

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

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



*Christ stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee | Ludolf Bakuizen | 1695 | Indianapolis Museum of Art | PD*

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### A Next Step

From the beginning of Mark, chapter 4, we have seen Jesus teaching via some very memorable parables about the Kingdom of God:

- Parable of the Sower (vv.1-9)
- Purpose of the Parables (vv.10-20)
- Parable of the Lamp (vv.21-25)
- Parable of the Seed that Grows Itself (vv.26-29)
- Parable of the Mustard Seed (vv.30-34)

The effect of his teaching has been to keep those on the "outside" from understanding: "*Without parables he did not speak to them.*" But it was different for the disciples: "*but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.*" (4:34). Why parables? Parables are an analogical way of teaching; one that does not simply give the listener the correct answer, but invites them into a reflection about the analogy offered: "the kingdom of God is like..." It invites them into a range of possibilities whose ideas germinate into a larger answer. That answer might be "next step" on the journey of faith, a radical u-turn, or something that completely turns one's world upside down. Had Jesus spoken to the crowds in a direct

manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. Perhaps a decision that too quickly concludes in unbelief and rejection. Jesus' use of the indirect address of the parable is then a grace and invitation to allow time for deeper reflection on his appeal to penetrate beneath his words to "the word."

William Lane [173] offers this insight about the public/private teachings: "With Jesus' parables before the people the evangelist contrasts his private exposition of *'everything'* to his own disciples. *'Everything'* within this context means more than parabolic utterance; it refers to the mission of Jesus in which the mystery of the Kingdom was veiled. The summary, accordingly, ... exhibits the two aspects of the revelation of God in the mission of Jesus. There was *veiling* (or very partial disclosure) before the multitude and *disclosure* (but only partial understanding) to the disciples. This is the pattern illustrated in Ch. 4 and assumed throughout the Gospel of Mark. In the private instruction which Jesus gives to his disciples, the mystery of the Kingdom as present in his person is graciously unveiled. Only through revelation does the enigma become partially resolved; not until the consummation (to take the perspective of the parables) will it become resolved for all men."

However, we will see that even with the disclosure/special instructions, the formation of the disciples has a way to go. But parables are not the only method of teaching.

### **Learning from Signs and Miracles**

Despite the traditional marking of chapters in the Gospel, most commentators do not include our gospel passage with the bulk of Chapter 4. Rather, our gospel passage is included with the content of Chapter 5. In 4:35-5:43 Jesus teaches with miracles that demonstrate the extraordinary character of Jesus' power as he stills a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:35-41); casts out a demonic legion (5:1-20); raises Jairus' daughter and heals a woman sick for 12 years (5:21-43 – our gospel text for next week). These miracles show that Jesus has power over the realms of nature, the demonic, and death.

What is possible to learn about the One who performs such acts of power? As mentioned earlier: parables are not the only method of teaching. What is the response to these displays of Jesus' power?

- The experience of the disciples leaves some doubt. After stilling the raging storm, Jesus questions the disciples' faith (4:40).
- In response to casting out the legion of demons the town's people beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood (5:17).
- In response to Jesus' power over sickness, and death while the woman is praised for her faith, Jairus is asked to have faith, but as for the people, while they are amazed, there is no mention of faith (5:42).

Following this powerful series of miracles, Jesus enters his hometown where the people "take offense" at him and "*So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.*" (Mark 6:5-6) Jesus is amazed (*ethaumazen*) at their unbelief (6:1-6a). The word used can also be taken as "wonder," and it uses the form that indicates present and ongoing amazement.

Although outside the scope of our gospel text, let me note that the text can be translated/read several ways. It can indicate that without their faith Jesus didn't have any reason to heal them. It could mean that they weren't willing to come to him to be healed. It could indicate that without their faith, Jesus' ability to heal them was affected. It is open to some interpretation.

It seems that the miracles do not produce faith, but faith sometimes has a role in the miracles.

## Divine Power over the Seas

We are people who live in a time when transoceanic sailing is routine, but for the people of Old Testament times, the seas, deep oceans, and their creatures held a mix of practical, symbolic, and theological significance. To the OT mind the sea is the place of chaotic power, the habitation of sea monsters, and the place from whence comes evil. Given that perspective, there are three primary OT motifs which arise, not only in Scripture, but also in the text of other Ancient Near East cultures:

- The ability to control the sea and subdue storms is a sign of divine power
- The image of the storm was 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
- The religious person should always trust in God even in the midst of the most terrible storm

Their understanding was shaped by the natural world they observed, cultural myths, and their religious beliefs. Consider this sampling of scriptural texts that would be part of stories easily called to mind by biblical people.

In Genesis 1, God separates the waters to create dry land, demonstrating His ability to impose order on chaos. This act of creation underscores the belief that the sea, though chaotic, is still under God's command and part of His orderly creation. Nonetheless, the sea was often viewed as a place of chaos, danger, and unpredictability. It represented the unknown and uncontrollable aspects of the world. This is reflected in various Old Testament texts where the sea is depicted as a formidable and tumultuous force (e.g., Psalm 46:2-3, Psalm 89:9).

The sea and the creatures within it were sometimes seen as symbols of evil or forces opposed to God. For example, the sea monster Leviathan, mentioned in several passages (e.g., Job 41, Psalm 74:13-14, Isaiah 27:1), symbolizes chaos and opposition to divine order. Leviathan is often portrayed as a powerful and fearsome creature subdued by God, demonstrating His supremacy over all creation.

During the time of Noah (Genesis 6-9), God used the waters to execute judgment on a corrupt world, causing a great flood to cover the earth and then causing the waters to recede, demonstrating His control over the life-giving and destructive aspects of water. The Old Testament frequently emphasizes God's control over the sea, reinforcing His ultimate power over creation. This is evident in stories like the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and crossing the Jordan River (Joshua 3).

The Psalms are replete with poetic and vivid descriptions of God's power over the seas. Here is one example that describes those who go down to the sea in ships and witness God's wonders in the deep, experiencing His power over the stormy waters and His ability to calm them:

*<sup>23</sup> Some went off to sea in ships, plied their trade on the deep waters.<sup>24</sup> They saw the works of the LORD, the wonders of God in the deep.<sup>25</sup> He spoke and roused a storm wind; it tossed the waves on high.<sup>26</sup> They rose up to the heavens, sank to the depths; their hearts trembled at the danger.<sup>27</sup> They reeled, staggered like drunkards; their skill was of no avail.<sup>28</sup> In their distress they cried to the LORD, who brought them out of their peril,<sup>29</sup> Hushed the storm to a murmur; the waves of the sea were stilled. (Psalm 107:23-29)*

And perhaps closest to the events of this gospel passage, there is a strong echo of Jonah and the Great Fish (Jonah 1-2). While the story is another demonstration of God's dominion over the seas and sea creatures, it is also a story of a faith response to God's rescue - not dissimilar from our pericope.

Many commentators have noted that when Jesus calms the storm, he speaks to the wind as though to a demon, leading some 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... 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 the Son of God (1:1, 11, 24). Yet the disciples seem unable to decipher the significance of Jesus’ identity.

### Getting Underway

<sup>35</sup> *On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, “Let us cross to the other side.”* <sup>36</sup> *Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him.* <sup>37</sup> *A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up.* <sup>38</sup> *Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.*

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 a 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.

The expression “*with them in the boat 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” bone tired, pointing to previous verses that indicate the course of events on the day: “*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. 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 disciples shoved off for the other side.

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 Storm at Night

Given the fact that at least four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their terror gives us a clue about the severity of the incident. The Sea of Galilee, surrounded by high mountains, is like a basin with the Golan Heights to the East and dry deserts to the south. Sudden violent storms on the sea are well known. Violent winds from the southwest enter the basin from the southern cleft and create a wave of storms and periods of calm that succeed rapidly follow one upon another. The text *lailaps megalē anemou* suggests a sudden tornado-like whirlwind descending from above.

Depending on the season and weather, it was not unusual to fish in the nighttime. While a storm during the day could be dangerous, during the night, even experienced fishermen are not able to “read the signs” of the approaching storm in the sky and waves/whitecaps. The squall that hit likely struck as an

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

In this 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 *Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion*” (v.38). The other’s 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.

One cannot help but recall a scene from the Book of Jonah. The Word of God came to Jonah and commissioned him to be a prophet to the moral enemy of the Jews - the Assyrians. Jonah’s response:

*“But Jonah made ready to flee to Tarshish, away from the LORD. He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down in it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD. The LORD, however, hurled a great wind upon the sea, and the storm was so great that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors were afraid and **each one cried to his god**. To lighten the ship for themselves, they threw its cargo into the sea. Meanwhile, **Jonah** had gone down into the hold of the ship, and **lay there fast asleep**. The **captain approached him** and said, ‘**What are you doing asleep? Get up, call on your god!** Perhaps this god will be mindful of us so that we will not perish.’” (Jonah 1:3-6)*

In the Jonah account “*each one cried to his god.*” This is a religious S.O.S as each sailor prays to his god; one of those gods has sent the raging storm, right? They are “shot gunning” prayers across all the spectrum of gods. It is to their credit that even they can see that this is no ordinary storm but betrays a divine reaction to some grave sin. But alas, the tempest rages: they can’t have called on the right god yet. Left to their own efforts, they begin to jettison cargo in an attempt to save themselves.

In the parallel account in Matthew, the disciples’ words to Jesus fit the anticipated pattern, “*Lord, save us! We are perishing!*” (Matt. 8:25). In Mark, however, their cry carries an edge – rebuke? Disbelief? Incredulosity? It is hard to assign a meaning that leaves the disciples other than accusing Jesus of being indifferent to their plight.

In the middle of this “all hands on deck” effort, “*Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship and lay there fast asleep.*” The original hearers as well as modern ones have to wonder, “how in the world could he be curled up fast asleep when the tempest rages? I know some people can sleep through anything, but really?”

### **Jesus Quiets the Storm**

Meanwhile in the gospel account: <sup>38</sup> *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?”* <sup>39</sup> *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 at the storm, wondering what all the commotion is about, and directing the sea to “*Quiet! Be still!*” (literally: “be muzzled”) 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 into 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.

<sup>40</sup> Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" <sup>41</sup> 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 word used for terrified, *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. This idea of fear continues in the disciple's response as they are "filled with great awe." The more literal translation retains the Semitic idiom in the Greek. "feared with great fear"

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.

With all they have seen and heard to this point and given their understanding that only God can command obedience from the power of nature, they still ask: "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?" They are at the cusp of making the connection about the true nature of Jesus, but perhaps that "next step" is a bridge too far at this point in time.

Later generations of disciples have the advantage of knowing how "the story" ends. The commonly accepted date for the authorship of this gospel is 69-70 AD. It is easy to see how the Markan community's suffering under Nero's persecutions, needs 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. Jesus asks for more than "great awe" (v. 41) in response to the Gospel. Mark 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.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

The scripture scholar Pheme Perkins raises some great points for reflection [581]. The long-ago story of the disciples' experience of tribulation and suffering have lessons for us in this age. She asks questions about how we react to such times, especially in the way the times shape our thoughts about God - even if only temporarily.

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 the 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

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## 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 1, 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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