



## “Jesus Calms the Storm”

Mark 4:35-41

July 12, 2020

The entire book contains a total of 338 words, and yet it describes human nature and imagination in a way that transcends generations and conveys profound meaning. Don't you wish your preacher could be so succinct? I'm speaking of the late Maurice Sendak's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, first published in 1963. I must have requested it at bedtime over a thousand times, and now cherish the opportunity to read it to my own sons. One of the great gifts of this alleged children's story is its honest depiction of fear. Sendak illustrates the terrors of childhood as wild things, monsters living in a land created in the imagination of Max, a young boy who is sent to his room for causing mischief and tormenting the family dog. When he arrives in the land of the wild things, Max is greeted by this gang of monsters. They roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth and roll their terrible eyes and show their terrible claws. The wild things are embodied representations of the anxiety and trauma of childhood and symbols for the fears that grip us all. Fear personified. Their name is legion. They overwhelm us.

In interviews about the book, Sendak consistently rebuffed the suggestion that *Where the Wild Things Are* was too scary for children. The author insisted that children are fully able to understand fear and that we do them a disservice when we bubble-wrap their lives or explain away their worries. Fear is real. The wild things are real. But the young boy Max, approaching this imaginary land in an imaginary sailboat, is equally prepared for the challenge. His words are concise and they appear in all caps. BE STILL! Before long, Max is in total control, king of the wild things. This is where the plot twist occurs. Being the powerful king is an equally unnerving and fearful proposition for young

Max, who becomes homesick. We are told that the boy wanted, “to be where someone loved him best of all.” And so, Max gathers his courage and declares that he will return home. Despite the protests of the wild things, he steps into the sailboat and soon arrives in his own room, where the dinner left for him by his mother is still hot.<sup>i</sup>

Max faces and overcomes his fear of the wild things. And then, he returns to the life he left behind. And though the room and the house and the family are the same, Max is not. He has been transformed. The wild things represent the tangible fears children face—monsters, darkness, bad guys, things that go bump in the night. Going home represents the subtler, but no less real, fear of growing up. He leaves the land of imagination a changed boy.

Which brings us to this morning's childhood Bible story. Jesus and his disciples are on a boat. There is a storm. This is no ordinary storm. Mark, usually understated in his descriptive language, paints the picture in vivid detail: waves beating against the boat, water gushing in. The wild storm roars its terrible roar and gnashes its terrible teeth. And there is Jesus, asleep on a cushion in the middle of the storm. The disciples are angry. Don't you care about us? Don't you recognize the wild things in our midst? Aren't you afraid? You can sense a child's perspective of the story—scary storm and silly Jesus taking a nap.

The next part of the story happens quickly, only takes one verse. Jesus is roused from sleep, chastises the wind for interrupting his slumber, and, like Max, commands the sea, “BE STILL!” Immediately, all is calm. And here is the most fascinating part of the story for me today. It is only then that the disciples become truly afraid. The original Greek is clearer

than most English translations. It literally reads, “And they feared with a great fear.” A mega-phobia. That’s right, the disciples are more frightened by the power of Jesus to calm the storm than by the storm’s power to take their lives. More undone by the prospect of transformation than the threat of death.

Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him? The disciples have witnessed the power of Jesus. They realize, perhaps for the first time, that this gentle healer and wise teacher might offer more than parables and platitudes. The disciples recognize that they will be asked to change, forced to grow, challenged to truly follow. And they are afraid.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis described this call to transformation: “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But [then] He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”<sup>ii</sup>

No wonder those disciples were afraid. The threat to their status quo is real, and it promises to challenge much of what we assume and rearrange much of what we thought was settled. Over the years, I have noticed an aversion to this interpretation in more than a few churches. Recognizing that most of us prefer a safe and secure Jesus, they have aimed for respectability and security, downplaying the risk of Jesus’ call and replacing it with feel-good messages designed to meet consumer demand. Gone is the image of the cross, described as an outdated or overly imposing symbol of the faith. Gone are demands for sacrifice and calls

to high-cost discipleship, replaced by a theology of self-congratulation and easy success. The thinned-out message that remains goes something like this: “Please be a part of our church. We won’t ask you to do anything, believe anything, or change in any way. It isn’t very serious, but we think you’ll enjoy it. It’s fun. Join us!” Or, “Here at our church, we have God all figured out. We have all the answers. Come to hear how right we are and how wrong everyone else is. The good news of our proclamation is that God is on our side!” These messages are only slight exaggerations. Heavy on otherworldly escapism and light on this-world impact. All reward and no risk. Hard for me to reconcile with the teachings of Jesus, which ask for total allegiance and radical openness to the Spirit’s call.

One of the reasons I am so hopeful about the future of faith in this present moment is that we have all been disrupted. So much of what is happening around us seems to be spinning out of control. The storm is raging. We can no longer pretend to live in a world where we are the king of the wild things, completely in control of all that we survey. We’ve been given the invitation to change. For those of us who have spent most of our lives in zones of comfort, privilege, or relative ease, this invitation may elicit a variety of reactions. Think of the disciples—first angry that Jesus would sleep while they perish, then fearful that following Jesus would utterly transform them. But they followed. And so can we. We can release our fearful grip on what has been and open our hearts to genuine transformation. We can change.

Indeed, this is our call. The one who calms the storms also beckons us to the adventure of faith. We are called to move beyond fear and into risky, life-giving trust. The church exists not to survive another year, but to serve the God who is always ahead of us. We worship a living and moving God, not a staid and stationary institution. The power on which we depend is not our own. We are free to act with boldness and courage, to reach out and not shut down. We are invited into the audacious journey that is faithful living. We can follow the lead of our children, who instinctively understand that life is an adventure and

that trusting God's call us to move beyond comfort zones and idols of stability. This is precisely what the disciples learn in this morning's story—and what each of us is called to learn through the journey of life and faith. I recently heard the stated clerk of our denomination, Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson offer this analogy: “Think about that Kool-Aid that does not taste good until you stir it up a little bit. We're being stirred up now by a Spirit that calls us to be the church we have to be in the 21st century.” Could you use a little Holy Spirit stirring? Could our church? Could our city? Could our nation? I think so.

Hear this, my friends in faith—the greatest risk of all, and the most life-changing decision you will ever make, is to get into the boat with Jesus. The storms are sure to come; the winds will blow and the sea will rage. The old fears will return, roaring their terrible roars, and gnashing their terrible teeth. And then, in the most terrifying and exhilarating moments of all, you will be called beyond the storms to new life and transformation. Don't stay on the shoreline and watch the waves from a safe distance. You were meant for more. This moment asks for more. The sea is calling your name. Amen.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Where the Wild Things Are*. Maurice Sendak. HarperCollins Publishers, 1963.

<sup>iii</sup> *Mere Christianity*. C.S. Lewis. Harper San Francisco, 2001