

# CALM THE STORM

SERIES ON MATTHEW V  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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Tonight's sermon is not political. It is just me, struggling. I suspect it is heavily biased and I make no apologies for that. These are my concerns, and I trust that some of them are shared by a few of you. I trust you appreciate the honesty because this week, and not just for the reasons of the war, I am only what you see and I feel fragile and weak.

Let us pray.

"I will not dodge the issue" said the disciple who doubted as he stepped into the boat. This magician who was known as Jesus was out of ear shot because the wind was picking up. "The world is basically still suffering and sick. Nothing has changed except for the lives of a few people. Changing the lives of a few individuals is marvellous magic. Changing the world, now that is something worthy of God. I don't want to see miracles, I want to see redemption."

He was talking to a disciple who had faith but that disciple looked at him in disbelief and was angry.

"Who do you think you are?" said the disciple with faith. "In the last two days we have witnessed the most incredible things. We've seen a leper regain his skin and become clean. No-one will be afraid of hanging around with that guy ever again! We watched him be healed in front of our very eyes."

"Yes but I only got to hear about it. I wasn't there." Replied the disciple with doubt. "What am I supposed to do about it? Blind faith?"

There was a moment of tension before disciple with faith replied, "We've seen people investing their faith in this man Jesus as being someone different, who possesses something, a gift from the divine, an authority. Don't you remember me telling you about the roman soldier who came to Jesus yesterday? What did he say?"

He paused and looked at the other doubter's face—which was blank. He clearly hadn't been listening, not because he wasn't paying attention, but because his mind was closed.

“Well, Do you want to hear this? How open are you to the possibilities?” And so the disciple with faith told him the story of the Centurion encountering Jesus.

The Centurion was a Roman, a gentile, the Jews' public enemy, their captor who cared nothing for them other than for their territory and wealth, and he of all the people in Israel, recognised in Jesus something significant.

He who had the power to end the life of anyone there at the click of his fingers angrily came through the crowd. And everyone made way for him and expected the worst.

He came up to Jesus and paused. He was really struggling to say this first word. It was a word that elevated whomever it was that was being addressed to it made them into being someone greater. . . into having authority and superiority over the one who speaks it. The word was 'lord'. And he was about to say it to a despised Jewish peasant. He was crossing a line and risking much in saying this. He was stepping out from the umbrella of a strict chain of command and could well be compromising his privileged position in the army.

He took a deep breath and spoke.

“Lord . . .” he rolled his eyes up to the creative part of his brain that was trying it's hardest to pretend this wasn't happening. He had prepared a speech on the way to seeing Jesus. It involved a lot of apologising for the fact he was Roman and had been responsible for the deaths of a significant number of Jews. And it involved not quite begging but describing with vivid and coercive detail the magnitude of his predicament which was the ferocity of his servant's pain and the ghastliness of his wounds. “There's been an accident and my servant is paralysed and in a great deal of pain.” And he was about to launch into the speech but Jesus butted in and said, “I will go and heal him.”

And as Jesus gestured for the Centurion to lead the way, the centurion said, “Lord, it's not necessary for you to cross that cultural barrier and enter my house. I know that it would defile you according to your customs. I don't want that. Just say the word and I know he will be healed.

“I'm a centurion in the Roman army. I know what authority is. And I know when I see it. Just say the word while you are here and it will be done.

I know that, because I know you have authority over things that we do not understand.”

Jesus had a smile on his face and put his hand on the Centurion’s shoulder. And he proclaimed to the crowd. “This . . . this is faith. And he has nothing to do with your religion, and he has faith purer than any of you. I tell you what, you think you know what your faith is all about, but in the end many of you will find your ignorant pride is a road to destruction.”

And he turned to the Centurion and said, “Sure thing. Your servant is healed as we speak!”

And later that afternoon Jesus went around to Peter’s house and healed his mother in law. And then people started to bring people who were demon-possessed and with other sicknesses. People were reminded of scriptures that spoke about the one who was to save Israel: He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases...

After hearing the story the disciple who doubted blinked once and said “So. So what?”

“What do you mean so what? He’s fulfilling the prophecies about him. He is the one who will save us and make our nation great again.”

The doubter shook his head. “No. I don’t buy it. He is the one to save *other* people, I think, not the people close to me. He is making anecdotes for people like you to talk about. I bet that even in a couple of thousand years there’ll be some guy speaking about this in a pulpit. But the world will still be just as sick. Don’t you get it? Jesus has not healed *me*. He’s healing lots of people, but Jesus has not healed me. Give me redemption. Give me a world that knows no suffering and I will believe. Give me that. Don’t give me faith. Give me transformation.”

As if to reinforce the tension between the two men the clouds darkened over their heads and the wind freshened up in to a mischievous and selfish chaos.

“Hurry up you two, we need to get to the other side before it gets too bad.” Doubter and faithful pushed the boat away from shore and they sat and opposite ends of from each other.

Jesus made a pillow for himself out of the nets on the floor and went to sleep.

Somewhere in the distance, too far away for it to be anything other than seen on TV, a man is ripped apart by an explosion in the air above him.

The United States have got this new bomb. It's called a thermobaric bomb.

Quote:

It is among the most horrific weapons in any army's collection: ... a fearsome explosive that sets fire to the air above its target, then sucks the oxygen out of anyone unfortunate enough to have lived through the initial blast.

...

Thermobarics inject a fine, flammable mist into the air . . . Once ignited, the mist creates a mammoth fireball and pressure wave that's nearly impossible to avoid. The mist can travel around corners and into hidden crannies. And it burns relatively slowly, so jumping out of the way on the bomb's initial impact isn't much of a survival tactic.

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*Wired News*. "When a Gun Is More Than a Gun", Mar. 20, 2003

This isn't television or a videogame. This isn't some kind of hyperrealistic movie like *Saving Private Ryan*, or *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon*. This is the real stuff. This man who has just been killed is the son of two parents. Does it really matter what country he was born in?

Isn't there something quite frightening knowing that there are people employed to design equipment for destroying other people? And God lets that happen?

Don't you think it's quite bizarre that 250,000 people have invested their absolute faith to such an extent that they lay their lives on the line for decisions made by a president that they trust to be sensible? And goodness knows how many Iraqi have done exactly the same thing? That the whole world is being subject to the afflictions of two madmen who both have the power to call the whole thing off. Tell me where is God's power in that?

I'm no expert on war, I'm not really sure about the mechanics of it. I don't have a theology of war, I don't have an understanding of what God thinks about it. All I know is that as I stand here in front of you with the responsibility of encouraging you to have faith in God, I actually stand here with a clear and present disillusionment with God's plan for redeeming humanity. That's the truth.

As they set off from shore the disciples were quite confident in the weather, perhaps a strange thing to be confident in because of its reputation for inconsistency. Even the fishermen who were taking the boat out, knew that there was always an element of risk on the lake, they had all experienced the unpredictable storms but they knew that that's just what they are, unpredictable and to live in fear of stuff that can't be predicted is bordering on superstition and wouldn't let them do anything.

And with all their sense and experience they determined that the lake was safe. They saw the clouds but didn't think a storm was brewing. They saw some signs, but did not believe there was any danger. Most of the time they were right.

And as the clouds interacted with each other and the wind began to gain power, and as the waves of the lake got larger and larger it became apparent that now in the middle of the lake, they were in danger. And the disciples began to get a little afraid. And Jesus slept.

And the storm began to brew as the weapons inspectors went into Iraq and as people became impatient. As the powers set about their own agendas and as the leaders began to express their opinions about each other. As the public began to get tossed and turned by the power of propaganda, as we heard each of the leaders inflame each other to justify their own positions and seek the support and loyalty of their nations, as we hear America is Great and Iraq is righteous, calls for eradicating evil from both sides, as the storm brewed and the Christians prayed and the protestors marched, and as the minor leaders of the world succumbed and the major leaders tried to be strong, as the rhetoric flowed and we sang songs about the whole world praising God, and as we came and listened to preachers preach and news readers read and we read informed opinion and watched the clouds become crowds and the fears and egos and pride and agendas and ideals all got thrown into the cauldron of chaos, as it all swirled around and standing for truth became hatred and loyalty became blind determination, and ideas became dogma. As all this was happening: Jesus slept.

We prayed Jesus for peace! We prayed for no war! We prayed that thousands of people would not die!

And the water started to come in over the sides of the boat that was built for fishing. And they began to take on more and more, and the rain pelted down on them and the sea spray was whipped into the disciples eyes.

And the hurricane began. The boat started to come apart. It was rocking so frantically that the disciples had to make a choice between holding on for dear life or bailing out the water. And Jesus was fast asleep.

“Well wake him up then,” yelled one of them. So they did and Jesus got up and said to them, “What’s the real issue here?” and the boat jerked so violently that Jesus was thrown to the deck. “Where’s your faith? You have no faith in who I am, just thoughts and ideas.”

“This is no time for a lecture Jesus, can you help us or not? We just need more help with bailing out the water. Get cracking man.”

Wind. Rain. Lightning. Thunder and a voice: “Stop.”

You don’t really know peace until you’ve faced destruction.

[sarcastic] “What’s the real issue, Jesus?”

“Well, Jesus we’re at war, and you didn’t listen to our prayers. You’ve let us down. What higher prayer is there than for world peace? What higher prayer is there than for a unified humanity? What higher prayer is there than for the preservation of life and family and relationships and love? What higher prayer is there than for the humbling of the great powers?

“You did it with the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt. You manipulated Pharaoh’s heart for crying out loud. You who are God, were sovereign back then. Why not now? Where is the power?

“Where is the redemption and new life? The transformation and the new creation? Sometimes I feel as though you are just sleeping as we are being destroyed.”

“And I live in fear because I don’t have faith enough that Jesus will intervene. Because he hasn’t. And I’m trying to somehow justify why the God I believe in is still worth believing in. And I am meant to deliver to you the congregation some kind of message from God’s heart.

“Jesus are you asleep? Wake up and stop this storm!”

And I can’t help but feel that this is what God said to me with a whisper after the fire and the earthquake and the terrifying wind.

“What’s the real issue here, Stu?”

“You’re not happy with “My ways are higher than yours?” You say that’s an empty platitude. Let me tell you something, Stu, I invented quantum physics! What have you invented? I am God, what are you?

“Yeah but . . .”

“But what? I am God, what are you? You think I am asleep. I hold the very fabric of space-time together. The rhythms of the cosmos are determined by my heart beat. Where would the universe be if I were asleep? What do you know about the love of God?”

“Yeah but God, what if you just made Saddam and George and Tony have heart attacks, simultaneously? Why can’t you do that?”

“Stu, you remind me of the people who lived when Jesus was among you. They wanted the Messiah to break down the Roman Empire to free them, to protect their theology, to make their religion make sense.

“Stu, don’t mock the martyrs by trying to make this Christianity sensible in human terms. Don’t mock Jesus who said ‘turn the other cheek and love your enemies.’ What do you think I am doing?”

“You want Justice? I would squash you because I do not tolerate your sin, but I don’t. Because I love. Am I weak? No, not at all. How much strength do you think it takes to watch the ones you love destroy each other? Now, imagine if I were to stop them. Try. You can’t. It’s just not that simple. You don’t know what that would look like. Where would I draw the line? You are all just as bad as each other don’t you think? To stop them would mean stopping you too.”

And maybe death and destruction and mortal wounds and suffering in this body aren’t as important to God as the healing of our hearts. And maybe my lack of trust and disillusionment and cynicism reveal not a passion for justice, but highlight my brokenness that looks for proof of God. With proof there is no faith.

And me trying to make sense of the Almighty will only reveal nonsense to me every time. Because I am an impetuous scholar of the word who yields a fragile ego and perhaps identifies too readily with the martyrs. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Maybe, just maybe there is a redemption going on the hearts of people all over the world. Maybe, just maybe this reminder of the stupidity of humanity will set God back on the throne once again. Maybe just maybe, when we learn that there are no winners here that some work of the Holy Spirit may take place in contrite hearts.

Who knows the distilling effect that being on the point of death has on an individual’s values. At that point where you are unable to communicate. Who knows what takes place inside someone just before their final breath? God does. God knows when the heart cries out.

“I want redemption now.” Said the disciple.

“You don’t know what that means.” Said Jesus.

“Calm the storm,” I cry out to Jesus.

“You don’t know what you are praying for.” I suspect is his reply.