

Sermon Series: Overwhelmed

Headlines – by Jeff McClain

Mark 4:35-41; Matt 24:3-8

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As David mentioned earlier, today we begin a new sermon series entitled “Overwhelmed.” Many people have mentioned how timely this series seems to be. Although, come to think of it, a lot of you who said that were wearing red bazaar shirts at the time... Seriously though, we’ve heard a lot of positive feedback on this series already and we’ve not preached a word of it yet. I believe that’s God’s timing. We’re a month or so into a new school year, and fall schedules are in full swing. For many of us that means new programming, new routines, new commitments, new rhythms of life. Gone are the lazy days of summer, if they were ever even lazy at all. In addition to schedule changes, many of us find ourselves overwhelmed by a variety of life circumstances. Some people are new parents. Some are caring for aging parents. Relationships with family and friends can be strained. Many are facing health challenges. Money, regardless of how much we have (or don’t!), always brings its own set of issues. And sometimes just the daily grind of everyday life takes its toll.

Over the next five weeks we’re going to spend some time looking at ways life can be overwhelming. We’ll approach this from a number of different angles: the news, relationships, money, time, and life. As we examine each of these challenges, we’ll discover what scripture has to say about how God meets us in the midst of our being overwhelmed. Today we’ll start with headlines.

It’s hard to read or listen to the news these days and not become overwhelmed. I’m constantly aware of this, but it became abundantly apparent to me a couple weeks ago on my way to church. I left a little later than I usually do, and the radio station that normally plays some kind of classical worship music on Sunday mornings instead was blaring out the daily news. And in the five minutes it took me to drive to church I went from being in a really good mood to being just depressed. Just five minutes of news, and my whole outlook, my whole countenance changed. And right then I learned a very important lesson – never leave late for church!

As I’ve thought about this series and this topic, the biblical story that has resonated most with me isn’t exactly a story about headlines. But it is a story about being overwhelmed. It’s the story of Jesus in a boat with his disciples.¹ Bazaar folks, forgive me for repeating part of what I shared during my bazaar devotional, but I couldn’t get this image out of my head. There’s just something about water that captures so perfectly the feeling of being overwhelmed. Hear this word from Mark chapter 4.²

¹ Rembrandt

² Mark 4:35-37 NRSV

On that day, when evening had come, he [Jesus] said to them [his disciples], "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.

Let me stop right there. Imagine yourself in that boat.³ You're crossing the sea, and all the sudden the wind and waves kick up. Wave after wave is beating against the boat, one after the next, and it seems like there's no end in sight. And now you're starting to take on water. The boat is being swamped. It's becoming overwhelmed.

Anyone ever feel that way in life? Do you ever feel like life is a relentless storm, clouds and darkness and wind and rain and waves all around you? Sometimes that's how I feel when I listen to the news...one story after the next about how the world is just falling apart. There is so much tragedy, so much violence and destruction, so much grief and pain.

Here's just a small sample of some of the headlines I saw this week:⁴

EU refugee crisis 'tip of the iceberg', says UN agency⁵

- Without an end to civil war in Syria, Europe must prepare for millions more migrants

Stampede kills more than 700 at Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca⁶

- 700 people dead while simply trying to worship

Fourth Body Found in California's Valley Fire, as Seven Now Dead in Blazes⁷

- Wildfires in California leave seven dead, thousands of homes threatened

Chicago: 8 Killed, 45 Wounded in Weekend Shootings⁸

- Chicago just last weekend alone

LA Officials Declare Homelessness State of Emergency⁹

- 25,000-50,000 homeless people sleeping on streets in Skid Row (twice Kidd Brewer capacity)
- Mayor of Portland, OR declared same thing there¹⁰

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/25/eu-refugee-crisis-tip-of-iceberg-unhcr>

⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/24/middleeast/stampede-hajj-pilgrimage/>

⁷ <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/western-wildfires/fourth-body-found-after-californias-valley-fire-7-now-dead-n432536>

⁸ <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2015/09/21/8-killed-45-wounded-in-weekend-shootings/>

⁹ <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/state-of-emergency-homelessness-328702371.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.kgw.com/story/news/politics/2015/09/23/mayor-announces-state-emergency-housing-homeless/72685832/>

So much tragedy, so much grief, so much pain. How do we process that kind of loss? So many complex and complicated issues – where do we even begin to imagine solutions? How do we take even one step toward progress? Where’s the hope? Wave, after wave, after wave. And they just keep coming. The boat’s taking on water. It’s swamped.

It’s easy to become overwhelmed by the state of the world. But the thing is, we shouldn’t really be surprised by it. Jesus isn’t. Listen to what he says in Matthew 24 about what we can expect to happen before his return.¹¹

6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

How’s that for some serious headlines? War! Famine! Earthquakes! And that’s just the beginning! But even in the midst of all this tragedy Jesus says, “See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place.” Don’t be surprised. This is the reality of living in a sinful, fallen world. A world that longs for redemption, a creation that’s groaning for the time when all things will be made new. But until then, storms and wind and waves are going to come. That’s part of life. That doesn’t mean it’s ok. And it doesn’t mean God sends the storms. What it does mean is that God expects storms, and so should we.

I’ve met a couple times with Rabbi Stephen Roberts from Temple of the High Country. He likes to say that if you read scripture, that’s one of the things God promises: there will be tragedy in this life. There’s no way around it. Jesus says the same thing. Don’t be surprised by the storms. In fact, expect them to come.

But let’s go back to the boat to see how Jesus responds to storms. When we last left the disciples a great storm was raging, the waves were beating against the boat and they’re starting to take on water.¹²

***Mark 4:38** But he [Jesus] 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?"*

¹¹ Matt 24:6-8 NRSV

¹² Mark 4:38-41 NRSV

The disciples are freaked out, understandably, at the prospect of death at sea. And there's Jesus, in the back of the boat. Sleeping! Not at all concerned, apparently! Jesus knows there will be storms in this life. But what's more, Jesus knows how to calm them. Peace! Be still! As the children and the choir sang so beautifully earlier, he's got the wind and the rain and the whole world in his hands.

Scripture says the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. Jesus overcomes the overwhelming storm with overwhelming peace. And the disciples were filled with great awe. Sometimes we can be overwhelmed in good ways, too.

The lesson here is that there's a bigger story at work. No matter what the headlines are in the world news, no matter what the headlines are in your household, there's another storyline. There's a counter-narrative. There's another source of information. There's another newscast, a different set of headlines. And it's good news of great joy for all people. And it's every bit as overwhelming but in the best possible way.

Here's part of that alternative narrative, spoken by the very author of creation, the one who's got the whole world in his hands. Consider these words of Jesus the next time you see the waves coming at you:¹³

Peace be with you.

I will never leave you or forsake you.

Do not be afraid.

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Let not your heart be troubled.

Do not worry about tomorrow.

I am with you always.

And this one might be my favorite, especially when I'm feeling overwhelmed by the weight of this broken world. Jesus says, "In the world you will have troubles, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33)

We will see trouble. That much God promises. But whatever trouble we find, Jesus has overcome it. No matter what kind of storm you're facing today, remember that you're not alone. Jesus is in the boat with you. And Jesus doesn't stay asleep in the back but he stands up, looks straight into the eye of your storm and proclaims: "Peace! Be Still!" [PAUSE] And the same Jesus who calmed

the wind and the waves overcame even the cross and the grave. There's no storm he can't and hasn't already overwhelmed by his saving grace.

Again, I love the image of water when talking about being overwhelmed. Wave after wave, crashing and crushing and overpowering. But as even as destructive as water can be, it's also life-giving. In fact, life can't exist without it. Water is something God gives freely and without limit. There's nothing we can do to make more of it, but there's more than enough of it to go around. Just like God's grace.

God often uses water as a means of salvation in the bible. From Noah and the flood to the Israelites being led through the parted the Red Sea to the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side when he was pierced for our transgressions. God uses water while bringing about salvation. And we're reminded of that saving power of water when we celebrate and remember our baptism.

Through the waters of baptism, God's grace washes over us, overwhelms us, and claims us as God's beloved children. The first person I ever baptized was a youth group kid named Adam at the church where Carrie and I interned during seminary. When I asked Adam why he wanted to be baptized he said, "Because I want to know that no matter what else happens to me the rest of my life, I can always look back to this day and remember who I am." That's a great reason to be baptized. And it's a great reminder for us when things get overwhelming. No matter what else is going on around us, we are God's beloved children, and God is with us.

I'm wondering where you find yourself overwhelmed this week. Throughout this sermon series, we want to encourage you to allow our staff and the prayer team to pray with you wherever you find yourself overwhelmed. In your bulletin you'll find a blank piece of paper. Please feel free to write prayer requests on this card for you or someone you know. Our staff and prayer team will pray over these requests throughout these next five weeks.

In a moment I'll invite you to come forward and drop those prayer requests in the basket as we have an opportunity to remember our baptism and give God thanks. Thanks that no matter how overwhelmed we are by life circumstances we are overwhelmed even more by God's saving grace.

But first I want to close with a story. It's about a businessman named Horatio Spafford. Some of you may have heard his story before. Spafford was a well-respected and successful lawyer in Chicago back in the late 1800s. He invested in a sizable amount of land north of Chicago, and he sadly lost most of it in the great Chicago fire of 1871. Two years later he decided to take his family to Europe on vacation. He got held up at the last minute on business, but he sent his wife and his four daughters ahead on the ship and promised to meet up with them as soon as he could. Tragically, part way across the Atlantic the ship collided with another ship and sunk,

killing 226 people, including all four of Spafford's daughters. His wife survived and sent him a telegram from England that read simply, "Saved alone."

Soon after, as Spafford was sailing to England to meet up with his wife, the captain of the ship notified him when they were passing over the spot where his children had died. As Spafford looked over the side of the ship at the churning waters below, he was overcome by the powerful reassurance of God's presence and peace, even in the midst of unthinkable tragedy. And it was there and then he composed the beautiful hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul."

Listen to this first verse:¹⁴

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

God can bring forth overwhelming beauty and peace even in the midst of the most overwhelmingly difficult circumstances. Through Jesus God brought forth the salvation of the world out of the agony of the cross and tomb. As that Tomlin chorus says, "Jesus has overcome, and the grave is overwhelmed." And just like with Jesus, death is not the end of our story. That's what gives us the hope to carry on, even when sorrows like sea billows roll. That's why it is well with our souls even when the reality of life around us might seem to suggest otherwise. God's story proclaims a very different reality, with a much much better set of headlines: Good news! The grave is overwhelmed! Christ is risen from the dead! It is well! Amen.

I want invite you to respond now to God's overwhelming grace in your life. As we listen to the worship team / Bobbie Jo / Dana play "It Is Well" I invite you to come to one of three stations set up in the sanctuary (one up front, two in the back). Dip your hand in the water and remember your baptism. Remember that no matter how much the storms push you around, you are God's beloved child, and Christ has already overcome that storm. I also invite you to put your card in the basket and we'll be glad to pray over your requests.

Finally I want to share with you one amazing way I saw God moving in our midst this week. As Vern and I prepared to preach today, we both decided independently to land in this same place with It Is Well. After I talked with Vern about it I called Colette and told her the direction we were headed so she could plan children's church accordingly. She told me, "That's funny – I had that same song in my head all day yesterday!" Friends, the Spirit of God is up to something here! And I invite you to join in. Come.

Benediction:

Look up. The ceiling of our church reminds us of a boat. Know that whatever storms we face, we don't face them alone. The Church is with us. And Jesus is in the boat with us, too, standing up and proclaiming "Peace! Be still!" as he overwhelms us with his grace. Go now in that peace. Amen.