



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

CLUELESS AND CALLED

Discipleship and the Gospel of Mark



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

CLUELESS AND CALLED

Discipleship and the Gospel of Mark

INTRODUCTION

In the New Testament, “disciples” are most often the followers of Jesus, including the twelve closest to him plus a wide range of others.

Simple enough. But what does it take to be one? According to the Gospel of Mark, it takes more *and less* than we might think. *Less*, because as Jesus’ twelve disciples demonstrate so well, we don’t need great or perfect faith. *More*, because the way of Jesus is the way of the disciple, and those who truly follow this suffering Messiah will always pay a high price.

The Gospel of Mark was probably written in Rome after the death of Peter and during Nero’s persecution of Christians (beginning 64 C.E., or “Common Era”). Most scholars agree that Mark was the earliest Gospel and a primary source for both Matthew and Luke. Even though it was anonymous, ancient tradition identifies the author as John Mark, Peter’s companion in Rome, who wrote it as a summary of Peter’s preaching. The Gospel’s purpose is to show Jesus Christ as the Son of God who proclaims and embodies the realm of God. Moreover, Mark’s vision of this Christ is meant to inspire readers to follow in Jesus’ sacrificial way.

Despite a fairly clear purpose, however, Mark unashamedly depicts those closest to Jesus, the disciples, as being distinctly *unclear* about Jesus’ purpose. When Jesus laid his hands on the blind man at Bethsaida and asked if he could see anything, the man responded, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking” (8:24). Only after Jesus touched him a second time was his sight restored so that “he saw everything clearly” (8:25). Like the man’s physical blindness, the disciples’ spiritual blindness throughout the Gospel kept them from seeing clearly the truth about Jesus, though he “touched” them time and time again. They had enormous trouble “clueing in.”

Jesus anguished over their inability to see. “Do you not yet understand?” (8:21). Yet he loved and forgave his disciples, constantly calling them to “follow me” (1:17). That’s good news for modern-day disciples who see no more clearly than the first twelve, but want to follow where Jesus leads.

Bombarded from all sides by society’s priorities of conformity, popularity, prosperity, self-gratification, and success, today’s youth are understandably confused about which messages to believe, what values to choose, and which of many self-proclaimed “saviors” to follow. The

Preparation Alert

Sessions 1, 2, and 5 ask for you to contact people for specific tasks ahead of time. Begin making those contacts now.

If you plan to use the extender session, arrange to view the video. (See order information in Extender Session.)





EXTENDER SESSION

Most units include one extender session, with suggestions for special activities related to the issue of the unit. Extender sessions help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 4**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



church has often failed to *touch* our youth once, much less twice, and has left them to stumble about blindly in the virtual reality of popular culture.

According to Mark, Jesus came as the world's true Messiah and called uncertain disciples to get in the boat and set out to sea; to drop their nets and follow him; to deny themselves and experience "the good life" of God's realm; to travel light as they continued his work in the world; and to be disciples in a way that required genuine repentance and commitment, *not moral perfection*. This is the call our participants need to hear. This is the call the sessions of this unit are designed to help you convey.

Unlike the blind man whom Jesus touched twice, our sight may still be faulty, our minds relatively clueless. But even if we never see everything as clearly as the man with restored sight, we can follow where Jesus leads. Following Jesus is what discipleship, and this unit, are all about.



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

- » **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage. in your group?
- » **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.
- » **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire
- » **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.
2. **Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.
3. **Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible *say* about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first two movements. The Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.
4. **Apply the faith story.** What does the Bible passage *mean* for contemporary life? This is the “aha!” moment when learners realize the faith story has wisdom for *their* lives.
5. **Respond.** Why does the Bible passage *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? At this point, the faith story becomes *lived* rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the Bible passage for the session.

» HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

» MAIN SOURCES

Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*.
Williamson, Lamar, Jr. *Interpretation: Mark*.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» SESSION 1

SEA-ING IS NOT ALWAYS BELIEVING »»

»» KEY VERSE

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?" (Mark 4:41)

»» FAITH STORY

Mark 4:35-41

»» FAITH FOCUS

After a long day teaching the crowds, Jesus and his disciples took a boat toward the other side of the Sea of Galilee. When a great storm blew in and threatened to sink the boat, the disciples frantically woke a snoozing Jesus and questioned his compassion for them. After Jesus calmed the wind and the sea with a word, the disciples were left awestruck and nervously wondering who this wonder-worker really was.

»» SESSION GOAL

Challenge participants to look for ways and reasons to trust Jesus more, on whatever sea and in whatever weather they are sailing.

»» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Contact three participants and assign parts for the game show "Ambiguity" (*Option A* in Focus).
- Copies of the handout sheets for Session 1
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Bibles
- Pencils/pens
- Blank note cards or index cards (*Respond*)



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 7 minutes

»» **Option A:** Contact three participants in advance and assign the parts of **Announcer**, **Contestant 1**, and **Contestant 2**; you serve as **Host**. You will need copies of the script "Welcome to ... Ambiguity!" (on the first handout sheet) for them.

After the short skit, go on to **Option A** under Connect.



CONFUSION REIGNS...

In your experience, how does the church tend to regard doubt and confusion? Are doubt and confusion weaknesses to overcome, or necessary parts of the learning process? What do you say about the pros and cons of doubt and confusion?



» **Option B:** Using the handout sheet section titled “Disciple Ingredients,” begin by having one of your more animated youth read the introduction. Or, simply start by saying something like:

*The media has always portrayed our cultural heroes, from Mother Teresa to LeBron James, as almost superhuman beings with few, if any, flaws. What qualities and characteristics do you think are really **necessary** to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus? List them on the chalkboard or newsprint under the heading, DISCIPLE INGREDIENTS.*

Go on to **Option B** under Connect.

2. CONNECT 7-9 minutes

» **Option A:** Now ask:

- What’s “wrong” with this game show?
- When was the last time **you** were rewarded or affirmed for giving the wrong answer, expressing confusion, or admitting some doubt?
- What does this suggest about how society tends to regard doubt and confusion?
- What do **you** say about the pros and cons of doubt and confusion?

» **Option B:** Ask everyone to think about a time when they felt “put down” for giving a wrong answer, asking a question, expressing confusion, or admitting some doubt. Now write the following statement on the chalkboard or newsprint and ask each person to complete it verbally with one word: *When I was put down for not knowing it “all,” I felt....* (**Note:** With this and all exercises, encourage participation, but allow people to pass if they wish.) List their words under the statement. When everyone has had a chance to share, ask:

- Why did you feel the way you did?
- How did the experience make you feel about offering answers, asking questions, expressing confusion, or admitting doubts **again**?
- What do these feelings suggest about how society tends to regard doubt and confusion?
- What do **you** say about the pros and cons of doubt and confusion?

3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 13-15 minutes

Shift to this activity by saying: *If you’re sometimes confused and full of doubts, you’ll relate to some guys in the Bible who seemed mostly clueless about who Jesus was, even though they saw him preach, teach, and even perform miracles almost every day. And these guys were the disciples!*

Have everyone turn to Mark 4:35-41 and ask for a volunteer to read as they follow along. Then go directly to the discussion questions below, or enhance the Bible reading by passing out copies of “Not Your Everyday Boat Ride” (on the second handout sheet). Assign parts, with you being the narrator to keep the action moving. Ask two or more of your more uninhibited participants to be the “Crowd.” After the reading, ask:

- For the disciples, was getting into the boat with Jesus like getting into a car with a stranger? Were they stupid to do it? Why or why not?
- How did the reading make you feel about the crowd? About the disciples? About Jesus?
- How did the reading make you feel about your own questions, confusion, and doubts about Jesus?
- How did the reading make you feel about following Jesus **before** all of your questions about him are answered?
- Does following Jesus require a “watertight faith” or a simple, personal decision to “get in the boat” with him? Why or why not?

4. **APPLY** 7 minutes

Invite everyone to close their eyes, relax, and sit quietly as you slowly read the following guide to help them imagine the windstorm scene. Pause at each break:

*Imagine **you** are in a boat, sailing across a calm, still lake, with Jesus sleeping on a pillow in the stern.*

A great windstorm suddenly arises and waves beat into the boat so fiercely that it's swamped and in danger of sinking.

Now, imagine that the "windstorm" is something in your life that is threatening to overwhelm you, to harm you, to "sink your boat."

Try to identify what the "windstorm" is in your life. These also might be times when you felt Jesus was asleep on you. (Pause for a few moments.)

Feeling the end is near, you rush over to Jesus, shake him hard, and desperately yell, "Wake up, Jesus! Don't you care about me?"

Jesus wakes up, sees the fear in your eyes, then rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!"

Suddenly, you notice that your "windstorm," the situation that was creating so much pain, anxiety, or fear for you, is beginning to ease up and settle down into a peaceful calm once again.

Amazed, you turn to Jesus and see the fire in his eyes as he says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith after all I have done for you?"

Only then do you realize that these are not words of impatient anger, but words of impatient love, spoken by One who yearns to be with you ...to be near you ...to be real to you.

In gratitude, you reach out to touch him, to thank him, to believe in him...and he's gone.

Confused, you look but see only your empty boat and calm waters all around.

*Filled with wonder, you say to yourself, "Who **was** this?"*

*And deep within, you know there's something here so real, so true, and so good that all the questions, confusion, and doubt in the world will **never** take it away.*

You don't understand him; at times you still doubt; but this much you know: He calls you to follow and find out more.

5. **RESPOND** 10 minutes

Distribute blank note cards or index cards. Invite everyone to write a simple, honest prayer beginning with the words, "Dear Jesus, in the windstorms of my life when I'm confused and afraid...." When everyone is done, suggest that they put this card in or near a place where they would see it often (on bedroom door, inside school locker, etc.).

(Option: Suggest the above "prayer card" be inserted as a prompt in cell phones, for participants who prefer to use reminders this way.)

Explain that the session will conclude with a brief, directed prayer in which you will offer several phrases and pause as they pray. Use or adapt the prayer on the second handout sheet (also in sidebar on this page).



Dear Jesus,

*when the wind is great,
when the sea is high,
when our boats are
swamped,
when our cries for help
seem to go unheard,
help us believe...*

Dear Jesus,

*when our fear is great,
when our confusion is
high,
when our doubts are
pouring in,
when our questions go
unanswered, help us
follow...*

Dear Jesus,

*when the winds have
died,
when the sea has stilled,
when our storm is over,
help us see your love
for us at work...*

Dear Jesus,

*go with each one
here into the
time ahead,
resting in the stern
of **our** boats,
ready to calm
our windstorms
whenever we
call. AMEN.*



LOOK AHEAD

For next session, contact someone (not in your youth group) to knock on the meeting room door or call on the phone (*Option A* in Focus).



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

A natural human reaction to distress or danger is to cry out to God. We may doubt there is a God. We may wonder if God cares or even knows about our problems. This passage is about that natural human reaction and God's response to it.

» IN CONTROL

The disciples, to whom Jesus had just "explained everything in private" (4:34), apparently weren't getting the message. In a violent windstorm, as their boat was being swamped, they desperately tried to "jump start" a response from their sleeping teacher. In stark contrast to their sheer panic, Jesus was asleep, indicating here, as elsewhere in the Bible, a posture of complete trust in God.

"Peace! Be still!" Jesus used the same command to call out an unclean spirit from the demoniac (1:25) that he used to calm the storm (4:39). This suggests, says William Barclay, the ancient belief that demons were at work in the storm. The dramatic effect of Jesus' simple command on the storm was Mark's way of declaring his divine authority and control over demonic forces.

» UNCOMFORTABLE GOOD NEWS

Though we might prefer to ignore Jesus' stern reproach (4:40), we must acknowledge his frustration, even impatience, with his disciples' lack of faith and understanding after so much time together. They were still clueless. What teacher wouldn't shake his head in despair? But more important is the fact that Jesus was *in the boat* with his disciples and *acted to save them* in spite of their thick-headed, fearful, and faith-less behavior. We might expect that Jesus' stilling of the raging storm might inspire his disciples to better faith—that they might nervously slap each others' backs and sigh with a mixture of relief and chagrin. "Why did we panic? What a lesson he taught us!"

Instead, Mark portrays the disciples as clueless as ever, still confused as to what had happened and with whom they were dealing. Their journey to faith was certainly not a smooth sea, but full of fits and starts and spills. That's good news for modern-day disciples who see no more clearly than the first twelve, but want to follow where Jesus leads.

» BLESSED ASSURANCE

Disciples of every age may be comforted by this story's assurance that:

- we need not have a "watertight" theology or all our questions answered to trust in Jesus, just a willingness to "get in the boat."
- Jesus is present to support us in every wind storm of life (even when he appears to be asleep on the job or even nowhere to be found).
- if Jesus could put up with the confusion, questions, and doubts of those who witnessed his teaching and miracles up close and personal, he can surely put up with any confusion, questions, and doubts we may have.
- Jesus yearns for our trust in him to continually grow, but we need not pass any test or meet any standard to begin following where he leads.

» WHAT ABOUT TODAY?

At home on the “information highway” and with a variety of social media, today’s youth are uncomfortable with confusion and doubt but experience both nevertheless. The awareness that Jesus’ own disciples were “experts” in these areas may reassure them that in matters of faith, it is willingness to embark on the journey, not absolute certainty, that matters most.

Less influenced by traditional value and belief systems than previous generations, many youth do not uncritically assume the Bible’s authority. The Bible will have authority for them to the extent that it has specific relevance for the issues of their lives. Because this story addresses the universal human need to trust and depend on something in the midst of life’s storms, it may have the appeal of relevance and the ring of authority for those seeking a trustworthy guide.

» THE BOTTOM LINE

Now as then, the stilling of the storm is an appeal and challenge for disciples of every age to trust Jesus more, on whatever sea and in whatever weather we are sailing. Reassure participants that being a disciple of Jesus does not require spiritual certainty or fearless faith, but rather a simple, personal decision to follow where he leads.



In matters of faith, it is willingness to embark on the journey, not absolute certainty, that matters most.



SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

Welcome to... Ambiguity!



Announcer: Welcome to the game show AMBIGUITY! And now, here's your host, Alex Reebok!

Host: Hello, and welcome once again to our game where the contestant who shows the most doubt and confusion wins! With our game, as you know, we provide the answers; you provide the questions. Now on to round 1. And the categories are: Geography, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z, and Biblical Characters. Contestant #1, you go first.

Contestant 1: I'll take Geography for \$100, Alex.

Host: And the answer is: This northern continent contains the countries of Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

Contestant 2: (excitedly raising hand) What is North America?

Host: No, sorry. That's the correct answer.

Contestant 1: (cautiously raising hand) Could you repeat the answer?

Host: Yes! A brilliant display of confusion! Contestant #2, your turn.

Contestant 2: I'll take Biblical Characters for \$100, Alex.

Host: And the answer is: A carpenter from Nazareth, this man once walked on water.

Contestant 2: (confidently raising hand) Who was Joseph?

Host: Judges?... I'm sorry, the judges say that's too nearly the correct answer, because Joseph was a relative.

Contestant 1: (hesitantly raising hand) He did what???

Host: A fine expression of doubt! Congratulations, Contestant #1. You've just won an all-expense paid trip to Lake Not-So-Sure, where the women are confused, the men are confounded, and the kids haven't got a clue!

DISCIPLE INGREDIENTS

(Excited observer) *Fewer doubts than the surest saint. More faithful than a farm dog. Able to leap tall questions in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird. It's a plane. It's SUPER DISCIPLE! Yes, it's SUPER DISCIPLE, who came to earth with certainty and confidence far beyond those of mortal believers and who, in his disguise as Clark Christian, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and to promote his way as the only way!*

The media has always portrayed our cultural heroes, from Mother Teresa to LeBron James, as almost superhuman beings with few, if any, flaws. What qualities and characteristics do you think are really necessary to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus? List them below:

NOT YOUR EVERYDAY BOAT RIDE



Narrator: "On that day, when evening had come, he said to them,"

Jesus: "Let us go across to the other side."

Narrator: "And leaving the crowd behind,"

Crowd: That's us!

Narrator: "they"

Disciples: That's us!

Narrator: "took him with them in the boat, just as he was."

Jesus: How else would I go?

Narrator: "Other boats were with him."

Crowd: Must have been rush hour!

Narrator: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped."

Crowd: (Make convincing windstorm noises.)

Narrator: "But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion;"

Crowd: Must have stayed up to watch Jimmy Fallon!

Narrator: "and they woke him up"

Crowd: Their first mistake!

Narrator: "and said to him,"

Disciples: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Crowd: Their second mistake!

Narrator: "He woke up"

Crowd: Uh-oh!

Narrator: "and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,"

Jesus: "Peace! Be still!"

Crowd: And guess what?

Narrator: "Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm."

Crowd: We're talkin' total stillness here!

Narrator: "He said to them,"

Crowd: Here it comes....

Jesus: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Crowd: Not lookin' too good for the ol' doubting disciples here.

Narrator: "And they were filled with great awe"

Crowd: As you might expect.

Narrator: "And said to one another,"

Crowd: As you might *not* expect.

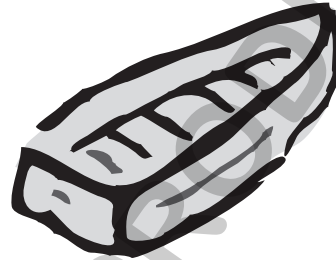
Disciples: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Crowd: And you call these guys disciples???

Jesus: Yes, any who try to follow where I lead.

Crowd: But Jesus! They're so confused and unsure!

Jesus: Like I said, any who try to follow where I lead!



Dear Jesus,
when the wind is great,
when the sea is high,
when our boats are swamped,
when our cries for help seem to go
unheard, help us believe...

Dear Jesus,
when our fear is great,
when our confusion is high,
when our doubts are pouring in,
when our questions go unanswered,
help us follow...

Dear Jesus,
when the winds have died,
when the sea has stilled,
when our storm is over,
help us see your love for us at work...

Dear Jesus,
go with each one here into the time
ahead,
resting in the stern of our boats,
ready to calm **our** windstorms
whenever we call. AMEN.

