

## ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL?

Mark 4:35-41; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

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When I was four or five years old, my parents took me to an American Legion picnic at a park with a lake. Some of my cousins and aunts and uncles were there. For awhile, I was just playing at the edge of the lake with my cousins Bobby and Nora, under the watchful eyes of family members. But looming nearby was a sliding board that deposited screeching kids directly into the lake. It was mostly bigger kids that were using it. I did not know whether to be afraid of it or to rush up and try it.

I guess curiosity got the better of me, because I set out up the sliding board ladder. Soon I was zooming down the chute and the world was a beautiful place – for two or three seconds. Then I hit the water. I was little enough, and unfamiliar enough with water, that I couldn't find a footing or paddle my way to the surface. I vividly remember, 50 years later, what it felt like to struggle under the water, what the sunlight looked like underwater, how helpless I felt, how lost.

It was probably only a few seconds, because soon an uncle or my father scooped me up and set me back on dry land. I remember coughing, and I remember my mother was mad at me for trying the slide, and mad at whoever was watching us kids for letting me try it. So the air was tense and the grown-ups were upset. I soon recovered, though, and was restored to health enough to eat at least one hot dog.

I had no lofty thoughts of God, not even a prayer, in my short time underwater. But I certainly was afraid – afraid, and vividly aware that I was in trouble. There was no way I was going to get out of this fix on my own, and somehow I knew it.

The disciples in that boat with Jesus had to be feeling the same way. A storm at sea is terrifying, especially if you're in a little, open boat and waves are crashing over its sides and it's night and you are far from shore. They were also probably tired, having ministered to a crowd that day. Drained, on edge, feeling helpless, they began to fear for their lives. And Jesus?

Snoozing on the job. Catching some Zs. Dead to the world. Their world, the one full of uncontrollable circumstances. Their world, the one he lived in with them.

Not just asleep, but asleep on the cushion! This detail implies that in spite of gathering storm clouds and the threat of drowning, Jesus led his disciples out on the dangerous sea and did not fall asleep sitting up because he was exhausted. Rather, he led them out on the dangerous sea and curled up deliberately in a cozy spot for a nice nap.

Have you ever been in the midst of a storm in your life, feeling like you're about to capsizе, and wondered where Jesus was when you most needed him? Have you

thought he must be sleeping, or distracted by the millions of prayers coming at him every second, or too busy for you? Have you thought he just doesn't care?

If you haven't, you're a very unusual Christian indeed.

Most of us have searched the small, frail boat of our lives, looking for Jesus, entreating him to help us, and experienced ... nothing. Or seemingly nothing. I say "seemingly" because I don't believe Jesus would really do nothing while we are in trouble. I realize, though, that sometimes it surely feels as if he's slacking off in our times of need.

We struggle along in this life without the advantage of having Jesus physically with us in our boats. We know his Holy Spirit is here. We know the Lord himself is on board, somehow, though this is difficult to perceive much of the time. Our fear – sometimes our panic – make it even less likely that we'll be in a state of openness to God's voice or God's subtle movements in the midst of our crises.

It is good to know that we are not alone in this predicament. It is good to know that some of the most celebrated saints of Christian history also felt all alone in their boats, too.

One of my favorite saints is Therese of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun who is one of only two female Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church. Therese was named a Doctor because of her contributions to theology. That puts her up there with Thomas Aquinas and other impossibly intellectual luminaries. But Therese's contributions to theology had to do with simplicity. She said it was impossible for her to be good enough to merit salvation, so Jesus would just have to put her in an elevator and get her to heaven without her making any effort at all, because she couldn't. This is what we would call the doctrine of grace – unmerited favor, undeserved love. Of course, by our standards, Therese was pretty high up on the holiness scale, living the very severe and isolated life of the Discalced – that is, shoeless – Carmelites in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France. But even she lived within the extreme discipline of her monastic order, she still knew she wasn't good enough to earn her way into heaven. Therese just waited for Jesus's elevator to help her.

Therese went through a long period of time in which she was unable to perceive the presence of God in her prayer. This kind of period is known in contemplative theology as "the dark night of the soul." It is not depression; it is not sadness. It is the complete absence of a sense of God's presence. For a person who is fully committed to a life of prayer, it can seem like slow torture.

Therese came up with a seemingly childlike way of describing what was going on with her in the dark night of the soul. She wrote of herself as being in the boat with Jesus, who was asleep. Nothing she did would wake him, so she learned to be content just knowing he was there – knowing in an intellectual sense, not in a felt sense. She hung on to her faith with tenacity when she sensed nothing of God's presence in her life, for years and through an excruciating final illness. We have reason to believe that she truly did go

to her reward. Her final words now decorate a chapel of the cathedral bearing her name in her home town of Lisieux. In very feminine rose and ivory mosaic tiles, those words are spelled out in French. In English, they are, “Oh, I love him! My God, how I love him!”

There is another Teresa who went through something similar – Mother Teresa. After her death, portions of her letters and journals were made public. It became clear that she, too, had experienced the “dark night.” She hung on to her faith by her fingernails – or, in the classical terminology of spiritual theology, she hung on by a sustained and remarkable effort of the will, not the heart. Her heart was too dry to inspire her, but the commitment she made to Christ as a young woman kept her going even though she felt – for decades – that God had abandoned her – she who spent four hours a day in prayer, and the rest of her time serving God’s poor.

I don’t need to tell you what a remarkable witness she achieved, or how truly grand her accomplishments on earth were. I don’t need to tell you, because her story caught fire globally. There is just something about this Albanian nun who went out on the streets of Calcutta and gathered up the sick and dying, the destitute, the abandoned, and brought them to a place of peace and love, and loved them unconditionally, truly seeing Christ in every face. I don’t have any idea how she did this, especially since it felt to her as if Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat for, oh, thirty years or more. But I am grateful that she persevered.

What Therese and Teresa and so many others bequeath to us ordinary Christians is a simple truth: The life of faith does not depend on feeling God’s presence, hearing God’s voice, or receiving dramatic signs from God. Wonderful as all those things are – and real as they are – they are not essential. Many Christians live faithfully and fruitfully without ever feeling “strangely warmed,” as John Wesley did, by the Holy Spirit. Somehow, they persevere in spite of long spiritual dry spells and all the trials of this life.

St. Paul sometimes seems like a braggart, and a lot of people understandably have a hard time with his rhetoric. Today’s passage from 2 Corinthians can set your teeth on edge as he “commends himself in every way.” But if we stop and consider a moment, we realize that Paul really did go through “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.” He knew what it meant to be misjudged and persecuted and demeaned. The storm in Paul’s boat started with his conversion on the road to Damascus. For him, Jesus was the boat-rocker, not the sea-calmer. He had an unforgettable taste of Jesus’ direct, unmediated presence, and after he recovered his sight, he started on the course Jesus set for him and never looked back. Can you imagine Paul ever stopping to wonder why Jesus hasn’t calmed the sea for him? Can you picture him complaining because the waves are too rough? Not for a minute. He is exuberant in his trust in Jesus. If Jesus is rocking the boat, Paul would be saying, “Rock on!”

I am not like St. Paul. I wasn’t when I was a little kid, either. All I wanted when I was underwater at the American Legion picnic was to get out from under. I am no different today: When trouble comes, I want it to be over with, and I impatiently

complain to Jesus that he doesn't seem to be acting quickly enough. Of course, I can't see that he has already started toward me from his perch on the picnic table, or that he has sent somebody else, or that I need to stay underwater just a little bit longer in order to learn something important. These are the things you learn only after the crisis has passed, and your vision has cleared, and you can breathe again. Then and only then you can retrace the seconds and minutes and hours and days, and see that that rescuing presence was not far away, no matter how you felt.

I have a feeling it's going to be like that when we get to heaven, just on a much larger scale. Jesus will be saying, "Now you remember that time when you were 18 ... or 35 ... or 52 ... and you thought I wasn't there? Let's look at that again." And we'll look together, and it will be oh-so-obvious that he was in the back of every boat, and that even his apparent absence was a gift – an essential gift for the development of our souls. We will look and we will understand, and we will be grateful for the gift of his silence, a gift we actually needed – far more than we needed an instant rescue from the crashing waves. AMEN.