

WHAT ONLY GOD CAN DO

MARK 4:35-5:20

Mark has been raising the curtain on who Jesus is and what Jesus has come to do, and so far in his account, Mark has emphasized Jesus' majestic nature as the 'Son of God'. He's been presenting his account up to this point much like a journalist who's interviewed eyewitnesses and is writing a report on what he's been told. We can tell that these stories are a collection of personal testimonies because Mark includes specific but seemingly irrelevant details in the stories. His writing is totally unique and certainly different from ancient legends or myths.

Ancient legends and myths stayed focused on details that helped develop the main characters and advance the main message of the author. However, one aspect of Mark's writing that contradicts this ancient style is the amount of "irrelevant detail"¹ contained in his narratives. For example, saying such things in this story about the storm as "when evening had come" or "just as he was" or "other boats were with him" or "asleep on the cushion" are details that neither move the story along nor build the main character of the story. These irrelevant details are subtle marks of true eyewitness testimony since they're simply extra bits of information recalled by the actual observers who witnessed the actual events occur.

This means that we have to try our best to wrap our minds around the fact that what Jesus does here on the Sea of Galilee is not a mythical story meant to communicate a memorable message. It's an actual event that happened at an actual time in history that people just like you and me actually experienced firsthand.

In looking at this story, some insightful observations can be made from the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples throughout the narrative. The story begins with Jesus saying to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." Apparently, it was Jesus' idea to set out upon these dangerous waters. Did he know that a storm was going to pop up while they were out there? And if so, then why would he put them in danger like that? Knowing his majestic nature, we have to admit that he was fully aware of what he was doing, and so this was actually him seizing another opportunity to teach his disciples an unforgettable lesson.

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 343

Sure enough, shortly after they set sail upon the waters, a great storm sweeps in and becomes so violent that these professional fisherman begin to panic and fear for their lives. They wake Jesus up in a panic saying, "Teacher, don't you care that we're about to die out here?" The disciples are questioning Jesus' concern and care for them. Why would Jesus be sleeping at a time like this? Does he not realize the urgency of this situation? We can feel their emotion and their fear in this story. How many of us today feel as if God isn't paying attention when we seem to desperately need him the most? Fear versus faith is a life-long war that we will continue to fight throughout this life.

As they wake him up in desperation and frustration, Jesus graciously tolerates their tone of voice with him and gets up to do the unimaginable. And Jesus doesn't take this moment to speak to his disciples; instead, with them scared and watching, he speaks to the storm.

Timothy Keller give us a descriptive picture of this incredible scene:

"He didn't brace himself, roll up his sleeves, and raise a wand. There were no incantations. He said: 'Quiet! Be Still!' That's it. To a hurricane, Jesus simply says, 'Quiet! Be still!' – just as you would talk to an unruly child. The more astonishing thing is that the storm obeyed like a compliant child."²

Not only did the storm stop, but apparently the sea became dead still. There's an eeriness to this sort of calmness that Mark is describing here. Have you ever been to the ocean and the water just seems to be completely flat and motionless? There's an eeriness to that sort of calmness on the water, and that is exactly what just happened in this narrative. One minute the disciples are scared for their lives because of a ferocious storm, and the next minute there's no storm and the water is dead quiet. It's now at this moment that Jesus turns to look at his disciples and simply asks them, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

What Jesus is saying in this moment to his disciples and what they are without question beginning to realize themselves is that they are heavily underestimating who they are dealing with when it comes to Jesus. Jesus is essentially stirring up their hearts and asking, "Why are you so afraid? Don't you know who I am?"

² Timothy Keller, *King's Cross*, (Redeemer CityNet: 2011) 51

In our study of chapter one, we mentioned how Jesus is the source of the gospel aroma that lingers throughout the entire Old Testament. With that being said, it's difficult to read this story of Jesus calming the storm without thinking about another great storm that God also calmed back in the Old Testament. It's a story found in the narrative about the prophet Jonah and the similarities are striking. Picking up in the middle of the action, we read:

But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." (Jonah 1:4-6)

In both of these stories, a great storm arises upon the sea out of nowhere and begins to sink the boat. In both of these stories, the men who would be considered professionals at sea are scared for their lives. And in both of these stories, the two men who can do something about the storm are sleeping in the middle of it. There is really only one big difference between the two stories, and that is the way in which the storms were stopped. Jesus speaks to the storm in order to silence it, but what did Jonah do to save those on his boat from dying?

Jonah told them to, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."... So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.³

What does Jonah do to stop the storm? He tells the men on the boat to cast him out. Throw him overboard. Jonah is willing to be sacrificed for the sake of everyone else. He knows that if he dies then everyone else will live. And without question, it is here that we begin to smell that gospel aroma again.

³ see Jonah 1:12-16

Jesus once declared that, "Something greater than Jonah is here"⁴ – talking about himself. Who is this Jesus that the disciples are dealing with? He is the one who has come to willingly offer himself to be cast out. To be thrown overboard. To be sacrificed for us. To die in order that we may live. He has calmed this storm with a command, but he will calm the ultimate storm with the cross. Again, Jesus asks, "Why are you so afraid? Don't you know who I am?"

If Jesus is willing to be cast out and suffer death so that we may live, can we not trust him no matter what storm we may find ourselves in here on earth? If God is for us, who or what could possibly be against us? Who or what can possibly separate us from the love of Jesus? Will tribulation, or persecution, or danger, or swords or storms? No, of course not, for we should be convinced that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God clearly displayed in and through Jesus our Lord.⁵

So again, Jesus looks at his disciples and simply says, "Why are you so afraid? Don't you know who I am?" And just like in the story of Jonah, the men on the boat are now more terrified after the storm is calmed than they were in the middle of it.

The disciples ask themselves, "Who is this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And here is their unforgettable lesson – Jesus had just done what only God can do. Only God makes storms be still.⁶ For the disciples, Jesus is becoming just as unpredictable and uncontrollable as that storm was on the sea. That can be a terrifying thought. However, we must not be afraid and always remember – Not only is he God; he is good, and he is for us.

Jesus uses this opportunity to teach his disciples that the power of salvation lies in the object of our faith not in faith itself. "Who is this man named Jesus?" and the ultimate question, "Is he worthy of my trust?" Failure to understand who Jesus really is will always lead to a deficiency in our faith and an increase in our fear.

⁴ see Matthew 12:41

⁵ see Romans 8:31-39

⁶ see Psalm 107:23-32

Now immediately following this story about the calming of the storm, Mark writes about an encounter Jesus has with a violently possessed man in the same region where they get off the boat. Now, notice some of the similarities in this narrative with the calming of the storm:

Jesus was confronted with a violent storm.

Jesus is confronted with a violently possessed man.

The storm was at the mercy of Jesus' word.

The demons are at the mercy of Jesus' word.

The storm was ceased and the sea was calmed.

The demons are cast out and the man is calmed.

The observers became more afraid of Jesus than they were of the violent storm.

The observers become more afraid of Jesus than they were of the violent man.

This encounter with Jesus proves to be just as unforgettable for the demon-possessed man as the calming of the storm was for the disciples. And in some ways, we're all a little bit like this demon-possessed man. While he was naked, enslaved, and crying out in isolation, we too find ourselves exposed, enslaved and crying out in the darkness of our sin. And just as Jesus liberates him, brings him into community, covers his shame and puts his life back together, so too Jesus liberates us, brings us into the community of his church, covers our shame and puts our life back in order.

How does he do this?

Jesus does this and in fact has the authority to do this because at the end of his life, he was stripped naked, he was in bondage as a prisoner, he was isolated and crucified outside of the city, and he was the one crying out in the darkness, "My God, My God." Jesus was able to heal the demoniac and is able to heal us today because Jesus has willingly taken our place. The Son of God was stripped naked in order that we could be clothed. Jesus cast himself overboard in order to give us salvation from the greater storms of sin and death.

“Who is this man Jesus?” He is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God and the Savior of Man, the Hope in our fear and the Object of our faith.

As these two stories come to a close, we see the way in which Jesus had certainly become the object of the healed demoniac’s focus and faith. The former demoniac wanted nothing more than to join Jesus. But Jesus has something else in store for the man. He says:

“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.”

And what does the man go and do? Mark writes:

“And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.”

The man didn’t go and tell the people what God did through this man named Jesus. The man proclaimed what Jesus had done for him. The power of salvation is found in the object of our faith. This man got it. He understood. To him, Jesus and the Lord were one and the same. For he recognized the same thing that the disciples were beginning to recognize – Jesus has done what only God can do.

Every one of us must come to terms with it and never leave it unsettled. Is Jesus in fact God? And is he worthy of my trust?