

Jesus, the Stiller of Storms

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Before we really get to studying the Bible, it's hard for us to grasp why there are four different gospels. We typically don't pay much attention to which stories come from which gospel, so stories from all four run together in our heads. However, once we start considering each gospel in isolation, a different picture emerges. We recognize that even though all four tell the same story, each one gives us a unique insight into the life of our Savior.

Nowhere is this more true than with the gospel of Mark. Mark is the red-headed stepchild of the gospels. It's the shortest of the four, so we naturally assume that if we want the full story, we have to turn to Matthew or Luke instead. In reality, though, of the stories that are common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is usually Mark's account that is the most detailed. What is more, the picture that Mark paints is often darker and gloomier than the Matthew and Luke versions. However, this isn't gloom for gloom's sake. Mark wants to make the point that in times of darkness and foreboding, the light of Christ shines more brightly. Let's look at how he describes the story of Jesus, the stiller of storms.

The Storm Outside

This section of Mark begins with a description of the Lord's interaction with a storm outside. The relevance of this storm appears in the discussion of **TRAVEL PLANS** in Mark 14:35-36. This story begins, as many of the stories in Mark do, with Jesus and His disciples traveling across the Sea of Galilee on a boat. Today, this seems strange to us. We primarily use cars for transportation, most of us don't own boats, and if we do, they're primarily for recreation, not travel.

Generally speaking, we think of water as a barrier to travel, not as an aid, but 2000 years ago, exactly the opposite was true. The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. That means that Jesus and His apostles had two choices for travel. Either they walked around it, which was a 10-mile hike, or they sailed across it, which didn't involve any walking at all. What's more, the trip across the lake also offered Jesus a useful opportunity to get rid of the crowds. Most people of the time weren't boat owners, but several of Jesus' disciples, who happened to be fishermen, were. They could go where the multitudes couldn't, at least not without spending a day hiking around the lake. For a number of reasons, then, it made sense for Jesus and His inner circle to travel by boat.

However, the plan had some drawbacks, and one of these drawbacks appears with the emergence of **THE STORM**. Look with me at Mark 14:37-38. The boat that Jesus and His disciples were on, if it was anything like the specimens that archaeologists have discovered, was about 25 feet long and 5 feet wide. It wouldn't have had a deck; instead, it would have been an open tub with a small triangle of decking at the stern for the man with the steering oar to stand on. It was well suited for the task of removing fish from the lake, but it wasn't built to ride out any major storms. In the absence of Tom Skilling and the Weather Channel, this one snuck up on them and put them in great danger. Because the boat didn't have a deck, it wouldn't have shed water. It would have filled up, well on its way to sinking.

Of course, Mark doesn't include this story only for the drama of putting Jesus and His disciples in the middle of the Sea of Galilee on a sinking boat. I have a friend in Washington D.C. who rode out Hurricane Sandy a couple of weeks back, and while she was live-blogging about the storm, she couldn't help inserting commentary about Jesus' ability to calm the storms of our lives. Mark wants us to think along the same lines. The storm isn't just a storm. It's an event that is posing a threat to those who love Jesus, a threat too big for any of them to control. Even when the skies are blue outside, we can encounter this kind of threat in our lives, both individually and as a congregation. It's all too common for us to encounter situations that will sink us without help. In times like these, our solution too must be to call on Jesus.

The story concludes with a description of the interaction between **JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES**. Let's read together from Mark 4:39-41. Jesus wakes up, He rebukes the storm, and just like that, it stops. This is impressive. We don't think of air as having any particular weight or energy, but that's hardly true. After all, a lightning bolt is nothing more than the static electricity produced by air and water vapor rubbing together. A storm system is massively powerful. Jesus, in the midst of all that power, told the storm to go someplace else, and it did. It's hard to imagine that.

After Jesus finishes rebuking the weather, He rebukes His disciples. With a little thought, we can easily see why. From the disciples' perspective, their concerns were very reasonable. Here they were in the boat, the boat was filling up and about to sink, and Jesus was snoring in the back. Clearly, the best course of action was to wake Him up and make Him do something. From Jesus' perspective, on the other hand, the whole disturbance amounted to nothing more than an unnecessary interruption of His nap. After all, Jesus knew He was the Son of God, and He knew that His Father wasn't about to sink a boat with Him in it. If the disciples had only recognized those two things, they wouldn't have bothered waking Him up. They needed to have more faith that Jesus would accomplish His purpose.

After this brief exchange, the enormity of what has just happened hits the disciples. Before, when they were in apparent danger of losing their lives, Mark doesn't say that they were afraid. Now, though, he says they were filled with great fear. The only thing more frightening than being caught in the middle of a storm is being in a boat with somebody who looks like a man, but can make storms go away with a few words. Even though we today are used to seeing all kinds

of spectacular sights in a movie, if we saw something like that happen in real life, we would be shocked. People don't DO that, and yet Jesus did. He might have looked like a man, but He was clearly far more than merely that.

Even today, friends, we must remember that we are still in a boat with Jesus. We can't see Him, but He is still gathered in our midst. Our lives may well be filled with storms; indeed, Jesus has never promised any Christian clear skies and smooth sailing. However, as long as we are with Jesus, we don't have to fear them. Jesus will protect us throughout our lives, and He will also protect us on our journey into the life to come. We can put our trust in Him.

The Storms Within

In the next context in Mark, the gospel writer reveals Jesus' power to still the storms within. Within is where Jesus does His greatest work, and we're going to use this story to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper. This account begins with **JESUS' ARRIVAL** at His destination. Let's consider Mark 5:1-2. The text tells us first of all where this is taking place: the country of the Gerasenes. These were Gentiles who lived on the northern part of the east coast of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' journey probably took Him from Capernaum, which was a community on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, across the lake at an angle. This destination also highlights one of the reasons for the trip. Because the Gerasenes were Gentiles, they weren't terribly interested in the comings and goings of a Jewish prophet, although that is about to change. Jesus and His disciples assumed that they could come to the area and rest.

However, there is one entity among the Gerasenes who is VERY interested in the appearance of Jesus, and his entrance on the scene is reminiscent of a horror movie. Here are Jesus and the disciples, all still soaked to the skin from the aftereffects of the storm, landing at twilight on a deserted shore. The only structures they can see are some Gentile tombs set into the hillside, which would be even creepier for them than for us. We merely think tombs are spooky; to Jesus' disciples, they would also have been spiritually unclean. This is not a welcoming landfall! What's worse, as soon as their feet touch dry ground, a man emerges from the tombs, wounded, filthy, and naked, and he runs right toward them. He has clearly been watching them and waiting for their arrival, and they can't avoid him. This is a scary, dramatic situation, and, like any good horror-movie director, Mark intends for it to make us uneasy.

We learn more about **THE MAN'S PLIGHT** in Mark 5:3-6. Not only does this strange man have a frightening appearance, but the apostles may be able to tell, and Jesus can certainly tell that He is possessed by a demon. This is more than garden-variety insanity. He literally has an unclean spirit inside him. The poor Gerasenes have no way to manage the man. They've literally tried chaining him to the wall to protect themselves from him, but the spirit within him is so strong that he rips the chains and shackles to pieces. The demon drives him out of the city of Gerasa itself, and he's living in the unclean precincts of the cemetery, howling ceaselessly and slicing himself up on the rocks. Nobody can help him; nobody can resist him. This is a terrifying figure, perhaps one of the most frightening in the entire Bible. He would be enough to give any of us nightmares for weeks, and now he's confronting Jesus and the disciples. We kind of have to feel for them too. They've already been scared out of their wits by Jesus and His God-given supernatural power. Now, they have to face a man whose supernatural power comes from the devil. They have no idea what will happen next.

What actually does take place is a conversation between **JESUS AND THE DEMON**. It is recorded for us in Mark 5:7-10. What an eerie sight this would have been! This horrific figure rushes forward and throws himself to the ground at the feet of Jesus. Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out, but it doesn't! This is not the first time in Jesus' ministry that the disciples have encountered the demon-possessed. In fact, the casting out of demons is one of the Lord's signature miracles. This demon, though, won't come out. Instead, he starts arguing with Jesus. The disciples might not have figured out who Jesus is, but this demon certainly knows. He even has the temerity to command Jesus to stop in the name of His own Father! We don't know a great deal about the demon world, but from this story, one thing is obvious: this is no ordinary demon that Jesus is facing, and things are not going according to the script.

However, even in dealing with this souped-up demon, it's obvious that Jesus is still the stronger. He's the One controlling the conversation. Because the demon already knows His name, He asks the demon what its name is. The answer provides some enlightenment. Instead of Bob or Fred, the demon's name is Legion, and it claims to be not one, but multiple demons. A Roman legion of the time contained about 6000 soldiers. The story later reveals that Legion probably contains at least 2000 demons. Basically, this poor man has got thousands of unclean spirits wriggling around in his head. There are thousands of unclean spirits and only one Jesus, but the demon still knows that the Lord is in control. He knows that Jesus isn't going to let him remain in the man, but he doesn't want to go back to hell either.

The compromise that Jesus and the demon/demons settle on involves a luckless herd of **PIGS**. Mark explains in Mark 5:11-13. There is no doubt that if Jesus had chosen to exert enough spiritual muscle, He could have expelled the unclean spirits from the man. However, something is holding Jesus back from the brute-force method. Perhaps it is concern for the man himself. In other places, when Jesus casts out demons, it's a fairly intense process, involving screaming, convulsions, and lots of pain. If this guy has thousands of demons, then removing them all, one by one by one, might not be much of an improvement for him over simply being possessed.

Regardless, for whatever reason, the demon wants to bargain, and Jesus is willing. The solution they settle on has a certain irony to it. Adding to the unpleasantness of the scene to the Jewish mind, the hillside is covered with a large herd of pigs, the archetypally unclean animal according to the Law of Moses. The unclean spirits wanted to be sent into the unclean animals. The animals weren't humans, but they weren't going back to hell either. Jesus, perhaps because He has a better sense of what is going to happen than the demons do, agrees to their plan. As far as I can remember, this is the only place in Scripture where we see an animal possessed by a demon, and maybe this story explains why. The demons enter the herd of 2000 pigs, the pigs resent it, rush down the hillside, and drown themselves. Goodbye, demons.

This is a story that is utterly beyond our experience, for which I am quite thankful. Life on this earth is difficult enough without the possibility of demonic possession too! However, we can still learn quite a bit from the tale about Jesus' ability to help us with our more prosaic struggles with sin. First of all, the story emphasizes Jesus' competence. As we saw several weeks ago, Jesus said it was much easier to heal a paralyzed man than to forgive sins. Today's narrative emphasizes that it's much easier to calm a storm than to cast out a horde of demons. The storm rolled over when the Son of God said, "Roll." The demon didn't. Nonetheless, Jesus got the job done, and this shows that He can deliver us too.

Second, the narrative reveals the compassion of Jesus. The demon-possessed man is repulsive, ceremonially unclean, and a Gentile who lived in a Gentile city. Even if the Pharisees had the same level of power as Jesus, they would almost certainly have left this man to suffer. Jesus, though, chose to exert Himself to save this unlovable victim, and to do it in a way that spared him further suffering. This tells us everything we need to know about Jesus' willingness to help the spiritually wounded, the spiritually defiled, and the spiritually alien. The point is not that Jesus helps us because our spiritual state is so inviting. In God's eyes, our souls are every bit as much a mess as the demon-possessed man was to human eyes. The point is that He helps us even though we're not, for no better reason than because He is merciful.

Third, the story reveals Jesus' ability to outwit His spiritual adversaries too. The demons were very clear that they didn't want to go back to hell, yet in a minute or two, back to hell they went. From this, we can only conclude that they didn't anticipate the pigs' reaction to their unwelcome guests. The demon's bargain with Jesus proved to be a trap.

On a much larger scale, exactly the same thing happened when the devil caused Jesus to be crucified. I'm sure that Satan was every bit as eager to see Jesus dead as the chief priests were. This was something that he had been trying to accomplish for years. Finally, the devil got his big chance and jumped at it. However, little did he know that death for Jesus would mean the hope of eternal life for everybody else. It wasn't the biggest victory Satan would ever win. It was the biggest loss he would ever suffer. Instead, the victory belongs to us. We are the beneficiaries of Jesus winning the battle of wits with the devil. Let's think about how much we owe Him as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

The Aftermath

Our final study session this morning is going to concern the aftermath of the story of the Gerasene demoniac. This portion of the context begins as **THE STORY SPREADS**. Let's read together from Mark 5:14-16. Once again in Mark, we have fear and more fear. Admittedly, the aftermath of the miracle is pretty spectacular. You have this menacing man whom everybody knew was demon-possessed, now cleaned up and behaving like a normal human being again. What's more, you also have an entire section of the Sea of Galilee filled with floating pig corpses. 2000 dead pigs is a lot of pigs! It also represented a huge economic loss for somebody. The herdsmen, of course, are very familiar with their charges. They know that pigs don't spontaneously turn lemming and hurl themselves into the water. Even if they didn't hear the dialogue between Jesus and the demons, they can put two and two together, and it terrifies them. They run away, tell everybody they can catch about what has happened, and THOSE people show up and are terrified too.

Once again, this is more evidence about the way that people react to the supernatural when it actually happens. The Gerasenes aren't turning cartwheels because the demoniac has been cured. They're frightened, because they have absolutely no doubt that Jesus has messed with the laws of nature. As with so many of the miracles of Jesus, this one is beyond question. There is no good natural explanation for a naked lunatic suddenly returning to his senses, paired with thousands of pigs spontaneously drowning themselves. The story is another piece of evidence for Jesus being the Christ.

The incontestable fact that a miracle has occurred produces **TWO REACTIONS** that are as different from one another as they can possibly be. Mark explains in Mark 5:17-18. The Gerasenes beg Jesus to leave; the man who had been possessed begs Jesus to let him come with Him. Interestingly enough, these two opposite reactions come from the same realization. Both the Gerasenes and the healed man understand that Jesus has supernaturally changed everything about his life. For the Gerasenes, that's a huge problem. They didn't want their situation changed. They were fine with the demon-possessed man living in the tombs. They were fine with thousands of pigs that were alive, not dead. They want Jesus to go away because they know that He will KEEP changing things if He sticks around. The former possession victim also knows Jesus has changed everything, but to him, that's the best thing that could have happened.

As we consider these two reactions, what jumps out at us is now how much things have changed, but how much they haven't. Even today, with no demons in sight, Jesus transforms lives. To us, that sounds like a wonderful thing, but to most people in the world, it's exactly the opposite. They like the way their lives are now. They enjoy living for

themselves and not for God. Once they let Jesus in, they know He's going to change everything around, and they think change can only be for the worse. It follows, then, that the only people who want Jesus are the ones who want a change. They find their current lives unfulfilling. They think existence should be about more than the selfish pursuit of pleasure, and so they go hunting for Jesus, not in the fear that He will change everything, but in the hope that He will.

This story concludes with **THE LORD'S COMMAND** to the ex-demoniac. We read it in Mark 5:19-20. Jesus doesn't let him return with Him to Galilee. The gospel hasn't been preached to the Gentiles yet, and we can easily imagine the Pharisees' reaction if Jesus turns up with another disciple who is not only a sinner, but an uncircumcised foreigner. However, Jesus does tell the man to repeat the story of his salvation, so that when the time does come for the gospel to be preached in the cities of the Decapolis, the seed will find the soil already prepared. The man does this gladly, and without the creepy accompaniment of the tombs and the dead pigs, many marvel at what Jesus has done.

This instruction, "Go, and tell your friends what the Lord has done for you," applies as much to us as it does to the demoniac. If indeed Jesus has transformed our lives, changed them completely and for the better, we should be eager to tell others about Him, in the hope that they will come to know the same blessing that we have. If we aren't willing to do that, it may well be a sign that we haven't allowed Him to change our lives, or we don't understand the change that He has brought. If we are basically the same people we were before we obeyed the gospel, if we live pretty much the way we would if we were atheists, that shows that we have missed the point of Christianity. Likewise, if we don't understand how good we have it as Christians, if we overlook the multitude of blessings that God's people enjoy in this life and in the life to come, we've missed the point pretty impressively there too. Jesus deserves better than that from us. He deserves our gratitude, He deserves our lives, and He deserves our eagerness to share the good news about what the Lord has done.