, the less I become like myself and the less I become like Jesus.

In this way in this uniqueness in the Lord I find true unity in the body, a true unity which is not a carbon copy imitation in a church body which mistakes similarity for the inward unity of the spirit. God did not call this church and he does not call it now to be a cookie cutter, with all the cookies neatly rolling down the conveyor belt with the same sameness. We seek not the outward stamp of uniformity the inward stamp of the Holy Spirit who bears witness in our heart that we are the children of God.

I needed to say all these things and I needed to say them again and in a fresh way because in recent months that at times I have felt like one of the disciples in the boat during the storm. God called me here with a purpose nearly six years he told me, Let us go across to the other side. In these nearly six years from the time I got into the boat with a far smaller congregation than now we have seen many more get into the boat believing that God wanted us to show his love would transcend our differences. But at times fear rises in my heart. I look at my limited abilities as a pastor and I despair. I simply cannot put everything together. Or most things even. I know from conversations with people in this church family how difficult it is to see community gel and take form. It is not easy to see community form within the diversity of this church. So I become easily discouraged. I see in myself from time to time and I see in others judgmental attitudes towards other persons in the body and I wonder why that person couldn't be just a little bit more like me. The waves swamp my boat.

So I begin thinking despairing thoughts. "Lord, not enough people are willing to give their time to one another or commit themselves to the work of the church or cross over in the boat to get to the other brother or sister sitting on the other side." People I've loved have moved away and a few have fallen away. I finally cry out when all my efforts have failed "Lord, it's time you wake up and help. You're in the boat too!" That's just the point. The Lord has been in the boat all along. So how in the world could the Lord ever allow this boat to sink?

No, he said, Let us go across to the other side. And God is going to help us fulfill the dreams which he has put in our heart and the vision of the Spirit which he has given us for this church family.

At the beginning of this year there are some exhortations I want to give this body. Seven.

First, I'd like to ask all of this body to pray with me that all of us would keep the vision of this church before us. Especially spend time alone worshipping the Lord and interceding for this, his body. No church can ever attain the ministry that the Lord has for it unless it is sustained by prayer and intercession of God's people. God has called us to do something very unique and therefore unique times of prayer are also necessary.

Second, love one another. Really reach out to one another and be forgiving and accepting. If God calls you to correct your brother then correct your brother in love and not in judgment. Use

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the opportunity if it comes to find out who your brother and sister are. For it's only in knowing one another can we truly be a body who feels one another's joys and sorrows and needs.

Third, when you come to church services seek to come full instead of empty. In the coming months the Lord will be bringing so many from various stations of life in the world. Many will come empty. They need to be blessed by the overflow of all of our lives. Not simply the overflow of the people who get up and speak or sing or stand behind this microphone. But from all of our lives. So come to the church service, seeking not so much a blessing but seeking to be a blessing. Don't feel bad however if you want a blessing. We all do. Be filled with prayer and in the private sanctuary of the Lord, rejoice in the Lord that when we are together we may more fully express the joy of the Lord and his glory.

Fourth, confess and repent of any attitudes or actions which are wrong in the Lord's eyes. If you have wronged your brother or your sister go and be reconciled. I have been as wrong on this on my own and have needed the inter rebuke of the Lord and the interposition of a brother. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

Fifth, be patient and prayerful with your fellow believer who is different from you or who rejects you.

Sixth, do not think of what you can receive from your brother or the church but rather what you can give. The Bible teaches us that only when we give do we receive. It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Seventh, use speech wisely and for edification. The tongue can be a fire, tearing down in moments what it's taken the Lord's people years to construct. Destructive criticism I have learned by hard experience is any criticism of my brother that I tell someone else and not him. The Lord wants me to be direct and let my tongue be used for praise and prayer and blessings.

I mentioned in a sermon the church is so often the third humiliation of Jesus. Theological term, humiliation. It means Christ condescended to come to earth. His first humiliation was when he left the glory of heaven to become a poor baby in a cattle stall in a Bethlehem manger. The second humiliation is when he went to the cross, endured the suffering, the shame, the despisement of the cross. Endured the humiliation for us. The third humiliation is so often his church. His body that brings him shame and reproach.

But we ought not to see the humiliation of Jesus. But the joy of Jesus. Isaiah, when he prophesied of Jesus hanging upon the cross, looked down the road of time and saw what Jesus longed for when he hung on the cross. What kind of fruit that he wanted to come out of his experience on the cross. Isaiah says in chapter 53 "He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied."

Lord, we are your fruit. We want to satisfy you.

Today on an individual basis you may be going through storm. God give you the strength to believe his word in the midst of a storm. He is with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. But he has said to you, "Let us go to the other side." As a body of believers together coming to the communion table let us thank God for what he's done in our midst. Let us not be content with what is in the past. Let us strain forward so we might be all that God wants us to be

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all that God wants us to be. But let us praise God for his great love for us which spans our differences and brings us together around his table as one family expressing one faith in the Lord.