

Jesus' Power Over the Wind and Waves (Mark 4:35-41)

³⁵ On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, "Let us cross to the other side." ³⁶ Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him. ³⁷ A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was great calm. ⁴⁰ Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" ⁴¹ They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?"

Context

In 4:1-34 Jesus teaches in parables, which keeps those "outside" from understanding (4:11-12), but Jesus "Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private." (4:34). However, we will see that even with the special instructions, the disciples don't get it. But parable are not the only method of teaching. In 4:35-5:43 Jesus teaches with miracle – stilling the storm (4:35-41); the demonic legion (5:1-20); raising Jairus' daughter and healing the woman with a flow of blood (5:21-43 – the text for next week). However, following these displays of Jesus' power, the responses are not positive:

- Jesus' power over wind and wave – the disciples have no faith (4:40).
- Jesus' power over demons – the town's people beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood (5:17).
- Jesus' power over sickness, and death – the woman is praised for her faith after the healing (5:34), Jairus is asked to have faith (5:36), but at the end the people are amazed, but there is no mention of faith (5:42).

Following these powerful miracles, Jesus enters his hometown where the people "take offense" at him and he is unable to any "deeds of power" except a few healings. Jesus is amazed at their unbelief (6:1-6a). Perhaps a summary lesson is that the miracles do not produce faith, but faith sometimes has a role in the miracles.

In the OT mind the sea is the place of chaotic power, the habitation of sea monsters, and the place from whence comes evil. The three primary OT motifs which come to the fore are

- The ability to control the sea and subdue storms as a sign of divine power (*cf.* Psalms 89:9-10; 106:8-9; and Isa 51:9-10).
- The image of the storm as a metaphor for evil forces active in the world and especially for the tribulations of just people from which only the power of God can save (*cf.* Pss 18:16; 69:2, 14-15).
- The religious person should always trust in God even in the midst of the most terrible storm (*cf.* Isa 43:2; Pss 46:1; 65:5-8 – wherein YHWH is the "God of salvation" (65:5) who silences the "roaring of the seas, the roaring of the waves.")

When Jesus calms the storm, he speaks to the wind as though to a demon (*cf.* 1:24), leading some interpreters to describe this story as an exorcism. Use of exorcism language provides a cosmological context for the story. Just as the sea monster in ancient mythology represents the powers of evil, so also the raging storm here reflects all the powers of chaos and evil. Jesus' exorcisms are evidence that he is the stronger one, able to break up Satan's kingdom (3:23-27). PHEME PERKINS [580] notes: "This story combines a nature miracle with the imagery of a divine epiphany. Ancient Near Eastern mythology depicted the storm god triumphing over the raging waters of the monster of chaos (e.g.,

Baal vs. Yam; Marduk vs. Tiamat). Even Hebrew poetry sometimes describes God as the victor in combat with the forces of chaos (cf. Ps 107:23–25)... The mythological and poetic imagery of God triumphing over the raging waters makes clear the response to the final question, “*Who then is this ...?*” (v. 41). Miracles like those Jesus performed early in his ministry could have been performed by other miracle workers, exorcists, or magicians. However, no one but Jesus could still the raging storm. He is no mere human being. Jesus has God’s power to still the storm. Once again, readers know that Jesus is Son of God (1:1, 11, 24). Yet the disciples seem unable to decipher the significance of Jesus’ identity.

Commentary

³⁵ *On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, “Let us cross to the other side.”*

As Stoffregen asks: Why do the disciples cross the lake? There are several possible answers: (a) to get to the other side or (b) as recorded in the text, Jesus told them to cross over. Even though (b) is the correct answer, (a) raises the curiosity: what *is* on the other side? Gentile (unclean) territory indicated by “unclean spirits,” “swine,” and “Decapolis.” Many scholars hold that this trip across the lake represents the Gentile mission for Mark. The storm at sea represents the storms in the early church as they sought to carry out Jesus’ command “to go to the other side” or “to make disciples of all nations.” It may be noted that the area where the people of God sit while in church is properly called the “nave,” from the Latin “*navis*” = ship.

³⁶ *Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him.*

In the tradition it is thought that the Gospel according to Mark, in a manner, captures Peter’s stories and remembrances. This account bears the marks of the personal reminiscence of one who had experienced the event. The precise mention of time, the unneeded reference to the other boats which were present, the vivid detail that the boat was “*already filling up*,” the precise location of Jesus’ position (“*in the stern, asleep on a cushion*”), the harshness of the rebuke implied in the disciples’ cry of indignation and terror as well as their subsequent bewilderment, combine to suggest an eyewitness report.

The expressions “*just as he was*” has raised a speculation or two in the millennia. There is nothing particular about the underlying Greek. Many scholars offer that given Jesus is soon asleep, “as he was” was bone tired. Another suggestion refers to the beginning of Mark 4: “On another occasion he began to teach by the sea. A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. And the whole crowd was beside the sea on land. ² And he taught them at length in parables, and in the course of his instruction he said to them...” (Mark 4:1-2). In other words, he was already in the boat, and now finished teaching parables, Jesus sat down and the shoved off for the other side.

³⁷ *A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up.”*

Given the fact that at least four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their terror indicates the severity of the incident. The Sea of Galilee, surrounded by high mountains, is like a basin. Sudden violent storms on the sea are well known. Violent winds from the southwest enter the basin from the southern cleft and create a situation in which storm and calm succeed one another rapidly. Since the wind is nearly always stronger in the afternoon than in the morning or evening, fishing was done at night. So when a storm arises in the evening, it is all the more dangerous. Especially during the night, even experienced fishermen are not able to “read the signs” of things such as encroaching whitecaps. The squall that hit likely struck as an unexpected, fierce gust of

wind they fell upon them, driving the waves over the sides of the boat, which was being swamped with water.

In this first storm scene (see 6:45–52 for a similar account), Jesus gives his disciples an opportunity to show that they have come to know him for who he really is. They have shared in the secrets of the kingdom (4:1–34), and they have been with him as he healed all sickness and drove out demons (chs. 1–3). Now they are with him on the raging sea, and he sleeps: *Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion*” (v.38)

³⁸ *Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”*

While the storm raged, Jesus lay sleeping in the stern upon the cushion that was customarily kept under the coxswain’s seat for those who were not involved in the actual sailing or fishing. The others aboard are having a much different experience. Given that at least four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their anxiety/terror indicates the severity of the incident. The usual pattern for a deliverance from a storm at sea involved a plea to the deity for help, but Mark’s version lacks such a formula. In Matthew the disciples’ words to Jesus to fit the anticipated pattern, *“Lord, save us! We are perishing!”* (Matt. 8:25). In Mark, however, their cry carries an edge – rebuke? Disbelief? Incredulousness? It is hard to assign a meaning that leaves the disciples other than accusing Jesus of being indifferent to their plight.

³⁹ *He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” The wind ceased and there was great calm.*

It is such a sparse telling of the story that it is not hard to imagine Jesus awaking, being somewhat chagrined (a good night’s sleep is hard to come by), glancing to the storm, wondering what all the commotion is about, and directing the sea to *“Quiet! Be still!”* As suddenly as the storm had come it had subsided, subdued by Jesus’ sovereign command.

However one imagines the scene, the question of what was involved in the stilling of the storm cannot be avoided. Jesus’ power and sovereignty was demonstrated in the stilling of the roaring sea and the silencing of the howling wind, strongly echoing God’s intervention in to history with the parting of the Red Sea. And at the same time the cosmic overtones should also be attended to. The same language used when Jesus rebuked and silenced the demons is repeated here with respect to the sea.

When Jesus calms the storm, he speaks to the wind as though to a demon (cf. 1:24). Just as the sea monster in ancient mythology represents the powers of evil, so also the raging storm here reflects all the powers of chaos and evil. Jesus’ power and sovereignty are evidence that he is stronger than the inherent evil represented.

⁴⁰ *Then he asked them, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?”* ⁴¹ *They were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?”*

After quieting the violent storm with a word, Jesus turns to his disciples (and Mark’s readers) and asks: *“Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?”* (v. 40). The first disciples’ only response is: *“Who then is this?”* (v. 41). This passage continues to reveal Mark’s theology of discipleship. These very same disciples who have been chosen in 3:7-12, who have been given the mystery of the kingdom of God (4:10-12), and who are privileged to hear Jesus’ teachings and explanation (4:34) are here chided for their timidity and lack of trust, their lack of a deepening faith. The question of their faith is abrupt at this point in Mark’s gospel. Increasingly as Mark’s gospel continues this question of faith continues to arise.

The commonly accepted date for the authorship of this gospel is 69-70 AD. It is easy to see how

Mark's, suffering under Nero's persecutions, need to be assured with the story of Jesus' entire life, death, and resurrection, and thus assured of his protection in their times of stress and confusion. He asks for more than "great awe" (v. 41) at Jesus' stilling of the storm. He asks for deep here-and-now faith from all who struggle to understand the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in their own daily experience of Christian living.

Reflections from PHEME PERKINS [581]

1. The question of Jesus' identity appears repeatedly in Mark. When the disciples suddenly show a lack of trust in God's power working through Jesus and even accuse Jesus of not caring, readers are challenged to examine their own faith. Merely repeating the confession that Jesus is Son of God means little if Jesus does not represent God for us. A suspicion that God does not really care what happens to us will corrode our religious life. The results of such sentiments in daily life are familiar. Human relationships die when we sense that others do not care what happens to us.
2. Doubts about God also emerge in times of crisis. Mark's readers were familiar with the destructive effects of persecution. The weaknesses exhibited by Jesus' disciples encourage later believers to persist despite doubts about God's saving presence. In the end, they will discover the one whom wind and sea obey.
3. When the disciples say to Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" their panic separates them from Jesus. How can he not care? He is in the boat with them! Jesus does not react to their panic. He speaks first to the raging elements, the wind and sea. Then he asks his stunned disciples about their faith. On the human level, we often act like the disciples. We expect others to share our panic or distress. If they seem detached from the situation, we accuse them of not caring about our suffering. Panic reactions can divide us from others who might help just as they can cause us to doubt God's love for us

NOTES

Mark 4:35 *other side*: For most of our parishes, we don't have to go anywhere to "get to the other side." The "Gentiles" have moved into our neighborhoods -- but what a storm it usually creates when a parishioner makes an intentional effort to reach out to the unchurched -- to the people who are "different" than they.

Mark 4:37 *a violent squall came up*. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills except in the southern area, where the Jordan River exits. With certain wind patterns, air can funnel up into the lake and get trapped, creating quick and violent storms (*lailaps megalē anemou* suggests a sudden tornado-like whirlwind descending from above). That apparently happened in this case. Key biblical scenes involving storms and seas include Exod 19:16; Mark 4:21–31; Ps 107:23–32; Jonah 1:1–16; Acts 27.

Mark 4:38 *asleep*. Jesus was probably sleeping in the stern of the boat at the helmsman's station where there was some protection from getting wet. The cushion may have been a sandbag used for ballast (Marcus 2000:333). His sleeping may indicate his calm trust in God (Ps Mark 4:8). Here is Mark's first description of discipleship failure. ***Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing? Ou melei soi*** denotes an urgency in this context. This question uses the negative particle *ou* and is asked in a way that makes it clear that the disciples knew that Jesus cared about their well-being despite the tone of their question. The conflict shows their panic. Many commentators hear an echo of the story of Jonah who also slept in the midst of a raging storm. The description of the situation and a number of verbal parallels lead some to suggest that Mark had the story of Jonah (1:1–17) clearly in mind (cf. Jonah 1:4 with Mk. 4:37; 1:5 with Mk. 4:38; 1:6 with Mk. 4:38; 1:11 with Mk. 4:39; 1:16 with Mk. 4:41).

Mark 4:39 rebuked the wind and said to the sea. This language is similar to that of an exorcism (1:25). Jesus' authority extended over creation and provoked the reflective question of Mark 4:41. In some parts of the ancient world, the waters were associated with evil. **Quiet! Be still!** This command is literally "Be muzzled" (Deut 25:4, LXX; 1 Tim 5:18), but the translation picks up the effects of the muzzling: silence and peace.

Mark 4:40 Why are you terrified? Jesus questions their timidity; *deiloi* indicates cowardice or lack of courage (Deut 20:8; Judg 7:3; 1 Macc 3:56). For Mark, fear is the opposite of faith (5:15–17, 36; 6:49–52; 10:32; 11:18; 16:8). Jesus' remark is a call to trust him. **Do you still have no faith?** Jesus' final question uses the interrogative adverb *oupō* which means "not yet". Jesus pressed the matter: "Do you still have no faith?"

Mark 4:41 great awe. The more literal translation retains the Semitic idiom in the Gr. "feared with great fear" (Jonah 1:10, LXX). Jesus' great authority left them in awe. **Even the wind and waves obey!** The remark points to Ps 107:29 and Ps 89:8–9. Jesus' actions revealed that he had divine control over creation. That such authority resided in a person left the disciples stunned. It raised the question of who Jesus was. By stopping the scene here (creating an "open ending"), Mark leaves the reader to ponder the answer to this question.

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