

Mark 4:35-41: Lord of the Storm

On a first read, [Mark 4:35-41](#) looks like a demonstration of Jesus' astonishing power — and so it is. Jesus' disciples are traveling across the Sea of Galilee. When a violent storm threatens to destroy the boat and its inhabitants, Jesus somehow manages to remain “asleep on the cushion.” The disciples' wake-up call — “Teacher, doesn't it matter to you that we are perishing?” — hardly commends either their faith or Jesus' behavior. Jesus, however, awakens with authority, rebukes the wind and commands the sea by saying, “Silence! Be still!” So when the wind ceases and a “great calm” stills the sea, no wonder the disciples ponder Jesus' authority. “Who then is this guy?” they ask. Who indeed?

Modern readers struggle with miracle stories like this. Yes, we know some “The Bible's good enough for me” Christians who are prepared to believe that the sun stood still to assist the Israelites in battle ([Joshua 10:12-13](#)), but most of us wonder about deeds like quieting storms and turning water into wine ([John 2:1-11](#)). We're inclined to interpret exorcism stories in the language of modern mental health. Maybe Jesus was helping disturbed people to find peace. We're prepared for Jesus' healing miracles because they directly benefit desperate people. But “nature miracles” like stilling the storm challenge the boundaries of our imaginations.

Preachers and hymn composers alike salve our discomfort by personalizing the storm. “When the storms of life surround you, and the waves are breaking in upon you,” they say, “just remember that Jesus is Lord of the storm!” So we avoid our unease with nature miracles by turning them into allegories of the things that try our souls. “Jesus, Savior, pilot me / over life's tempestuous sea,” pleads one hymn.

Remarkably, Mark's earliest commentator offered precisely such an interpretation — but with a twist. With a copy of Mark on the desk, the author of Matthew changes several little details in Mark's story. Matthew, however, is interested in the community of Jesus' followers more than in the challenges of individual living. So where Mark offers several boats, Matthew's disciples follow Jesus into one boat. That's what disciples do; they follow Jesus. And when they're afraid, they don't complain as they do in Mark. Instead, they pray, “Lord, save us!” Matthew's disciples, buffeted by the waves of resistance to the gospel and perhaps by outright persecution, cry out for deliverance, and Jesus saves them.

But that's Matthew's version, not Mark's. Mark allows the story to remain chaotic because Mark is after something greater. Careful Bible readers have long noticed how Mark's account echoes some of Israel's Psalms. Facing a storm on the sea, sailors “cried out to the LORD in their trouble.” Then the LORD made the storm “be still,” “and the waves of the sea were hushed” ([Psalm 107:28-29](#), NRSV). Just as Israel's God stills the storm and hushes the waves, so does Mark's Jesus.

[Psalm 65](#) is also suggestive. God silences “the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples” ([Psalm 65:7](#), NRSV). This Psalm links God's authority over the power of the sea with God's authority in human affairs. Just as God brings the storms to silence, so does God bring peace among the peoples of the earth. Psalms 65 and 107 proclaim that the God of Israel brings peace to all circumstances, including distress among human communities.

Fully aware of Psalm 107 and Psalm 65 — not to mention other traditions that celebrate God’s authority over the sea — the author of Mark does something remarkable. Mark presents Jesus as Lord of the storm, just as Israel’s God commands storms. Mark’s Jesus carries God’s authority with him. Jesus forgives sins (2:1-12), and he is Lord of the Sabbath (2:23-28). “Who then is this guy?” ask the disciples? When you are in Jesus’ presence, Mark implies, you’re in the very presence of God.

Shifting the focus from the disciples and their struggles to Jesus and his authority makes for good news. We frequently encounter those persons bent under by the burden of spiritual inadequacy. I’m talking about people who love God deeply and serve Christ faithfully, yet they feel that they lack sufficient faith. They feel that something is wrong with them.

The burden of spiritual inadequacy only grows during times of unrest and uncertainty. This summer 115,000 people will cease contributing to the unemployment rate, not because they’ve found work but because their unemployment benefits will expire. The consequences of long-term unemployment are spiritual as well as material. Extended unemployment places enormous stress upon individuals and their families, with increased rates of depression and strained intimate relationships. Researchers wonder, but have not proven, a correlation between extended unemployment and cardiovascular disease. Some preachers only make things worse by proclaiming that with enough faith all our problems will go away.

Mark 4:35-41 has good news for those preoccupied with their own spiritual inadequacy. In response to Jesus’ command, the storm yields to a “great calm” (4:39, literal translation). Jesus goes on to scold the disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40). Even after things settle down, Mark tells us, the disciples’ fear has not subsided; rather, it’s only moved on to another topic. “And they feared a great fear, and they said to one another, ‘Who then is this guy, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (4:41). Great calm does not preclude the disciples’ great fear.

In other words, the disciples’ deliverance has nothing to do with the adequacy of their faith. They never get there. Their security resides in Jesus, the Lord of the storm who silences the “roaring of the waves” and “the tumult of the peoples” (Psalm 65:7, NRSV). Life does not depend on whether we have enough faith or not. For many of us, that’s a very good thing.

Editor’s Note: ON Scripture - The Bible is a series of Christian scripture commentaries produced in collaboration with Odyssey Networks. Each week pastors from around the country will approach the lectionary text of the week through the lens of current events, providing a religious voice that is both pastoral and prophetic.