

“Who Is This? Even the Wind and the Waves Obey Him”

The Fourteenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 4:35-41; Psalm 18:1-19

Jesus’ disciples witnessed some very amazing things in the months since he called them to follow him. Jesus has cast out demons. He has healed the sick. He has forgiven sins. Multitudes of suffering people were following him wherever he went. And now Jesus is preaching to the same people using parables, totally confounding the unbelieving religious leaders of Israel and forcing the multitudes to look beyond the miracles and to try and understand the true nature of his messianic mission. But the disciples are about to witness the most dramatic miracle yet. Jesus will command a storm to give way to calm, giving his disciples important new insight into the true nature of his person and work. And even though the disciples have seen some truly amazing events, when Jesus calms the storm, all they can do is ask, “who is this man?”

As we work our way through Mark’s Gospel, we are in that section of Jesus’ ministry known as the latter Galilean phase (Mark 3:7-6:13). Recall that Jesus first appeared in out of the way Capernaum and had been preaching in the area around the Sea of Galilee for some months. During this phase of his ministry, Jesus called twelve disciples, who left everything behind to follow him and who would become the leaders of a new Israel. Jesus was also preaching the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand and that the time had come for God’s people to repent and believe. To confirm his preaching and as a sign that the kingdom of God had indeed come, Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, and forgave sins. Mark has recounted how large numbers of people from throughout the region sought out Jesus because they had heard that Jesus was a miracle worker/exorcist. Jesus, graciously healed many of these people, even though they missed the fact that Jesus’ main purpose was to deal with the root cause of all human suffering—which is our sinfulness as individuals and as a race.

But as Jesus’ ministry continues to unfold throughout these first months of his public ministry, it is becoming increasingly clear that the religious leaders of Israel will not receive Jesus as their Messiah, even though it should have been obvious that Jesus was sent by God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In fact, at the behest of Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Mark has already recounted to his readers how certain teachers of the law made their way up from Jerusalem to Capernaum to check out Jesus’ ministry, and then report back to the Sanhedrin. When these religious experts witnessed Jesus cast out a demon, their response to Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God was to accuse him of being demon possessed. This is not only shocking, but lets us know that from the very beginning of his mission, Jesus is despised and hated by many of those whom he came to save and that ultimately, his mission would take him to the cross. It is the supposed “shepherds” of Israel, who are most responsible for his death.

Thus Mark already informed us that the scribes and Pharisees were conspiring to have Jesus killed because he dared to heal on the Sabbath and because Jesus and his disciples ate with tax-collectors and sinners, people whom the Pharisees considered unclean and beneath contempt. And then there was the sad fact that even Jesus’ own family did not understand who Jesus was nor what his messianic mission was all about. Jesus’ own mother and half-brothers thought him out of his right mind. All of this has certainly raised troubling several questions in the minds of the disciples. Who, exactly, is Jesus? Is he prophet? Is he the Messiah? And why is it that Jesus is not being accepted and welcomed by the scribes and Pharisees? Who is this man who speaks with such authority about great mysteries of God and who has the power to heal and cast out demons?

In response to all of this unbelief and lack of desire on the part of the crowds to understand the true nature of his mission, Jesus begins to preaching in parables. On one level, the parables use vivid images drawn from ordinary life so as to illustrate spiritual things. When Jesus begins to speak in parables, the scribes and the Pharisees know that Jesus is speaking about them, and yet they are thoroughly confounded by our Lord' words. But on another level, Jesus is explaining in these parables why it is that so many in Israel (including the religious leaders and the multitudes) are rejecting him. Jesus is also laying out the big picture of what lies ahead for the disciples (and for the church) as the course of this age unfolds. In these parables, Jesus is telling us what the kingdom of God is like: a mustard which starts out small, but grows all out of proportion to its size; a lamp, which should not be hidden but which must be placed on its stand so that all benefit from its light; and the kingdom of God is like seed spread by the sower, who sows (the gospel) until the time of the harvest, the act of sowing sets into motion the process which inevitably leads to the harvest.

Because spiritual discernment is required to understand the true meaning of these parables, Jesus is, in a sense, hiding the truth in plain sight about his messianic mission from the multitudes and from the Jewish religious leaders. This is a form of covenant judgment upon covenant breakers. By speaking in this way, Jesus will force those who hear him seek for spiritual insight and to ask God for ears that truly hear and eyes that truly see. But Jesus will explain what these parables mean to the members of his true family, the new Israel, which even now he is creating as his messianic mission unfolds in the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee.

In discussing this later phase of Jesus' Galilean ministry, in Mark chapter 4, Mark has placed three parables together, in which Jesus begins to define for his disciples what the kingdom of God is like. Having given us some insight into the nature of Jesus' messianic mission, Mark now recounts a number of Jesus' miracles which took place in the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee, all of which demonstrate Jesus' absolute authority over nature, the demonic and even death itself.¹

The first of these three miracles (and the subject of our sermon this morning) is a so-called "nature miracle" in which Jesus demonstrates his authority over the created order by calming a storm.² In this case, the creator himself (who's glory is veiled with human flesh) demonstrates his authority over that which he has created. Throughout Mark's account of this miracle, is there is the inescapable sense that this story was related to Mark by someone (i.e. Peter) who had been an eyewitness to the events which actually took place one night out on the Sea of Galilee. This obviously left an indelible impression upon the witness. Mark refers to the precise time when this occurred, he mentions that other boats were present, he recalls vivid details such as the fact that the boat was filling with water because it was being swamped, he points out Jesus' exact location in the boat (the stern), and reveals the harshness of the disciples rebuke of Jesus for falling asleep, as well the fact that the disciples were greatly terrified. These are all things associated with an eyewitness report.³

¹ France, The Gospel of Mark, 219-220.

² Lane's point that these miracles demonstrate Jesus vanquishing forces hostile to God, as some sort of cosmic expression of Jesus' encounter with Satan is not convincing, nor especially helpful. See, for example, the discussion in; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 173-174.

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 174-175.

Recall that Jesus had been teaching the multitudes who had gathered along the shore of the Sea of Galilee from a small boat (Mark 4:2). This enabled Jesus to preach to a great number of people, while at the same time provided a bit of crowd control. But the time had come for Jesus and his disciples to move to a new location so that Jesus could preach to a new audience. As we pick up with Mark's narrative in verse 35, we learn "*that day when evening came, [Jesus] said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side.' Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.*" This desire to move to a new place is in keeping with Jesus' statement about his mission made back in Mark 1:38—"Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." Jesus' efforts to preach the good news about the kingdom of God will shortly take him to new areas (Nazareth, Tyre and Sidon and the Decapolis), and eventually all the way to Jerusalem, where the conflict with the Sanhedrin would reach its climax.

We know from the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel that the disciples were experienced fishermen, so they knew the Sea of Galilee quite well and were, no doubt, very competent sailors. And so when Jesus decided to cross the lake and go to the other side, the obvious choice was that they went by boat to avoid the crowds and so that they could get some rest and not have to walk. Even though they began the journey after sundown, Mark reports that a number of people followed Jesus and his disciples in their own boats. It is not a stretch to imagine people along the shore running ahead and trying to track the direction the disciples were headed so as to anticipate where Jesus and his disciples would end up next.

The Sea of Galilee appears to be a very tranquil place, especially in the morning when most tourist photos are taken. But as the local fisherman knew, the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by high mountains which form a kind of basin. It is not uncommon for sudden storms to form on the Sea as winds from the south enter the basin through a large notch. These winds then create surprising violent windstorms which create rather large waves and chop, especially in the late afternoon of certain months of the year. This is why most fishing on the lake was done at night or early in the morning, when the winds are calm and when the fish are closest to the surface. This is what made such a strong storm in the early evening hours all that more frightening since it was completely out of the ordinary.⁴

As Mark recounts these events in verse 37, after Jesus and his disciples were far away from the shore, "*a furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.*" Apparently, the waves and swells were so high that they were actually breaking over the side of the boat and it was beginning to swamp and fill up with water. According to verse 38, "*Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.*" Jesus was obviously exhausted from his work and the preaching from the day before. Mark has already recounted for us how Jesus was forced to retreat into the wilderness to rest and pray, because when he went to Peter and Andrew's house, where he had been staying, so many people had gathered around Jesus was even unable to eat. And so Jesus must have been bone weary and was sound asleep in the back of the boat when the storm blew in, lying on the cushion used by the coxswain who steered the boat while the others tended the nets.

As this scene as described by Mark, it clearly calls to mind the story of Jonah, who likewise slept in the midst of a raging storm while everyone else on board the ship was in a panic. In Jonah 1:5-6, we read of something quite similar. When a great storm came up, "*All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep?*"

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 175.

Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.” In the account of the prophet Jonah, Jonah was helpless in the face of the storm as it was God’s means to direct Jonah, by way of the innards of a big fish, to Ninevah. But in this instance, however, Jesus is not helpless. But whether Mark draws an intentional parallel to Jonah or not, there is certainly an echo from Jonah here in Mark’s account. Like Jonah, Jesus has been called to a new area to preach and while en route and while sound asleep, a storm threatens all on board, while God’s servant sleeps through the whole ordeal. But Jesus is not Jonah.

That this storm was large and completely unexpected can be seen in the disciples’ reaction. Even though they were very experienced sailors, when this particular storm blew in the disciples were in a panic and probably a bit perplexed, if not angry, that Jesus was sleeping in the midst of an emergency. The tone of what follows is clearly that of rebuke.⁵ *“The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’”* These men were obviously terrified, and were looking to Jesus for to help them. Meanwhile, Jesus is sound asleep in the stern of the boat. And so they rebuke him—“don’t you care if we drown?” All we can conclude from this is that at this point in Jesus ministry, his true identity is still veiled, and so Jesus must bear the reproach and the rudeness of men—even that of his own disciples.⁶ You can just see the disciples struggling to put all of this together. How could the Son of God be so worn out that he’d fall so deeply asleep that even a storm wouldn’t wake him? What they knew and had observed about Jesus so far didn’t fit with the fact that this man now soundly sleeping in the stern of the boat. He should be taking control of the situation. Unlike the response of the crew on Jonah’s ship, who blamed Jonah for the storm and then pitched him into the sea, in this case, the disciples are pleading with Jesus for help and a bit put out that he hadn’t yet done anything to help!

Jesus’ response is likewise quite remarkable. As Mark tells us, “[Jesus] *got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*” And so just as suddenly as this storm had formed, it was suddenly quiet and calm because Jesus had commanded it. While some have speculated that Jesus is rebuking the storm as an agent of the demonic, it is probably better to see in this Jesus’ Lordship over nature. Even as he commanded demons and they obeyed him, so now he commands the wind and the waters and the storm immediately abates.⁷

Since Jesus is the Lord of all creation, his ability to calm the storm does not surprise us, since we look back at this through the eyes of all four gospels and two thousand years of Christian reflection upon the person and work of Christ. But, to fully understand the gravity of this and the impact of this event upon the disciples, we need to put ourselves in their place when this all occurred. Here are these experienced fisherman, facing a storm the likes of which they had never seen. Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat as their terror grows. And so perplexed, and frustrated, they rouse their master and rudely accuse him of not worrying about whether or not they drown. Jesus wakes up—he had to be groggy—and with a command, shuts off the storm, or at least that’s how it appeared to the terrified disciples. If they were terrified by the storm, then they were equally terrified by being in the presence of someone who can wake from a sound sleep, speak to a storm and have it immediately cease.

⁵ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 176.

⁶ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 174.

⁷ See the discussions of this in: Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 176-177; and France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 225-225.

When we read this story, we draw upon what we know about Jesus, which is a substantial amount of information. But the only thing the disciples could draw upon to help them understand what they had just witnessed was several months of being in the Lord's presence, as well as those passages throughout the Old Testament which speak of God as the author of the storm and the rebuker of winds and waves. Throughout Psalms, for example, there were multiple references to YHWH stilling the waves and controlling the seas. In Psalm 33:7, we read of God, "*He gathers the waters of the sea into jars he puts the deep into storehouses.*" In Psalm 65:7, the Psalmist speaks of YHWH . . . "*who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations.*" Similarly in Psalm 77:16 we read, "*The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed.*" And then in Job 12:15, we find these words, "*If he holds back the waters, there is drought; if he lets them loose, they devastate the land.*" If these words were true of YHWH, how do they relate to Jesus? Surely, the disciples were struggling to put all of this together, even as they were relieved that this threat to their lives was now blessedly over.

There are other passages as well. In Psalm 107:25-30, the Psalmist declares, "*For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.*" Surely, the words of this well-known Psalm sounded exactly like what had just happened to them. This man Jesus is asleep one minute because he is worn out from preaching and performing miracles. And then once awakened and even as the disciples are crying out to the Lord in their trouble, he brought them out of their distress, by merely speaking to the storm.

And then there are the familiar words of Psalm 18, a portion of which we read as our Old Testament lesson and which bear repeating in this context. "*I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him—the dark rain clouds of the sky. Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning. The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning and routed them. The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of breath from your nostrils. He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the LORD was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.*" Jesus had done exactly what the Psalmist proclaims of YHWH. Jesus cried out to the Lord and the wind immediately ceased.

But while the disciples are still trying to make sense what Jesus had just done in light of the familiar words of the Psalter and the prophets which spoke of YHWH as Lord of the storm, Jesus now addresses them without anger, even though the disciples' rude treatment of their master surely deserved a rebuke.

“He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’” This is the first in a whole series of rebukes for a lack of faith that Jesus will direct towards his disciples. In this case, they have reacted exactly as have the multitudes who flocked to him for healing. The disciples were not interested in Jesus’ mission nor his ultimate purposes, but in an immediate response to the situation at hand. In other words, they were acting out of panic and not in faith. Surely, having witnessed all that God had done in their presence through the ministry of Jesus, these men should have placed their faith in God’s saving power and his ability to deliver them in all circumstances. They should have cried out to the Lord in their distress as the Psalmist did and not rudely awakened Jesus, foolishly accused him of not caring about what happened to them.

And so when Jesus asks them, “why do they still have no faith,” their answer indicates that they are only in the early stages of grasping just who it is who has been asleep in the stern of the boat. As Mark tells us in verse 41, *“They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this?’ Even the wind and the waves obey him.”* Jesus had just given them great insight into who he is and what his mission entails. They know this man, despite his human limitations, is no ordinary man. Even the wind obeys his command. Who is this man?

What, then, can we say by way of application?

It is clear from Mark’s account of Jesus calming the storm, the disciples are struggling to understand just who Jesus is. This is certainly understandable. Their master can heal the sick, forgive sins, and cast out demons. He’s shown that he’s far more than a prophet, that he is Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. And yet, at the same time he’s subject to all manner of human weakness, including being so tired that when he gets in the boat and finally away from the crowds he falls deeply asleep because he’s completely exhausted. And then when awaked, he stills the storm with a single command. All of this would be very difficult to grasp. And so when we look at event from the disciples’ perspective, we can see that slowly but surely, Jesus is revealing his true identity to his disciples. In the calming of the storm, the disciples witness the fact that Jesus is Lord over creation. He is Lord of creation, because he is God in human flesh—something the disciples cannot yet understand. There is still no way for them to understand how the creator of the universe would need to sleep in the back of the boat, because he’s tired. Indeed, this mystery of Christ’s two natures will not become fully clear to them until after our Lord’s resurrection.

From our perspective, when we read of Jesus directing the storm to be still, we know that Jesus is the one spoken of in Psalm 18, 33, 65, 107 as well as a host of other passages. We know that since Jesus is God in human flesh he has the power to calm the seas and still the waves, and yet is subject to all manner of human weakness because he is truly human. We understand that Jesus is slowly but surely revealing himself to his disciples, that he is teaching them that he is the promised one in the Old Testament, that his mission, like Jonah’s, is to go and preach where the father sends him. Therefore, nothing can happen to him, unless it be the father’s will. We can see it, but they could not—at least not yet.

Clearly, Jesus allowed this event to happen in order to test the disciples’ faith and teach them something about his true nature and person. Although terrified, they have nothing to fear. The creator and sustainer of the universe lies sound asleep in the stern of the boat. Therefore, nothing can happen to them that is not the will of God. As far as we are concerned, we know that this same Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now ascended on high where he rules the nations and governs the affairs of men. We know who he is. His identity is no longer veiled. We also know that in his glorified state, Jesus no longer sleeps nor gets weary, although he understands how it is that we get tired and weary and are subject to

the limitations of our humanity. Now ascended on high and in his glorified human nature, Jesus tirelessly watches over us every moment of the day and every moment of the night. We know that he directs the storms and tempest and that when we call out to him, he will hear us and rescue us according to his will. There is nothing that happens to us that has escaped his eternal gaze. And since he has died for our sins, was raised for our justification, and even now intercedes for us, we know that he is working all things according to his will. Nothing can separate us from his love, not even death.

Who is this man? He is the Lord of the storm. He is the Lord of death and the grave. He is Lord of the seas, indeed of all creation. And since he loves us and has purchased us with his own blood, he will never leave us nor forsake us, even when things look bleak and no hope is to be found. The wind and the waves obey this man because he is Lord. He is our Lord. For he is our God and we are his people . . .