

From fear to calm: Spiritual direction on stormy waters

These Gospel stories can seem so familiar. But sit with the disciples in the little wooden boat, and Jesus' power will render you speechless.

by [James Martin](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue



Thinkstock

Two years ago I traveled with a Jesuit friend to the Holy Land. The experience was overwhelming. When I first caught sight of the Sea of Galilee and saw its shimmering blue-green waters surrounded by pinkish sandy hills under a blazing sun, it was like a dream. One afternoon, after a full day of visiting sites around the lake, I found myself on the veranda of the Church of the Beatitudes at a Franciscan complex. The chapel overlooks the lake from an impressive height and gave me a commanding view of Galilee. To my left I could see the ruins of Capernaum, a mile or so from where I stood. Beyond that was Bethsaida, where Peter and Andrew lived. In front of me, across the sea, was the land of the Gerasenes, where Jesus healed a demoniac.

I sat down to pray and found that for the first time in my life I was able to pray with my eyes open. I practice classic Ignatian contemplation: you imagine yourself in various scripture passages, trying your best to see the place in the mind's eye. But this time I didn't have to do any imagining. This time it was all laid out before me. I could even see fishermen on the shoreline below.

Suddenly a terrific wind arose, sweeping all the dry palm leaves off the portico. I laughed, because I really wanted a storm to blow up. Let me tell you why.

I've been a spiritual director for more than 20 years. It is one of my greatest joys. Spiritual direction helps people notice where God is active in their prayer and in their daily lives. While it may overlap with a number of other practices, spiritual direction is neither psychotherapy (which focuses mainly on the psychological underpinnings of a person's problems), nor pastoral counseling (which focuses mostly on problem-solving in a spiritual setting), nor confession (which focuses on sin and forgiveness). Spiritual directors are trained specifically to enable a person to recognize God's activity; this means helping that person with prayer.

What topics come up in spiritual direction? Anything significant that arises in prayer, moments in your daily life when God felt close, and frustrations over how God might seem absent. Being a good spiritual director requires formal training, which includes learning how to listen well and notice where a person might be overlooking God's activity. It's not enough simply to be prayerful. St. Teresa of Ávila, the 16th-century Carmelite nun, famously said that if she had a choice of a spiritual director who was wise or one who was holy, she would choose the wise person. Optimally, you would want both!

My first spiritual directee approached me when I'd been a Jesuit for only two years. I was studying philosophy at Loyola University in Chicago, and an undergraduate in the course asked if he could see me for spiritual direction. I asked my own spiritual director if I was ready. "You're ready to be a director when people start asking you," he said. It was moving to hear and see how God was at work in this young man's life. Directing him also introduced me to a common experience: my faith grew as I saw how God was at work in someone else. It's a spiritual boost to see God's activity in others, particularly during times when you yourself feel dry. It's like doubting the wind and then seeing it sweep across a field of tall grass. You say to yourself, Ah, there it is!

The next summer I spent two weeks in a spiritual directors' training program at a Jesuit retreat house outside of Toronto. Years later, after my ordination, I spent an entire summer at a Jesuit retreat house near Cincinnati, Ohio, learning about spiritual direction techniques, most of which hinge on being a good listener. "Slow, silent, and stupid," goes one mantra. Don't rush; don't be afraid of silence; and don't assume that you know what the other person means; ask.

Since then I've served as a spiritual director for dozens of people, both on a regular monthly basis and during retreats—weekends and eight-day and 30-day retreats. It is rarely dull. In Ohio one of our instructors told us, "If you're bored in spiritual direction, it probably means that the other person is not talking about God. They might be talking about problems at work, difficulties at home, or health issues, but they're not yet talking about God. Because the Holy Spirit is never boring!"

In my experience as a spiritual director, I've noticed that a handful of Bible passages seem to help almost everyone. One such passage is Jeremiah 29:11, which begins, "For surely I know the plans I have for you," and invites the reader to meditate on God's provident care. But the passage that is by far the most helpful for people going through difficult times is the stilling of the storm. I know of no other passage that is as helpful to Christians. It has been helpful to me, too.

The story is essentially the same in the three synoptic Gospels, though in each the story begins on slightly different notes. I'll focus on Mark's account. In the passage where Jesus asks his disciples to cross to the "other side" of the Sea of Galilee, the reader notices two things. First, Jesus' request comes at the close of a long day of preaching from a fishing boat. The crowds have just heard the parable of the sower. Now Jesus is going to leave them behind to sail with the disciples. Mark tells us that other boats accompany them; these may have carried the larger group of followers. (The number of apostles, disciples, and followers was increasing.) Perhaps Jesus will reveal something special to the smaller group. So readers may think it's a hopeful time.

The reader will notice something else: it is evening. On the sea this can be a time not of anticipation, but fear.

Before the story begins in earnest, the English translation includes a charming phrase. "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was." For many years I wondered about those words. What did it mean—"just as

he was”? The English might be vague, but the Greek is clearer. A literal translation would be: “They took him as he was in the ship.” That is, Jesus was already in the boat, so the disciples just piled in. But the opaque English translation unintentionally reminds us that we need to take Jesus “as he is” rather than trying to make him as we would wish him to be. The disciples often had a hard time dealing with Jesus as he was, just as we do.

Suddenly a great windstorm arises on the sea, and the waves begin to swamp the boat. The Greek suggests a kind of tornado. Even today storms suddenly stir up the Sea of Galilee, the result of dramatic differences in temperatures between the shoreline (680 feet below sea level) and the surrounding hills (up to 2,000 feet). The strong winds that funnel through the hills easily whip up waves in the relatively shallow waters (200 feet). Today a boating industry for pilgrims thrives on the Sea of Galilee; boat owners take pilgrims on a tour and include a mass aboard the vessel. A few pilgrims told me that while they were at sea a storm arrived without warning. They were thrilled to witness a biblical “storm at sea.”

But the disciples would not have felt any pleasure. In Jesus’ day storms were terrifying, and water held rich symbolism: it symbolized life and a means of purification, but it also held out the potential for death and was an occasion of danger. The psalmists speak of God’s power over the seas and use water as a symbol of peril: “Save me, O God,” says the psalmist, “for the waters have come up to my neck” (Ps. 69). Raging seas and howling storms would have represented to Jesus’ contemporaries chaos and danger. Jewish belief was that the sea could also be the abode of demonic forces.

On a less theological level, sea voyages were simply dangerous, as St. Paul would attest. A storm at sea could be frightening even for experienced fishermen. Far worse is the storm at sea at night.

Not long after a terrible hurricane hit the East Coast of the United States and caused widespread destruction, I saw footage of a woman describing the panic she felt as the storm surge hit. She described the waves barreling up her street, bursting in the door of her house, and rising up to her neck; she could barely get the words out—the fear in her voice was still palpable. A cubic meter of water weighs over 2,000 pounds, which explains the destruction it can cause during a hurricane or flood, crushing everything in its path. This is a window into the kind of terror that the water would have held in Jesus’ day.

But in the face of the chaotic storm Jesus is calm. Beyond calm. “He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion,” says Mark. In their book *The Gospel of Mark*, John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington say that “untroubled sleep” signals trust in God’s protection even in the most dire of circumstances.

A friend had told me about the nearby Yigal Alon Museum, so I visited. Inside was the ancient Sea of Galilee Boat, the remarkably well-preserved remains of a first-century fishing craft discovered in 1986 when a drought lowered the level of the lake. The dark, wooden vessel, supported by metal struts, is large—almost 27 feet long by seven feet wide. I was touched by the evidence of numerous repairs, the reuse of timbers, and many wood types (12), some salvaged from other boats. The boat seemed to have, as the brochure said, “a long work life and an owner of meager means.”

A reconstruction of the boat in another room included a raised wooden ledge on which several people could sit. So it would have been easy for Jesus to find a place to sleep, perhaps on a cushion or a bag of sand used for ballast or comfort.

But it wasn’t easy for his friends to understand how he could sleep in the violent gale. “They woke him up,” said Mark, “and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’” Among his disciples were four fishermen, and even they were afraid. It must have been a hellacious storm.

Jesus rises up. Matthew uses *egertheis*, which conveys not simply standing, but rising to his full height to confront the storm. He “rebukes” the wind and says to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The word Mark uses for Jesus’ rebuke (*epetimēsen*) is the same used for his commands to evil spirits, and Jesus’ phrasing is similar to the way he rebuked the demon in the synagogue at Capernaum: “Be silent, and come out of him!”

At once there is a “great” calm. The Greek *megalē* is the same word used for the “great” wind, highlighting both natural danger and Jesus’ power over it. We can tell that the disciples are terrified, because Jesus says to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” A more literal translation of Mark’s Greek—*pōs ouk echete pistin*—may better convey Jesus’ amazement at the disciples’ reaction: “How is it that you still have no faith?”

Their terror is not surprising. We’re so used to some Gospel stories that they can seem predictable. But sit on the narrow wooden seats next to the disciples, and

Jesus' power will render you speechless. The disciples are frightened not only by the miraculous—or what might seem magical—power, but also by what it meant. Controlling nature was the prerogative of God alone. The creation story in Genesis recounts God's dividing of the waters, separating the rains above and the seas below, and also exerting power over chaotic nature. Jews aboard the boat might have remembered one of many psalms on that same theme: "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them" (Ps. 89).

The next line is stunning: *ephobēthēsan phobon megan*. They feared a great fear.

Fear of the storm has morphed into fear of God, the awe accompanying a display of divine power, a theophany. When they next open their mouths, I imagine them having a hard time getting the words out: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

The carpenter who has just offered homey parables on the shoreline now reveals a supernatural command over the waters. I can only imagine the disciples sitting in stupefied silence as the voyage continued, now over calm waters.

Why has this story proved so helpful to people? Out of all my directees, only one was a fisherman. But everyone faces stormy times, when God's presence is hard to perceive. One of the most common struggles in the spiritual life is a feeling of God's absence during painful times. Even some of the saints report this. Perhaps it's because when we're struggling we tend to focus on the area of pain. It's natural, but it makes it more difficult to see where God might be at work in other places.

A young man whom I'll call Aaron came to me for monthly spiritual direction. With palpable sorrow he explained how he felt God had abandoned him after he was diagnosed with a chronic illness. His sense of God's presence, his ability to see God around him, the ease with which he had once prayed—all had evaporated. Thus his sadness over his physical condition was exacerbated by a sense of abandonment. When I asked him if he had ever prayed about the stilling of the storm, he wept. Just mentioning the passage evoked tears—he instantly connected with the disciples' feelings of abandonment.

When we next met, Aaron said that he was embarrassed about what had happened in a prayer. He had imagined himself aboard the boat and pictured the waves crashing around him. He saw the waves as apt images of his inner turmoil. But when he thought about Jesus sleeping, he shouted aloud in his apartment, "Get up! Get

up! Where are you, Jesus? Why don't you care about me?" As he recounted this he wept.

We talked about God's ability to handle Aaron's feelings of anger and abandonment, since God has been able to handle powerful emotions since (at least) the time of the psalms. "How long, O Lord?" laments the psalmist. "Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13). This is what Aaron, the disciples, and countless believers have said to God.

Expressing his emotions honestly made it easier for Aaron to talk to God honestly, and that in turn enabled him to notice God's presence in other parts of his life. Aaron's honesty didn't remove the physical pain, but it helped to reestablish an open relationship with God. When you say only the things that you believe you should say, any relationship grows cold, including one with God. Once Aaron was able to be open and transparent in his prayer, he felt God's presence. "Funny," he said. "It made me feel calm. Like the sea after Jesus stilled it."

Were we somehow able to ask the disciples why they were afraid, they would likely scoff, "Why wouldn't we be afraid?" Those living along the Sea of Galilee knew what storms could do to boats—and to people. Fear made sense. Without a healthy fear of the elements, Galilean fishermen wouldn't have taken the necessary precautions to protect themselves, their boats, and their catches.

But Jesus warns against fear in the spiritual life. When it comes to God's activity, fear is dangerous because it turns us away from God. Rather than focusing on what God can do, we're tempted to focus on what it seems God cannot do—that is, protect us. Indeed, Jesus' earthly life is bracketed by warnings against fear. The angel announcing his conception says to his mother, "Do not be afraid." The angel announcing his resurrection to the women at the tomb says, "Do not be afraid."

Jesus' counsel against fear reveals several truths—a few things he wanted us to know about the world, and about God.

First, God has not come to harm you. God's presence should not prompt fear, for God always comes in love. Second, don't fear the new. God's entrance into your life may mean something will change, but unanticipated doesn't necessarily mean frightening. Third, there is no need to fear things you don't understand. If it comes from God, even the mysterious should hold no terror. You may not understand fully what God is asking, but this is no cause to be frightened. At the annunciation Mary couldn't foresee what her future would hold, but she was empowered to fear not.

And at the resurrection the disciples probably didn't understand what, or more precisely who, stood before them, but they soon learned not to be afraid.

A healthy fear may remind fishermen to guard against contingencies like a storm, but in the spiritual life fear can lead to the inertia of hopelessness. It can paralyze us, destroy our trust, crush our hope, and turn us inward in unhealthy ways. Unchecked, it can lead us into despair—if we conclude that only woe can come out of the present situation, which is an implicit denial of God's ability to do the impossible.

Notice that the disciples encounter fear where they are most comfortable—aboard their own boats in Galilee. Especially when God enters into our familiar surroundings—cozy places or parts of our lives where everything seems settled—we may be particularly frightened. Perhaps there is a sudden thaw in a frozen relationship. Maybe you fear this new challenge to your old ways. “What are you doing here, God?” we may say. “Don't make me let go of my resentments. I'm too settled.” We may not fear the storms as much as the calm after the storm.

Even in these places Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.”

The stilling of the storm is similar to another incident in which Jesus brings calm: his walking on water. Without delving into too much detail, we can briefly sketch out the narrative that appears in Matthew, Mark, and John. In all three Gospels the story follows the feeding of the 5,000 on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After feeding the crowd Jesus immediately dismisses the disciples and “makes” or “forces” them to board their boats and cross the sea. There is no indication why the journey is so urgent, unless we take the next line as an explanation: “After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.” Perhaps his insistence was a way of saying, “I really need some time alone.”

Near the traditional site of the feeding is a hollowed-out space on a hill called the Eremos Cave, in which Jesus may have prayed. It is a small ovoid opening in the rocky hillside, perhaps five feet high by ten feet wide. The morning my friend and I scrambled up to see it (it's a few hundred feet from the shoreline), we found the cave empty and the dusty site barren save for an empty beer bottle sitting insolently at the opening. The cave can accommodate a single person and provides some shelter from the elements; if it existed in Jesus' day (and there's no reason to think it didn't), it would have made an ideal place for solitude.

By sunset the disciples' boat has reached the middle of the Sea of Galilee. (The sentence includes a Greek word: "many *stadia* away from the land," with a *stadion* being an ancient measure of roughly 200 yards.) From his far-off position Jesus sees the disciples straining at the oars in the face of an adverse or "contrary" wind. Matthew says the boat is being "battered by the waves."

Then "early in the morning he came towards them . . . walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by." The disciples are terrified and cry out in fear; they think they are seeing a ghost.

The one standing upon the waves greets them. "Take heart; it is I," Jesus says simply, which may be a gently human way of reassuring them. Or it may be an echo of God's divine declaration to Moses in the book of Exodus, "I am who I am."

"Do not be afraid," says Jesus, who boards the boat. The wind ceases. To describe the overwhelming emotions of the disciples Mark writes literally, "very much exceedingly in themselves standing outside" (*lian ek perissou en heautois existanto*). They were utterly beside themselves. Although they have just witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes, they still do not understand who he is. Their hearts, says Mark, are "hardened."

Matthew's addition to the story is well known even to those who aren't familiar with the New Testament. Peter answers Jesus with a challenge: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Why does Peter request this? Is he looking for proof that the one speaking in the teeth of the gale is truly Jesus? Does Peter want to arrogate to himself God's prerogative, power over nature? Or is he simply curious to see if he can do what Jesus is doing? What fisherman wouldn't want command over the waters?

In response Jesus says, "Come."

Peter begins to walk on the water but then notices the strong wind. Distracted by danger, Peter fears, begins to sink, and cries out, "Lord, save me!" much as the disciples did during the storm. Taking his eye off Jesus means that he can do nothing on his own. Jesus stretches out his hand, takes hold of Peter, and says, perhaps bemused, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus brings Peter back into the boat, where all prostrate themselves and pronounce him the Son of God. In Matthew the disciples are more able to apprehend Jesus' identity. Once again, the disciples

may have recalled the psalms that speak of God's saving those in danger of drowning.

In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus manifests his awesome power over the sea. In both instances the disciples are terrified. In both Jesus warns them against fear. But besides counseling against fear, Jesus offers another blessing desperately needed today: calm.

Let's consider this in light of the frenzied state of our emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual lives today. The more I listen to people, the more I hear them speak about their lives using the same words: overworked, overbooked, stressed-out, nuts, and insane. "I have no time for my family." "I have no time to pray." "I barely have time to think." This does not describe everyone's life. But our culture has told us that the busier we are, the more important we are.

Some of this pressure may be the result of an economy in which more hours are demanded from employees. Some of it can be traced to increasing pressure from technology. Newer forms of communication mean that it's easy to be always connected. You're never far from anyone intent on contacting you. But some of our busyness is the inevitable outcome of a world where overactivity is praised. And if everyone else is busy, who are we to opt out?

It may also mask a form of pride. Being busy may indicate generosity; some people pour themselves out for others in a selfless way. But sometimes busyness is the way we prove (consciously or not) to ourselves that we are important. This tendency is then multiplied out in the community, creating a society in which extreme busyness is a badge of importance. It may also mask an inability to be still. What would it mean if we weren't running around like demoniacs? What would happen if we weren't overbooked? What would we do with ourselves if there weren't some task at hand?

Not long ago I found myself in a kind of storm. Trying to be generous, I had agreed to do many talks around the country. This had been my pattern for the last several years. I enjoy speaking to groups, but it was becoming unmanageable.

One weekend the logistics of a trip were boggled up. There was confusion over where I was staying, a grueling itinerary, delayed flights, and an ear infection. A cold hung on for two months. Looking over my schedule for the coming year, I began to worry. How could I continue at this pace? Gradually I noticed something else within

me: a deep desire to live a calmer, quieter, and more contemplative life. A great many people were counting on me for lectures and retreats, yet the more I thought about them, the more my longing increased. I was bewildered. Should I cancel engagements and disappoint others or continue on and disappoint myself? I promised myself that I would pray about it the next day.

Early in the morning, when I closed my eyes, the first thing I saw in my mind's eye was Jesus, clad in a light blue robe, standing silently on a glassy calm sea. He stretched out his hands as if to say, "Come." Unlike Peter I didn't feel the invitation to walk on the water. Instead, Jesus seemed to be saying, "Why not come into the calm?" The wind whipped around him, but both he and the sea remained calm.

Why not come into the calm? Why not indeed? It seemed a real invitation. That morning I crafted a letter and canceled many of the events I'd already agreed to attend. I am loath to cancel anything, but the choice was either a life of storms or a life with at least a little more calm. So I was honest: I needed more quiet in my life in order to be a good Jesuit. I wrote my e-mail, took a deep breath, and hit "Send."

Not everyone can jettison tasks in this way. A new mother or father cannot simply stop getting up in the "fourth watch of the night" to change a squalling infant. A person caring for an elderly parent cannot simply leave. But most of us know that there are some unnecessary things that prevent us from living more contemplatively, extraneous tasks and events and dates and appointments and things that can be thrown overboard. Do you have to make everyone happy by agreeing to every request? Must you say yes to something else you cannot possibly do—on the job, at your children's school, or in your family? Aren't there a few things that you can drop overboard?

Can you hear Jesus inviting you to more calm in your stormy life? Even Jesus needed to take time alone to pray. Reading this, you might feel fear. What would it mean for the storms to cease and for you to live more contemplatively? The disciples knew this fear. Even when things grew calm on the Sea of Galilee, when one would think that their fear would lessen, it only grew.

Jesus gently guides us away from fear, and he calls to us, as he did to the disciples, inviting us onto the calm waters of life. He says to us, "Come."

This article is excerpted from James Martin's new book, Jesus: A Pilgrimage, and is published with permission of HarperCollins. © James Martin 2014.