

2021-06-20 Questions at Sea

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June 20, 2021

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Eileen Metzger]

This is from the fourth chapter of Mark.

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you, Eileen, for reading that text for us, and I do have some brief thoughts to share about Mark 4:35-41, but first I wanted to talk a little bit of business and share a little bit of news; it was already mentioned during the prayer time, but I want to tell you a little bit more about what happened last week. As you know, Artisan's annual meeting was last Sunday night, and of course we had all of our usual business that we do at our annual meetings. We attended to reports on the previous ministry year, we had an annual budget that was approved, we had some Leadership Team members and Nominating Committee members elected to second terms; it was all very normal Artisan business meeting stuff.

And, we also had two very important measures that were on the agenda – measures that I think probably made this year's annual meeting the most significant one we've had in at least a decade, and maybe even ever. And those two measures were: an affirmation of the Leadership

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Team's recommendation to begin the process of disaffiliation with the Evangelical Covenant Church and an update to our LGBTQ inclusion statement that would remove denominational language, as well as the limitations that our denomination placed on us, as far as hosting or officiating same gender weddings. So, we had these two huge votes in addition to all the other business, and I'm really happy to report that both of these proposals passed unanimously. [applause] So, happy Pride! [chuckles]

I am so glad to know that we're moving forward together as a church in what we perceive to be the call of the Holy Spirit for our community, and really overjoyed that we had such unanimous approval of that direction. Now, even in the midst of that joy, I do want to recognize that it also brings with it some uncertainty, and lots of questions, and maybe even some fear. So, let me take just a couple of minutes to offer some pastoral reassurances about all of that.

First and foremost, we are still *us*. Although we are moving on from this connection that has been really important to us through the ups and downs, through our whole ministry history, let's remember one thing, which is that that denominational connection was never the thing that gave us our primary sense of identity as a church. And this comes up all the time when people find out I'm a pastor – first of all, I try not to tell strangers that because it makes them act weird, but when they do, they then follow up with certain questions that I have sort of an elevator pitch about, and one of them is always like, *“So is that non-denominational, or is it a denomination, or what are you, Catholic or whatever?”* And I tell them, yes, we have a denomination, but it's not the thing that makes us who we are. Our mission is the same today as it was 17 years ago (almost). Our foundational values are not changing. That's the first thing; we are still us.

Secondly, we actually have plenty of goodwill built up with our soon-to-be-former denomination. No one is under any illusions about the depth of disagreement that we've had on some very important matters. There's a lot of pain that has come with that disagreement in various ways, some of which has been felt much more deeply to certain members of our community than others. But on a logistical level, it is helpful to know, perhaps, and maybe reassuring for you to know, that they are not bitter toward us. We expect the separation to be healthy and amicable, although the bureaucracy of it does mean that it's going to take a while, like at least a full year, longer than we might like for that to take place, but there's not much we can do about the bureaucracy side of it.

Lastly, we are not alone. We have other congregations here in Rochester that are with us and continue to be a support to us and continue to be, you know, chosen family for us as a church.

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There are other Covenant churches, other ECC churches across the country, who are in the same spot that we are, or maybe a few months ahead of where we are, or maybe a few months behind where we are. But we're not alone, even within our denomination, as a church that's leaving. We're still connected.

And, I'll reiterate one last time – maybe not, it's probably not gonna be the last time, but one more time – that, as your pastor, I didn't realize how important this was for some of you. And that's in part because of just kind of missing stuff, but it's also because I didn't listen as well as I should have at certain times. And I want to acknowledge that, and ask for your forgiveness about that, and commit as much as it's within my power to do a better job of that going forward, because this is probably not the last time that something is going to come up that I'll have occasion to hear the pain that you might experience and need to do better than I did about that. And that's one of the reasons that this took as long as it did.

I want to read for you one last time the reassurance that the Apostle Paul received in a dream when he finally came to terms with the fact that he had to give up on ministering within the family of religious tradition that he had been raised in, in order to go to reach those on the margins. The word that he received from the Spirit in this dream is a word that I spoke over you. That sounds very high-falutin, but I want to do it, I want to speak it over you again: “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you,” – God is with you; God is with us! – “and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city” – there are many in this state, there are many in this country, there are many around the world – “who are my people.” So, yeah, that's the report from last Sunday. And some extra. [chuckles] [applause]

The story of Jesus calming the storm while on a boat with his disciples is very famous for its declarative nature, for the fact that he speaks over the waves and the weather, “Peace! Be still!” It's very direct and powerful. You may even have seen some kitschy religious artwork about this moment. Has anybody seen the picture that I have in my mind? [chuckles] It's Jesus and it's always like he's on this little tiny skiff. I'm like, *I don't think they have read the whole story. There's no space for a sleeping cushion in the front of that boat.* But anyway, in this picture, he's standing on the bow of the boat and kind of going like this, right? [gesturing with his arms] And then this beam of light or something is how he calms the waves. I don't know if I like that image, but I'm wondering if maybe some of you have seen that same thing. I think it might have been in my grandparents' house or something.

At any rate, what it drives home is the very declarative and direct nature of that moment of Jesus saying, “Peace! Be still!” And I think that's what probably rises to the top for most people

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when they read this story, is the power of Jesus to do this great thing. But as I looked at the story again this week, I noticed that there are actually a lot of questions in this passage. In fact, there's four different questions in just six verses in Mark chapter 4, 35 through 41 was it, I think? And I think these questions might hold a lot of meaning for us. Let me make the case, for those who haven't heard it, for the idea that questions (good questions anyway) are usually better than answers. Even in church, questions are better than answers.

As a preacher, as a speaker, as a pastor, as a teacher, I try very hard – often failing, I'm sure – to speak and teach and lead and preach in a way that inspires your curiosity and raises for you profound and provocative questions, much more often than it gives you some great answer. That's not (at least, I hope) because I'm some wishy-washy person, right? Ask anybody who knows me, I've got opinions. [chuckles] Or just ask me about literally anything and I will make one on the spot and tell you what it is. [laughter]

But I think, in spiritual life, the work of coming to a better question is usually, if not always, more fruitful, more productive than getting some really neat answer. And to the extent that an answer is helpful, I usually think it's because it just raises the next question. “Okay, got that figured out. Oh, but now...” Have you ever had one of those moments in the spiritual life where you think, just about the time you figured something out and arrived, you go, “Oh, actually what I've arrived at is the realization that I was even more clueless than I thought.” [chuckles] So, never be afraid of questions; never be afraid to ask a question of me. And if any of you ever catch me shutting down a question, or acting in a way that doesn't honor space or hold space for the question, please remind me of this moment and the fact that I told you you're supposed to call me when I do that and say, “Hey, dummy! You're not living up to what you said you would be.”

And here in this passage there are four questions. Two of them are asked by the disciples, and two of them are asked by Jesus – which, by the way, is one of the reasons we know that questions are valid within the Christian faith: Jesus asks them *a lot*. Two questions by the disciples, two questions by Jesus. Now, here's how this is going to work: I'm going to give you some questions about the questions, and then I'm going to read what the questions are from the passage. And then, I'm going to ask you to tell me what your questions were about the questions. [laughs] Any questions? [laughter] So, once again, I'm going to read for you the four questions that I see in the passage, but before I do, I want you to be thinking about some follow-up questions that I'm going to give you *now*. When I read those questions for you, please answer this: Which of these questions are you actually asking right now? (Either of God, or of yourself.) And which of these questions gives you the most negative feeling? Because, let's be

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honest, even in the space where questions are safe, they don't always feel very good, right? And when we get asked a question by God, sometimes it's not always comfortable, right? So, which question gives you negative feelings, and why do you think that is? And then, I'm also going to ask you, which question do you feel ready to answer right now, today? And what would your answer be?

So, here are the four questions:

1. Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?
2. Why are you afraid?
3. Have you still no faith?
4. Who then is this?

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Maybe they're speaking to him as a friend, “We're all on this boat together and you're asleep; don't you care that you're about to die?” Or maybe they're asking him as a miracle worker—or as we would think about it, with the benefit of lots of hindsight and some logical training, as God in the flesh.

“Why are you afraid?” This is a question Jesus asks them, which might have been a question that they found quite annoying. [chuckles] “Oh, why am I afraid?” [laughter] “Uh, have you checked the weather lately, Jesus? Why wouldn't we be afraid?!” But maybe that's a question that would be profound for you in your life right now. In your life today, with what's going on, non-rhetorically, why are you afraid and what are you afraid of? That's a pretty heavy, but important question that you might process for yourself and gain some self knowledge.

Third question, Jesus's second question: “Have you still no faith?” [Sighs] A question that must have felt like a rebuke. And again, if it was a rhetorical question (“Do you have any faith?”) then maybe it was a rebuke, and maybe they needed to hear the rebuke. But what if the question wasn't rhetorical? And sometimes the tone is hard enough in the written word, but when you layer it through some translations and a couple thousand years of linguistic history, it's a little bit hard to know the tone of what Jesus was saying. Maybe it wasn't a rhetorical question at all. Maybe that's a question that you ought to be answering yourself right now. Do you have any faith? And maybe for those of you who've been kind of playing at the edges of it: Still, do you have no faith? I know pastors aren't supposed to have favorite questions, but this one is mine: “Who then is this—[And I want to get the exact wording at the end of that question] that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

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Even after all they'd seen—and you could go back, it's only a few chapters into Mark—but they had seen plenty from Jesus already. Numerous people healed of afflictions and disease, profound teachings that had started to reorient the way they thought about the world and about God. And even after all of that, they were still taken aback for some reason in that boat. “Who even is this?” Maybe it was because the miracle this time hit closer to home. Right? You might be impressed if someone else receives a miracle, but when you receive it yourself, you kind of go, “Whoa, what's going on here?” Perhaps it was because it affected the elements, not a person. Maybe that's a bigger category of miracle. But for whatever reason, these people who had been close to Jesus for a good long time still found themselves unsettled about who he was. And maybe you have been close to Jesus in your own way for a good long time, and still find yourself asking the question, who is this?

So I'm going to ask some of you to be brave here because during this summer's series, I am trying to foster an experience to curate—an experience, if you will—where we all kind of think about the text together. And we're going to do that on Zoom and in the room. I'm going to ask you the questions about the questions, and you can choose, if you want to share, to answer any of the questions about the questions and give as much or as little detail as you want. Of course, it's always an option just to sort of stay where you are and keep quiet and keep your fingers off the keyboard and just observe and take it in. Here are the questions:

1. Which of these four questions are you asking of God, or of yourself right now?
2. Which of these questions gives you the most negative feelings, and why do you think that is?
3. Which question are you ready to answer right now? And maybe even share what your answer might be to that question.

So those are the questions about the questions, and the questions themselves one more time are:

1. Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?
2. Why are you afraid?
3. Have you still no faith?
4. Who then is this?

This is maybe a little bit more intimate than some of the sharing that we've done recently. But if you want to give an answer in the room, I will do my best to repeat it back so that the folks on Zoom can hear it. If you want to give an answer on Zoom, go ahead and type it into the chat and

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I'll read it out to the congregation. And if you have an answer that you want to give confidentially, I'm sorry, there's no way to do that in the room. But I'm assuming you could send me a direct message and I would still see it and I would not use your name in that case. Usually I read the name out.

Which of these questions are you asking right now? Which yeah, go ahead.

[Member of congregation, Samantha, shares her answer, which is not audible in recording]

Scott: Thank you so much, Samantha. Your response to that was so lovely and beautiful and there's no way I'm going to be able to repeat it well for the people on Zoom so I'm apologizing to the people on Zoom. And from here on out, I'm going to ask people who answer in the room to use a microphone [laughter]. [To Samantha] No, it's not your fault at all. This is my fault. I should have remembered that that is likely to be the case. Thank you for your very beautiful answer and for being willing to share it.

If I walk out too far with this [microphone] on, it's going to squeal, so can you give this to the next person who's ready to answer in the room, Kerry? Thank you. I think it's Dan Proctor, right there.

Dan Proctor: I have an answer. *Amen!* [laughter]

Scott: [Laughing] He gave an amen. I love it. Okay, Cameron's ready for the mic.

Cameron: The question that struck me the most was, "Why are you afraid?" And I find myself sometimes just dreading, like life? I don't know. The future? My mind is dwelling on the future and where I'm going and I feel a sense of uncertainty sometimes. But really, I feel like the answer is simple. Like, don't worry, be happy. Laugh, laugh at it all. I really believe that this entire existence is like a play, you know? It's kind of a—I don't know. I'm going to give the mic to somebody else now [laughter].

Scott: [chuckling] Cameron, thank you for sharing about that. It's definitely a brave thing to share about your personal fears, so thank you. [To next speaker] Go ahead, Susan.

Susan: I think the question I'm most uncomfortable with is, "Do you still have so little faith?" because I feel like that one gets put out a lot. I think the hard thing for me to figure out is if it's really coming from God or if it's just coming from other people, but I'm definitely ready to answer, "Don't you care about us?" and that answer is yes. I've got that much figured out—God cares.

Scott: Wow, thanks for sharing that. Yes, and so often those questions are weaponized by other people. [To next speaker] Go ahead, Dylan.

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Dylan: Basically what she said. Because sometimes in my life I say, is this the right decision? Do I have faith in this decision? Sometimes the answer is no, because I feel like it's just not right. I have to ask myself, is this the right thing to do, and do I need to do it?

Scott: Wow, thank you. Thanks. Don't forget to type into the Zoom chat if you have questions.

Speaker: I'm thankful I'm not asking this question right now, but it brought up some negative feelings of asking it in the past—"Don't you care about us?" in moments of tragedy, in moments of feeling persecuted or alone. Or maybe not alone, but in a group where we're being attacked and whatnot.

Scott: Yeah, thank you. Yeah. "Do you not care that we are perishing?" Is a question that carries with it a lot of pain.

Speaker: Yeah, about the "Don't you care?" Well, how did you word it?

Scott: The way the disciples worded it was, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Speaker: I've been thinking about that in terms of society and the church. The church (not this church, the church at large) talks a lot about caring about people and the actions don't match. In my personal life with my family and friends that I grew up with, in the past four years, I'm really struggling with the church at large. Don't you care about us?

Scott: Wow. Thank you. Thanks for sharing that and. And if I could just have a real quick response to the "not this church, but that church" thing. I'm both grateful to you for saying that and for the fact that that is apparently how it comes across, but it's impossible to separate this church from "the church." And so that pain is always going to be present to a certain extent, even within the safest walls you have found. So let's do our best to acknowledge that and counteract it when we can.

Rachel: I just want to go off of that actually, about this church. So we're relatively new to this church. That was definitely a feeling that I was struggling with for quite some time in other churches where part of it was good and part of the community were always good people. But there were bigger questions and bigger issues, and not quite feeling like they matched up with my own beliefs and what I truly in my heart felt God stands for and wants for everybody. And then coming to this church, and especially at this season of this church, has just been amazing and is answering that question in so many ways at this time.

Scott: Wow, thank you. You know, I've thought often about people who recently started attending and how they were going to experience the last month or so of church life. It's mostly been really, really positive actually. So thank you for sharing that, Rachel. And this is not meant to be a prophetic word or anything, but it occurred to me that our leadership team member and church chairperson, Dr. Kristen Brown, who presided over the meeting on Sunday, has told me

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that her first Sunday here was the Sunday that we ratified our first version of our LGBTQ inclusion statement [chuckles]. She stuck around and it worked out pretty well. I'm not saying you're going to have to preside over a meeting in three years [laughter]. You might! I'm not saying you're not. Okay, we have time for one or two more.

Speaker: Well, what was the line about having no faith?

Scott: Yeah. "Have you still no faith?" That's in the NRSV version.

Elecia: When I find that I'm in an extremely stressful situation, I question my faith and it takes me a long time to do all those things that I know will help me work through my faith and talk to God. Not be mad at church, you know, not be mad at God for not fixing it, and doing the things that I can do to fix it.

Scott: Thank you, Elecia. So I think Doug has been wanting to share, so just pass it over. And then we'll I think we're going to give Doug the last question today.

Doug: No pressure there [laughter]. I think the question I'm ready to answer and have been ready to answer for some time is, "What are you so afraid of?" Because I'm such an analytical person, I need to have answers. And for much of my shifting of my faith and my beliefs, the question that always came up is, what if I'm wrong? So that was what I was afraid of. What if I'm wrong? And so that continues to be a question I asked, but I'm less fearful of the question now than I used to be. So I don't feel like being wrong is the end of the world anymore.

Scott: Wow, thank you. That's a great way to end our time together.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).