

Don't You Care that We're Drowning?!

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Mark 4:35-41

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In the 1990's, two psychologists at Harvard had a creative idea for an experiment to test how the brain processes visual information. They asked participants to watch a 60-second video of people passing a basketball, and their task was simple: to count the number of times the ball was passed from person to person.

What they weren't told, however, was that during the video, a woman in a full-body gorilla suit would walk right in the middle of the group tossing the basketball, she would pound her chest like a gorilla does, and then walk away. She was front and center – smack dab in the middle of the camera frame – surely, no one would miss something like that, right?

The experiment was conducted across the world, and viewers watched this video intently to count each time the ball exchanged hands between one person to another. And the results were the same no matter where it was shown. Half of the people who took the test completely missed the person in the gorilla suit – even though they had been staring right at her. In fact, when they were told about the gorilla, most of those who hadn't seen her actually protested that the experiment had to have been rigged. They argued that they must have been shown two different videos, because there's no way they could have missed something so obvious when they were staring right at the screen.

Well, the video became famous. You can see it for yourself in the comments today on our livestream; it has over 25 million views today. The result was that the researchers coined the term “in-attentive blindness” – the failure to see something conspicuous – something that may very well be right in front of you - when focusing your attention on something else.

One of the original researchers, Daniel Simons, says “This form of invisibility depends not on the limits of the eye, but on the limits of the mind. We consciously see only a small subset of our visual world, and when our attention is focused on one thing, we fail to notice other, unexpected things all around us—including those we might [actually] want to see.”¹

I felt like I had a similar moment to those who finally saw the gorilla for the first time when I was reading this week's passage from Mark's gospel. I saw something that seems so obvious—but I've heard this story since I was a little girl in Sunday School, and I had never seen it before.

¹ Read more about this fascinating experiment at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126977945> or <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/but-did-you-see-the-gorilla-the-problem-with-inattentive-blindness-17339778/>

Here in Mark 4, Jesus and the disciples get into a boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And they are out on the water when suddenly, they are caught off guard by a huge storm. The disciples quickly become agitated and upset, and when they look for Jesus, they realize he is asleep in the bottom of the boat.

The disciples are so angry with him – how could Jesus possibly be asleep at a time like this?! And they say to him, “Don’t you care that we’re drowning?!”

I don’t know about you, but I can really relate to the disciples here. I mean, how many of these kinds of questions have we found ourselves asking over this past year?

God, don’t you care that all of these people are dying of Covid? Don’t you care that the entire world has come to a complete halt? Don’t you care that my family member is immune compromised? Don’t you care about all of those who have been so isolated and alone? Don’t you care that I had to miss my senior year of high school or college? Or a funeral for a beloved family member? Don’t you care about all the people and experiences and moments we lost over the past year?

But it’s not only a question that we have asked ourselves during Covid, is it? Even now, we find ourselves saying, God, don’t you care that the test results came back, and the prognosis is terminal? Don’t you care that we are struggling with infertility – while other people seem to have children so effortlessly?

God, don’t you care that systemic racism is in the water we drink – in every crack and corner of our society? Don’t you care about our LGBTQ siblings who have experienced so much harm and shame – from the church, and even from their own families? And the list could go on and on.

Do you ever feel as if we have a God who just doesn’t care sometimes? Well if you do, know that you are in good company with so many other followers of Jesus. But, even as we ask these very real questions - we also might want to remember that we follow a God who is well acquainted with the chaos and disorder of our world – which is how the earliest readers would have interpreted this storm the disciples encounter at sea.

Debbie Thomas points out, “In Genesis, God creates and hovers over the chaos *before* God creates order...And Jesus’s entire ministry on earth is steeped in the “chaos” of upended hierarchies and rocked boats. But how quickly all of this nuance disappears when the sky darkens and the waves swell. And the disciples say, “*Don’t you care that we are drowning?*”

And through asking that question, I can’t help but ask if they (and if we) have completely missed the gorilla in the story. If they (and we) have completely missed what’s right in front of us; that Jesus is right there in the boat with them. Jesus doesn’t teleport to the scene to save the day; he’s already there. Because we follow a God who chooses to be with us in the boat – even in the chaos and the storm.

Debbie Thomas continues, “In Mark’s story of the storm, the obvious (but wholly overlooked) fact is that Jesus is just as present in the raging water as he is in the soothing calm that follows. Despite the disciples’ inability to perceive it, there is no point in the night when God is absent or even distant. In that vulnerable boat, surrounded by that swelling, terrifying water, the disciples are in the intimate company of Jesus.

I think I will spend the rest of my life seeking this one grace — the grace to experience God’s presence *in the storm*. The grace to know that I am accompanied by the divine in the bleakest, most treacherous places. The grace to trust that Jesus cares even when I’m drowning. And the grace to believe in both the existence and the power of Love even when Jesus “sleeps.” Even when the miraculous calm doesn’t come.”²

Friends, we follow a God who gets in the boat with us. And whatever storm we find ourselves facing – let us not forget that we do not face it alone.

But there’s actually a second part of this story that I think we tend to miss, too. I don’t know about you, but in every picture I’ve seen depicting this story, there is Jesus, and there are the disciples, on the boat, in a bad storm, and all around them are waves and darkness. Have you seen anything else in the picture before? I went into one of our children’s classrooms this week to find a picture Bible – and this is the picture I’ve always had in mind.

But if you go back and look at the end of verse 36, it says this: that when the disciples and Jesus got in the boat, there were *other boats* that went with them.

I don’t know about you, but I have never heard this story or seen an illustration of it with other boats being in the picture – have you? And I can’t help but I wonder how that new picture might change our understanding of what’s happening here? If we realized that the disciples weren’t out there in the middle of a storm by themselves. That they were surrounded by other boats and other people who were in the midst of the storm with them.

But they seem so focused on themselves and Jesus not caring about them that it seems as if they have this inattentive blindness. Because after they leave the shore, there is no other mention of any other people in other boats, seemingly all around them, who find themselves in this exact same situation.

I mean, maybe there’s someone from another boat who yells out – hey, another big wave is coming around the corner. Get ready! Maybe there’s someone who calls out, hey I’ve got some extra life jackets over here. Let me toss some over to you. Maybe there’s someone who says, hey – we went through a big storm like this a few years ago – this one will pass, soon. And maybe together, all the people in all the boats, somehow or another, say to one another – “Hey, We’re gonna get through this. We’re gonna get through this together.”

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3045-don-t-you-care>

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “Sometimes, when we get so wrapped up in how we think the story of our lives should look: the cast and setting and plot, we forget about the other boats. Maybe we think God’s faithfulness to us has to look a certain way when the fact is that sometimes God’s faithfulness looks like the fact that there is actually a better story than the way you want things to be. And that better story is always a bigger story. A story with a lot of boats other than ours.”³

Friends, whatever storm that you are facing in these days. Whatever situation it is in your life or in our world to which you might say, “God, don’t you care that I am drowning here?” I want you to also look around this room today. See these people, and know this – that this church family is a body of people who are in boats all around you. You are not alone. And together, we follow a God who gets in the boat with each of us.

As I close today, I’d like to invite you to imagine with me a story I once heard from another pastor - that one of your children wakes up crying in the middle of the night. Maybe they had a bad dream, maybe they heard a creepy sound, or maybe they saw something that scared them in the dark of night. Whatever the case, your child is crying out for you from their bedroom, and so you go rushing in to see what’s the matter.

You probably ask them what’s wrong, and in response to hearing about their frightening experience, you might give them a hug, you might gently rub their back, kiss their forehead, or rock them a bit in their bed. But whatever the case, you might whisper to them something like, “Shhh, it’s okay, it’s okay – there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

But is that entirely true? Because, as the child will learn and as many of us have already, there are things in this world to be afraid of. There are so many reasons for the things that keep us up at night. There is so much in this world that just isn’t fair – isn’t right – is not okay.

But what I love about this gospel passage is that it doesn’t deny that the storms will come. Rather than telling us falsely reassuring words that there is nothing to be afraid of, Jesus says to the disciples – and to all of us, “Shh...it’s okay, I am here with you. Peace – be still.” And all of creation, the wind and the waves, and the disciples, and even the other boats are in absolute awe.

Friends, may we find moments, each day, to allow Jesus to say to us – Peace, be still. And to remember that we follow a God who is always willing to ride out the storm with us. Let’s not miss the gorillas in the story, because we are not alone. Thanks be to God!

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/fear-self-centeredness-and-storm-sea>

