

*The Miracle in the Boat*

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49; Mark 4:35-41

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I'll never forget the look of sheer panic on our business manager's face when he stumbled upon the church's *misleadingly-named* "Renovation Team" a couple of years ago. "What are we renovating?" he rushed over to ask me anxiously. Duane was trying his best to sound supportive—which, he really was and always is—but he was also having trouble hiding his mild sense of terror.

It took me a moment to wrap my brain around what he was asking. I mean, I didn't know about any major building projects—and I couldn't figure out why he was asking *me*, of all people. That sounded like a senior pastor or church moderator question . . .

But just then, it hit me. I realized he was referring to my recent newsletter article announcing the Renovation Team and I couldn't help but start laughing. Duane had every right to be concerned. He and the trustees might have a *slight* interest in knowing about any major building renovation plans. But that's not what the "Reno Team," as we affectionately called ourselves, was up to.

Rather, this group of lay and staff leaders was charged with revitalizing our ministries of faith formation. The team name was actually given to us by Ministry Architects (you might be sensing a theme here). This is an organization that helps congregations assess the health of the systems and *figurative* structures of Christian education.

Millie Brobston, Jeff Hall, Christine Harding, and Anitra Grove will forever be my Reno Teammates. Over the course of many, many months, this group helped to establish systems that will make our children, youth, and adult education ministries more sustainable for staff and lay leaders. They asked big questions about just what sort of faith United Church of Chapel Hill hopes to form in its congregants. They gathered pastors, staff, and others leaders from throughout the congregation to define the vision and priorities of our faith formation ministries moving forward.

Thanks to the Reno Team, we began drafting a new Safe Conduct Policy to ensure the safety of minors, vulnerable adults, and the program volunteers who work with them. We began to articulate a new vision of faith formation at United Church—one crafted from the dreams and priorities *you* shared with us.

Responding to the Reno Team's call, our youngest leaders began taking increased ownership of the ministries that gather them together. In fact, the youth crafted a mission statement focused on celebrating young people, connecting them to community, and empowering them as leaders who act for equity and justice. And because of their incredible work, I was able to secure an Innovation Grant to fund a new ministry venture called *The Hub*, which engages the social justice issues young people care about and puts our youth in conversation with local civic leaders.

Thanks also to the Reno Team, Anitra joined a cohort of children’s ministry professionals from across the country. And the Children’s Board began reading Ministry Architects literature and asking how *they* could create more sustainable structures for their ministries too.

Heck, we even decided that we would take on some *real* renovation work—and began to repaint and refurnish the downstairs youth wing—including an incredible new mural by one of our high school students, which reflected the social justice priorities of our youth. There was so much momentum building in our programs. So much excitement about the new possibilities that were unfolding. And so many projects to keep up with . . .

But then . . . the storm came. The week of March 8, 2020 ends with a staff gathering in the music room. A new and frightening virus is spreading rapidly. It’s so dangerous, in fact, that the risk of gathering our community is now too great. Cameron makes the most heartbreaking announcement of his pastoral career: we won’t be together this Sunday, or the next.

Tears fill our eyes, and fear fills our hearts. There is talk of reassessing in a couple of weeks, but we all know that we are in uncharted waters. We know that this decision throws into question the future of this very community that we care for so deeply. And that **the storm** we are facing threatens everything we know and everyone we love.

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The disciples’ boat was “already being swamped,” the scripture says. Given the Gospel writer’s clip and concision, Mark leaves us with the impression that this literal storm came on suddenly and took these experienced sailors by surprise. We have no record of how long they endured the wind and waves before waking Jesus. We do not know what conversation, if any, they had amongst themselves before deciding to rouse Christ from his post-preaching nap.

All we know is that they were deeply afraid. Interestingly, they never name their own fear, and neither does the narrator. Only Jesus does. Perhaps Mark assumes this terrifying context tells us all we need to know about the fear the disciples are carrying. But it interesting to note that when he gives them voice it is only to express *anger* and *frustration*—and not even at their circumstances but at Jesus himself.

Fear contorts their ask for help into an accusation of indifference. “Do you not care?” they demand. Jesus’ response demonstrates astounding graciousness for someone whose nap was just abruptly interrupted—*and from a sleep so deep that the storm itself couldn’t wake him, by the way!*

Rather than shoot off a defensive reply to their question, he compassionately names the fear underneath it. But not before addressing the storm directly.

We know the story well. Christ rebukes the wind and demands stillness of the sea. The winds cease and the waters rest. The message of this miraculous scene is clear enough: Christ has the power to speak peace to the storms around and within us. The good news of this story is that Jesus is present with the tempest-tossed.

I can't tell you the number of times this passage has brought me comfort. And I know many of you have taken solace in its promises too.

But as I follow Mark's attentiveness to the storm brewing *within* the boat, I am left wondering if there isn't a miracle unfolding here too. Dramatic as the storm and its abrupt conclusion may seem, what drives this narrative is what's happening *inside* the boat rather than what's happening *around* it.

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This storm unsettled more than the wind and waves; it shook the disciples to their core. It endangered more than the boat (and even their lives); it threatened the community they had built and the mission that brought them together in the first place.

Even as Jesus' words calm the storm, they also transform the disciples' hearts. We see it clearly in the questions they ask of one another—the only words Mark allows them to speak. As Jesus turns compassionately toward their fear, as he invites them into a more faithful posture of heart, their anger and frustration are suddenly alchemized into awe and wonder.

Their narrow, accusatory questions break open to consider new possibilities instead. "Who is this?" they ask themselves. As they consider what they have seen Jesus do, as they turn over in their minds the words that he spoke, curiosity releases their imagination to dream of a world transformed by his incredible power.

The storm no longer impeded their vision. And I wonder, as the clouds parted and the full expanse of the landscape opened before them again, if they could've pointed to the very mountain where Christ had first named them his apostles.

I wonder if they could look out and locate the place where they had signed up to follow this Jesus. Where they first made the commitment to get into the boat together.

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As the disciples will show us, again and again—and in all four gospel accounts—it's challenging for our imaginations to keep pace with Christ's power. It's difficult to maintain our mountaintop commitments in the midst of the storm.

And if it was *this* challenging for the disciples, who saw extraordinary things with their own eyes, how do we—thousands of years removed from Christ's presence on earth—stand a chance? How do *we* tap into the miraculous power of this story today?

I believe that there is another, perhaps more accessible, miracle here—if only we open ourselves to see it. It's found not just in the way Christ commands the storm but in the compassion he offers to his beloved and fearful friends. It's not just in the transformation of the wind and waves but in the change of heart reflected in the disciples' questions. It's the miracle found in turning toward one another—of recognizing the profound gift of being in the boat together.

Friends, I don't have the power to stop the storms of life—literal or figurative. I don't even know what the landscape will look like if we manage to fight our way through the wind and waves.

But I do know that if we hold each another in tender love. If we turn toward one another with compassion. If we covenant to be curious. If we allow faith to break fear's grip on our hearts. If we don't let this or any other storm define our posture toward one another. If we embrace the power and responsibility *we have* to define the questions *we ask* of each other—we might just see our hearts change too.

We cannot control the storms, friends, but we can define what it means to be in the boat together. We have every right to be afraid, but if we turn toward one another with compassion, we can hold space big enough for our dreams to come alongside and buoy those weighed down by fear.

Because sometimes faith is just refusing to believe the stories fear tells us. It's refusing to let our worry over the storm overpower the miracle of just being in the boat with one another.

Friends, this ship has seen us through many, many storms over the last few years. Huge leadership transitions in the church and in our nation, losses of those we've loved, separation by social distancing, and innumerable fears and uncertainties ushered in by a global pandemic.

But I am in the boat with you, and so the one who promised never to leave nor forsake us. And while we wait for the power that calms the storms around us, let's get busy searching for the miracles already at work among us.

The Reno Team, the youth, our faith formation Boards—that's just my little corner of this very big boat. I want to know what miracles *you're* seeing too. I want to hear the dreams that have kept you afloat when your fears threatened to drown you. I want us to turn toward one another, compassionately connect, and allow awe and wonder to fill our hearts with new dreams and visions for this place.

No storm can stop the miracle happening here, between us, right now. If only we recognize the wonder of being in this boat together. Amen.