



SIX SANE TRUTHS FOR A CRAZY WORLD PART 4: UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
February 27, 2005*

[STORY SHARED BY KERRI HOFMANN]

Kerri's story made the perfect lead in for this morning. We've been counting down six sane truths for a crazy world, and today we are spending some time looking at the reality that God is close. He's right here. You can talk all you want about him being in control, about him being holy and unchanging. But that doesn't do me much good if he's totally distant and removed from my world. How does God being close change things in this crazy place?

Let's jump right in and look at a story that shows us some central themes about that topic. It's a story out of the life of Jesus.

Luke 8:22-27

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee.

If I could only preach one kind of sermon for the rest of my life, I would want to preach about the life of Jesus. I love digging into the events that happened and the conversations between him and his disciples. Not only are the stories interesting – they capture truth about God in a different way. Having Jesus – God the Son -- as a human gives us concrete illustrations of God's character. It's hard to explain some of the big concepts about God when we're thinking in purely spiritual terms. When we can't figure out something about God, we can always look to the life of Jesus for clarification.

Talking about God's closeness is a good example. What does it mean? How does it change anything for me? What does God do when he's up close? This little story from real life gives us some great insights. I'd like to walk through it again more slowly, stopping every so often to look at it in different stages to see what the closeness of God looks like.

Before we do that, though, it's probably worth taking a moment to talk about how we can make the jump from Jesus and his disciples to us and God. Just because they were close doesn't necessarily mean their experience applies to us. How do we know God is close to us as well?

In one sense, we can talk about God being close to everyone because he is everywhere. David wrote these words:

Psalm 139:7-8

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

There is a certain degree to which anybody in the world can describe God as being near, because his Spirit surrounds us all the time.

But there's another dimension to closeness that we're talking about this morning, and it is more relational in quality. And in this case, it's wrapped up with being one of Christ's followers today. We experience a closeness to God specifically because of Jesus.

Ephesians 2:13

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

There had been a barrier, a degree of separation between us and God, which Christ removed by dying for our sins. When we accept that, we position ourselves close to God. When we don't accept it, we act as if the barrier is still there.

The closeness is real. Jesus' parting words to his disciples were these:

Matthew 28:20

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

So just like Christ's first followers enjoyed being near him, we can count on the same promise being true for ourselves, and it is based on what Jesus did in his earthly life and death.

That means that we CAN draw parallels between the disciples' experience and our own.

And that's good, because as I read this story, the boat serves as a pretty good metaphor for our lives. Just like Jesus was right there in the boat with the disciples, he's right in the boats of our lives as well. He's accessible to us. But we don't see him, so we forget that he's right here with us. We don't always fully grasp what it means when we say that God is near.

Let's break the story down and see what it shows us.

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out.

If we stick with the whole boat theme, one of the places where God's closeness affects us most would be in charting the course for our life.

Charting the Course

How many times in life have you asked God for guidance, to show you where to go and what to do? I've had phases in my life where I have gone for months or even YEARS pleading with God to show me what to do. Deciding to church plant was a serious case of that for me. I spent a long time feeling absolutely paralyzed and unable to choose a path. Karin and I would pray together and beg God for some indication of what was the right thing to do.

It reminded me of that old Collective Soul song called Shine. It pretty well summed up the feeling:

*Give me a word
Give me a sign
Show me where to look
Tell me what will I find
Oh, heaven let your light shine down*

Heaven let your light shine down. God, if you're listening, answer me. I've sounded a lot like that when I've been asking for God's guidance. But as I have reflected on that kind of praying, I've come to realize that it doesn't take into account God's closeness. It's praying to a God up in the sky somewhere – not a God who's already right in my life.

I don't know if you noticed it in the story or not, but it was Jesus' idea to get into the boat in the first place. He was the one who wanted to go to the other side of the lake. He was the one with the plan. And he didn't send the disciples off on their own and shout how to get there from the shore. He was right in the boat.

My point is this: Jesus is in my boat. He's intimately involved in my experiences. He's the one who's been guiding from the start. I look for some dramatic revelation from the outside, when he's already charted the course and he's with me on a daily basis to help me navigate. God guides me from right in my boat, not from far away.

In that time when I was praying so hard about church planting, one day Karin finally said to me, “Don’t you already know?” And when I thought about it, I realized I did know. God had been confirming everything in a bunch of small everyday ways. He was dialoguing with me about it daily, not saving up his instructions for one big epiphany.

I read an article this week on these people. They work for one of the online map services like MapQuest. Have you ever downloaded driving directions and found that they aren’t anything like the real streets? Sometimes newer roads don’t even show up. The computer just grabs the data it can find, and sometimes the data and the actual driving conditions don’t match.

These people take a different approach. They are working to make the maps as realistic as possible. To do that, they’re literally getting in cars and going out and driving street by street – not just relying on computer coordinates. And they’re producing better maps that give you much better and more accurate directions.

It’s so much better to get our map from a God who drives our streets. He’s not behind a desk somewhere – he sees the road conditions, the potholes, the shortcuts. He has an insider’s perspective on our lives. His closeness is a comfort when it comes to charting the course of our lives.

The course Jesus and his disciples took went through some rough waters.

A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

I call this phase of the journey “sending the S.O.S.”

Sending the S.O.S.

Back in 1986, some people in Israel discovered a fishing boat in the Sea of Galilee that was from the time of Jesus. It had been buried in clay, and then it became uncovered when water levels dropped one year.

You wouldn’t want to take it out on the water now, but you can begin to picture what it must have looked like. It was 26 feet long and used mostly for fishing. At one time, it had a mast. But it wasn’t a very deep boat. You can see why the disciples would have been frightened in a storm. With a dozen or so people on board, this thing was probably riding very low in the water. Luke tells us they were in great danger. Surrounded by the waves, they weren’t imagining the threat. It was real.

Our lives are about as frail as that 2000 year old boat. We weren't designed to weather the storms that life brings. The waves are too big for us. The problems are too overwhelming. We look around and see the storm pressing in on us.

But you know what? No matter how close the danger feels, Jesus is closer. No matter how close the storm, Jesus is closer. Because he's already in your boat. The one who can still the wind and waves has already planted himself in your boat and mine and is ready to come to our rescue.

Psalm 145:18-19

*The LORD is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.*

Thursday night I woke up in the middle of the night and could NOT get back to sleep. I talk too much about how busy my job is, but this week was worse. We went as a family for two days to Portland at the beginning of the week, which was great, but that meant losing two days in one of the most hectic weeks ever at work. I had a church board retreat scheduled for Saturday, so I knew I would be missing one of my key prep times for this morning. There was an impossible amount to do in a very limited amount of time.

So by Thursday night, I was completely overwhelmed. I laid awake for hours, with my heart racing and my mind spinning. It finally came into my head to actually try what I was preaching about this week – to act like God was close to me right there at 3:00 in the morning. So I went to him just like the disciples, basically telling him, “I’m going to drown. My boat is swamped. I don’t think I can make it.” And he said “Yes you can. Watch me.”

Within 24 hours, I had completed the most difficult chunk of my work, and I had a draft of my sermon prepared – earlier than I ever have it done. It wasn't because I did something spectacular or that the problem disappeared. It all had to get done, and God stepped in and did the impossible for me. He didn't let me drown.

I don't know what you're going through right now or what you've been through in the past. I don't know why God allows suffering and I don't know why he doesn't just make it all go away. But I do know that if you've invited him into your life, he is in the middle of your storm with you and he is closer to you than the danger is, and he will stand between you and the dark clouds.

Psalm 34:18

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

The monk Brother Lawrence once said, "You need not cry very loud; God is nearer to us than we think." When we send out an S.O.S., we can know that he's close at our side, experiencing the situation with us.

Jesus jumped right in and handled the situation when the disciples came to him.

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.

Ahh. Things have settled down. All is peaceful and quiet. Then Jesus turns around and looks at them for an answer.

"Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

Ouch. It was nice to have him close a minute ago when there was a problem to be solved. It's great to have him near when there's danger. But having him that close may have other implications too. We could call it "Sitting in Dry Dock."

Sitting in Dry Dock

You put a boat in dry dock so that you can get the hull out of the water and examine it, make repairs, scrape off some barnacles. It's an exposed situation, where the boat is easy to access from all sides. Damage that might have been hidden under the water is suddenly obvious when you can see it in the light.

Jesus had the disciples in dry dock. Their lack of faith was exposed when they panicked and their lack of understanding became obvious when they told Jesus they were going to drown. And Jesus isn't one to look the other way.

Here's another misconception about the closeness of God. I've often imagined being more saintly and how great it would be to really, really experience a close relationship with Jesus, being such a good person and having it be a total joy.

But over a lifetime of being involved in a lot of different churches, I've met a lot of people who I consider to be much more godly than myself, people who I know can speak with authority on being close to God. And without exception, the people who seem to know the most about being near Jesus are the people who are most aware of their own sin and inadequacies.

The closeness of Jesus doesn't mean a feel good experience all the time. It means being exposed to his holiness on a regular basis. It means letting him see us for who we are. We read earlier the psalm where David talked about how God is everywhere and what a comfort God's presence was to him. But just a few verses later, he would invite God to put him in dry dock:

Psalm 139:23-24

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Being close to Jesus means letting him ask the tough questions of us like he did with the disciples. His questions prompted them to ask their own questions.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee.

I see one last thing in this story about Christ's closeness, and I call it "Hoisting the Sails."

Hoisting the Sails

When there's a good wind kicking up, you put down the oars and hoist the sails to take advantage of it. The wind provides the force to take you where you want to go.

I see what Christ did in calming the storm as putting some wind in the sails of the disciples. The word Luke uses for amazement could be translated as admiration or wonder. They were inspired by this great act. It increased their faith and deepened their understanding of who Jesus was.

And the story wraps up with the group reaching their final destination. They made it where Jesus had wanted to go in the first place. And he used the experiences of that journey to take the disciples further in their belief, to reveal more of his glory to them.

Christ's presence with us, his closeness to us, does more than guide us and save us and convict us. It causes us to want to worship God. Getting to know Jesus better, experiencing him in our daily lives and watching him work makes us want to love him more. It fills our sails.

And that's where Jesus wants to take us – to a point where we understand who he is, to a place where we will worship him more.

That's where I want to be. I WANT to see Christ work in those ways that make me fall on my knees and worship. But a whole lot of my day goes by where I don't even THINK about Jesus being near me. R.C. Sproul said it well when he wrote,

When we can't "feel" His presence with the accompanying tingle on the back of the neck and the chill along the spinal cord, we tend to think He is absent. Our experience is more of the divine absence than of the divine presence.

How do we learn to see Christ with us more? If he's that close, how can we recognize him?

I moved offices recently, from one that was a real office to one that's more of a shared space with cubicle walls dividing me from other employees. Now I know many people work in cubicles, but this particular space is so quiet that you can almost hear the other people breathing. I can tell when it's time for someone to trim their fingernails by the sound of their typing.

Not long after I moved there, a new employee was put in one of the spaces near mine. Every morning, she would arrive after me, but she wouldn't even say hi on her way past me to her cubby. It was almost like she was pretending I wasn't there. Then, rather than just talk to me about a job, she would always send me an email: Can we meet to discuss this project? And she would send me a meeting schedule with a "reply requested" – when all we really needed to do was talk. It felt ridiculous to be so formal and not take advantage of the fact that we were sitting in the same room.

God shares our space with us, but we often act like he's not really here. And I think one of the best ways to start seeing him at work in our lives is to start up the conversation. We can talk to him throughout the day and keep a running dialogue going. It's what Brother Lawrence called practicing the presence of God.

It's not easy to remember. Like I said earlier, even though I knew I was preaching on the topic this week, it was work to actually put it into practice. When I finally did stop to acknowledge that Christ knew my stress and was right there with me, it made a noticeable difference in my outlook.

Fortunately for the disciples, their lack of understanding didn't prevent Jesus from being himself. He took care of the storm at their request, even though they didn't know what they were asking or what he would do. And I'm so glad that God isn't waiting for us to get our concept of him right in our heads before he shows us what he can do when he's close. He stays close, regardless of our ability to see him.

Does God feel close or far away this morning? If you've put your faith in him, you couldn't be any closer. If you haven't but you want to, he promises he will never leave you or forsake you.

And what aspect of his closeness hits home for you? Are you needing guidance? Are you needing his protection and rescue from a big storm that's raging in your life? Is he convicting you of things that need to change?

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, "Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet." I pray that God will fill your sails with that knowledge and help you see more and more each day of who is in your boat.