

MORE THAN A TITLE

Mark 4:35-41

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You all have heard many sermons on this text about the importance of faith in the midst of the storms of life. Though a sound interpretive move, actually it has nothing to do with Mark's purpose for writing it. At this point in our sermon series, you should be able to guess its purpose – to build upon answering the central question of the Gospel asked once again in our text – Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?

We thought we had the answer in Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, The Son of God." Jesus is the Christ, God's Son. But for Mark's audience, and for us, this answer is utterly insufficient, even misleading.

Knowing someone's name and title does give us some information, but our pre-conceived notions all too often skew the truth. This was especially true for both the notions of Messiah and Son of God. Peter so misread the title of Messiah that Jesus warned him, "Get behind me Satan." This retort makes it absolutely clear the danger of jumping to conclusions about Jesus.

Mark sets out to give a complete answer and I hope by now you have been captivated, surprised, and even shocked by his tale. We have political intrigue, hometown gossip, adoring thronging crowds, acts of deep compassion (that will only grow stronger) exorcism of demons, and there is more to be revealed.

Despite one powerful, head-scratching miracle and encounter after another, in today's passage the disciples are even more bewildered, in awe, and asking themselves "Who is this guy!... even the winds and the sea obey him!" Such power did not compute with any worldview in which they operated. Not even the concept of Messiah nor

"the Son of God" was sufficient to explain this power.

The Messiah was meant to be a leader, a powerful king – like David – who would defeat Israel's earthly enemies. Though the prophets offered hints of something more, the common person believed this messiah would be beloved by God, dear to the Lord's heart, the best of humanity, but still human. This story adds a cosmic dimension to this person of Jesus; one that would not have been in the minds of those expecting the Messiah or Son of David.

Mark has crafted this passage carefully to indicate that Jesus' actions are about something more than simply controlling the weather. The word for "storm" in verse 37 is the same word used for "whirlwind" in Job 38:1. The whirlwind was the place of raw power, clouded from human eyes, from which God often speaks. Generally, it indicates something beyond human comprehension and power. According to Markan scholar, Lamar Williamson, the connotation is that the supernatural is present in the storm.

To those in the ancient world, the raw power of the wind and the sea represented the forces of chaos that not even the gods could easily control. In general, the battle of God verses the sea was a recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible. More particularly, in Jewish thought, the Leviathan was a monstrous serpent that represented the ancient malevolent force of the sea. In vain men strived to slay this beast, for that power does not rest within humans. But in Isaiah we learn, "In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea." (Isaiah 27:1)

Only God had the power to tame the sea. There are others who have commanded nature. Take Elijah for example. He calls down fire from heaven to consume a ritual offering in order to defeat the prophets of Baal. Listen to Elijah's prayer, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and have done all these things at Your command." (1 Kings 18:36)

There is a subtle difference between Jesus' act and that of Elijah's. Elijah prays and calls upon God. Jesus gets up and does it himself. The disciples recognize both Jesus' direct action and the supernatural status of the sea when they say, "Who then is this that the winds and the sea, *obey him*? Jesus is obeyed by this ancient force of chaos. And what is creation in ancient thought? The power to bring order out of chaos. And how did God accomplish creation? By speaking a word, "Let there be light!" And how did Jesus bring order from this chaotic storm? By a word, "Peace! Be Still!"

Suddenly, in the eyes of the disciples, Jesus has gone from wise teacher, clever debater, and healer to something far more.

Note the disciples didn't actually ask Jesus for help. Rather they woke him up saying, "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing!?" The devastating and deadly raw power of nature has frustrated and frightened people since the very beginning – even to today.

We may feel as if God is asleep over this Coronavirus. It absolutely confuses us that God would not arise to strike down plagues and storms. The fact that nature, of which we are a part, and even our own bodies would rise up to destroy us in cancerous ferocity – it is like a family member striking us down – it does not seem right. How can the world be made like this?

Genesis seems to agree. Upon being expelled from the Garden, things didn't work as they were meant to at the beginning. To bring forth fruit from

the earth would require toil, that is backbreaking work. And furthermore, the animal kingdom would bite the heel of man, that is it would rise against us.

The Apostle Paul concluded that creation is fallen, just like humanity is fallen. In Romans, he described it as suffering birth pangs (Romans 8:18-25). Remember that birth pangs were another result of fallen creation.

He tells us creation waits with eager longing. Like us, it longs to be restored. Isaiah paints an amazing portrait of this restoration when the lion will lay down with the lamb, and the serpent will no longer bite the heel of man, instead Isaiah proclaims, "the child will play over the adder's den." (Isaiah 11)

The harmony of all creation will someday be known. Viruses will be no more. That is the promise and the hope. But that time has not yet come. And in this time, when we are wondering, "Where is God?", "Is God asleep?", "What is God doing?" we would do well to remember today's story.

This passage shows us that even though God has not yet redeemed creation, at times God will intervene in nature and bring healing.

Mark tells a slightly different story of this event than Matthew. In Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus to help. But before he calms the sea, he first castigates the disciples, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26) But in Mark, Jesus' first act, before he says anything, without even being asked, is to calm the sea and then secondarily he teaches the disciples.

It is almost as if the Bible is giving us two ways to view God and it is up to us which Christ we believe in – the one who first acts in compassion or whose first act is to scold us and put us in our place, only helping after making us feel guilty for being weak and afraid, as are all of us.

Mark's Jesus is closer to us. He is not called "Lord" like in Matthew but "Teacher". He does not praise himself, like in John, but remains the humble servant. He is asleep in Matthew and Mark; however, Mark adds that he is asleep – *on a cushion*. Making him feel more human, like he was truly tired, exhausted in fact, not just faking it. But even so, in the moment of seeing fear on their faces, he rises to calm the storm. Who is this man?

The legions of Harry Potter fans out there will remember a quote from Sirius Black, "If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals." There is another similar quote from Malcom Forbes, "You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him."

Before these quotes a 19th century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, wrote these words:

I think you may judge of a man's character by the persons whose affection he seeks. If you find a man seeking only the affection of those who are great, depend upon it he is ambitious and self-seeking; but when you observe that a man seeks the affection of those who can do nothing for him, but for whom he must do everything, you know that he is not seeking himself, but that pure benevolence sways his heart.

When these quotes are applied to Jesus, we see a person who, more than anyone else in history, demonstrates a character of such blinding love and humility it can scarcely be imagined. It is his compassion for the crowd, his patience with his disciples, and his love for his enemies that shows what he is like more than any title, even that of Messiah or Son of God could ever convey.

Finally, if we want to know, "who is this man, that even the winds and the sea obey him," you find the clearest and most complete answer to that question in Mark 15:39. When seeing the way in which he died, the centurion declared, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Amen.