

“Terror in the Deep”

Mark 4:35-41 ¹

We sometimes say about large organizations that “It’s not a wonder that it works so badly. The wonder is that it works *at all*.” So it was that the United States Navy took a young, recently-graduated psychology major and in a mere five months, turned him into a “naval engineer.”

During my active duty days, my title was “Main Propulsion Assistant to the Chief Engineer,” and I was responsible for the ship’s boilers, fuel, main engines, and associated auxiliary equipment—though, of course, it was the career sailors who actually took care of all that.

In October, 1975, we were involved in NATO exercises in the North Atlantic, near Iceland. As you may know, October is not a good time to be in the North Atlantic. Sixteen Octobers later, a Gloucester fishing boat, the *Andrea Gail*, was lost in “The Perfect Storm”² in latitudes far south of where we were on this exercise.

We, too, were overtaken by a great storm—a storm so fierce that we were unable to refuel from the oiler, and as our fuel was depleted from the bowels of the ship, we were becoming dangerously top-heavy and in danger of capsizing. After several days of this, the Captain told me to begin ballasting the fuel tanks with sea water.

Now if you’ve ever had water in the gasoline in your car, you know that it is not a good thing to have water in your fuel, and ballasting fuel tanks with sea water is something Navy ships *never do* unless in great danger. The Captain appeared calm as he gave me this order, but I knew we were in serious trouble.³

Fast forward twenty-five years, to a summer morning in the year 2000. As I sat on our back porch in Louisville having my morning devotions, the text for the day was the same text we just read about a desperate storm at sea—about another terror in the Deep—and as I came to the end of the passage, I sat in awe and wonder with the disciples, who looked at one another in that little boat and asked incredulously, “*Who IS this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him?*” (Mark 4:41). I had need of such a Savior that same afternoon, but that’s a story for another day.¹

Mark’s account, in what we know as “chapter 4,” suggests that the events in this morning’s Scripture passage took place at the end of the same day in which Jesus taught the crowds from a fishing boat; and tradition still identifies a particular cove as the location at which Jesus taught. The boat in question was probably a fishing boat—it may well have been Peter’s boat—and it was small enough to be dragged up on the shore of the Sea of Galilee at the end of the work day.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 19, 2017. Parallel passages to this text: Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrea_Gail;
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Perfect_Storm_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Perfect_Storm_(film))

³ Happily, before the ballasting began, we came into the lee of the Faeroe Islands and were able to refuel.

The text tells us that on this particular day, at the end of His teaching, Jesus told His disciples that they were going to cross to the other side of the lake.⁴ You may know that the Sea of Galilee is notorious for its storms—sudden and severe squalls that can literally come out of a blue sky. Here’s how one person described it: “It is not unusual to see terrible squalls hurl themselves, even when the sky is perfectly clear, upon these waters which are ordinarily so calm.

“The numerous ravines that empty upon the lake operate as so many dangerous defiles in which the winds from the summit of Mount Hermon are caught and compressed in such a way that, rushing with tremendous force through a narrow space and then suddenly being released, they agitate the lake in a most frightful fashion.” The word Mark used for this particular storm is the word for a tornado or a hurricane, both of which are rare in that part of the world (cf. Job 38:1).

Now if Jesus and all of His disciples were aboard the boat during this crossing, which seems to have been the case, then the boat was likely filled to capacity, which meant that it was sitting very low in the water. Several of the disciples were professional fishermen, accomplished sailors who knew the lake well; but they, like my Captain in the North Atlantic, were very concerned about losing the boat, and their lives with it.⁵

Jesus, asleep in the stern of the boat, gave no notice to either the storm or the danger, and the disciples shook Him awake with the incredulous rebuke, “Don’t you care that we’re all going to drown?!” They apparently had some difficulty awakening Jesus,⁶ and when He woke up, we’re told that He “rebuked” the storm using the same words He had used earlier while exorcizing an unclean spirit: “*Silence!*” He said. “*Be still!*” (literally, “be muzzled”; Mark 1:25).⁷

When Jesus spoke to the storm, the furious wind stopped, and the churning sea became calm—instantly, in the blink of an eye. And now, these experienced, professional seamen were terrified for an entirely new reason: “**Who IS this man,**” they wondered, “*that even the wind and the sea obey him?!?*”⁸

The disciples recognized that Jesus had just done what only God can do.⁹ They’d been with Jesus for a while, now, and they’d seen Him do some amazing things; but this, the first of Jesus’ “nature miracles,” was an epiphany—a “credential sign”—that revealed His power as beyond anything they had imagined. And through the benefit of hindsight, you and I know His power to be beyond any imagining.¹⁰

⁴ It’s interesting that Mark reports the presence of other boats in this crossing. No further mention is made of them, so we don’t know whether they completed the crossing or not.

⁵ See Psalm 107:23-32.

⁶ There is bitter irony that these same disciples would go to sleep on Jesus in His hour of terror in Gethsemane. See also Job 11:18-19; Psalm 3:5, 4:8; Proverbs 3:23-26.

⁷ Matthew and Luke report that the disciples were shouting at Jesus, perhaps in fear, perhaps to be heard over the storm. We are not given any indication about how loudly Jesus spoke in His rebuke (Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25).

⁸ The Marcan account of the subduing of the wind and the sea bears the marks of the personal reminiscence of one who had experienced in the event. The precise notice of time, the unnecessary reference to the other boats, the vivid detail that the boat was already filling, the precise location of Jesus in the boat, the harshness of the rebuke implied in the disciples cry of indignation and terror, as well as their subsequent bewilderment, combined to suggest an eyewitness report.

⁹ See Job 26:12; Psalm 6:7, 46:1-3, 89:9, 93:3-4).

¹⁰ Awe still does not bring understanding. In place of the confession, the disciples can only raise the question that will concern Mark for the rest of the gospel, preparing the way for Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (8:29) and the Centurion’s confession at the cross (15:39) – “who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41).

Once they had crossed the now-calm lake, Jesus was accosted by a demon-possessed man who screamed at Him, “*Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!*”¹¹

Now when ordinary folk talked to Jesus, they addressed him as “Lord,” “Teacher,” “Son of David,” or “Master.” But those possessed by demons called him “the Holy One of God,” “the Son of God,” or the “Son of the Most High God.” While He walked among us, Jesus cloaked His eternal majesty and power in human flesh, but the spirits knew who He was. They knew that He had come to destroy their power over us, and that He would eventually destroy them. And they rightly feared Him.

In this section of his Gospel, Mark takes pains to point out that Jesus did not subdue an *average* storm but a “*furious squall*” that threatened to swamp the boat, delivering the disciples from terror in the Deep. Once across the lake, Jesus did not exorcise one who was *marginally* possessed but one who was victimized by a “*legion of demons*” (5:1-20). After that, Jesus healed a woman who had been bleeding from some illness for a dozen years; who was not just “*sick*” but who was “*walking death*” (5:24-34). Finally, Jesus did not simply cure a child with a *fever*, but raised her from the grip of *death* (5:35-43).

These encounters remind us that although Jesus *appeared* to be a Jewish carpenter—and at one level, that was certainly true—the deeper truth was that He was and is the Lord Christ, with power over disease, power over nature, and power over every spirit, whether good or evil. **And, given all this, we now need to ask ourselves, “So What?” *What difference does that really make?***

Mark’s message is clear: **Jesus is more than equal to any danger that may threaten human life**; and that’s a good thing, because storms such as these are a part of life from which none of us escapes. It has been said that there are really only three situations in life: we are always either in the midst of a storm, just coming out of a storm, or heading into a storm of which we’re not yet aware.

And the point of today’s Scripture about “subduing the storm” is not so much that Jesus will subdue the storms in our lives, but that He is Lord of Heaven and Earth, Lord of both Time and of Eternity, and He will bring us *through* life’s storms if He doesn’t choose to *prevent* them.

Anyone can be calm and courageous when there is neither storm nor danger. It’s not hard to have faith in God’s deliverance when we don’t sense any particular need to be delivered. But when pressures mount and dangers threaten to overwhelm us, our confidence and our faith can fade pretty quickly. **The Real Question has to do with how confident we are about Who is in our boat.**

Jesus never promised to protect us from life’s ordinary perils. His promise to us is that He will make us able to be faith-full *through* those perils, because He is Lord of both life and death. I’m sorry to have to be the one who tells you this, but all of us are going to die—even you—whether soon or late, and there will obviously be some means—storm or disease, accident or war—by which death comes.

¹¹ Matthew says there were two men, while Mark and Luke mention only one man, perhaps the man who did the talking (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). This is one example of the value of multiple gospel accounts that agree on essentials but sometimes differ in non-critical details. In a courtroom, for example, if all the witnesses agreed with each other in every detail of their stories, the most likely conclusion would be that they had colluded with each other. Where there is agreement on essentials but difference in details, there is more likelihood that the witnesses are telling the truth.

But even though this is true, we who follow Jesus do not live in fear. As Paul put it, “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; we are struck down, but not destroyed*” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). My friends, the only way to be Truly Safe in this universe is to be in personal relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Messiah, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God—and only God—is our refuge and our strength, both for this life and for the Life to Come (Psalm 46:1).

The message of the Bible is that “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” “*I am convinced,*” Paul wrote, “*that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love*” (Romans 8:31, 38).

The question for us, then, is whether we are really living as though these things are true. As you and I make our way through a terror-infested world, we do well to remember that God’s relationship to us and to our planet is not a series of sporadic and disconnected raids, but is rather a strategically coherent and persistent invasion that will end in complete conquest and in the complete renewal of the cosmos.

Later in His ministry, Jesus rescued His disciples from another storm on the Sea of Galilee by walking to them on the surface of the water. Peter asked for permission to walk on the water to Jesus, and all was well so long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus; but when Peter focused his gaze and his mind on the wind and the waves instead, he was overtaken by “terror in the Deep,” and he began to sink (Matthew 14:22-33). I suggest to you that this same principle is true for us as we sit here this morning.

You and I need to name the storms that threaten us, that cause us to be filled with “terror in the Deep,” and to remind ourselves that **this same Jesus is “in our boat.”** There are not a few who these days who are anxious about the new crises that every day seems to bring in our government . . . and Jesus is still Lord. There are those who are worried sick about immigrants and terrorists . . . and Jesus is still Lord.

There are those who are concerned about tomorrow night’s discussion about future directions for this congregation . . . and Jesus is still Lord. There are those who are concerned that we’re in another economic bubble and recession can’t be far away . . . and Jesus is still Lord. Many of us are anxious about what’s going to happen to healthcare in this country . . . and Jesus is still Lord. There are rumblings of war in North Korea and in the South China Sea . . . and Jesus is still Lord.

My friends, there is no end to the anxieties that can be marshalled against us . . . and Jesus is still Lord.

It’s not surprising that early Christians quickly claimed Jesus’ stilling of the storm as a symbol for the Church—a community that quickly found itself in danger from persecutions of many kinds, but was nevertheless safe and fearless, because the Master was on board. And if we think of the Church—and of our congregation—as such a ship, we might also remember the old saying that “*a ship is safe so long as it remains in port, tied up to the pier . . . but that’s not what ships are for.*”

And so, my friend, what would you do with what’s left of your life, if you were not afraid?

What would we do as a congregation if we were not afraid?

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
 When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
 When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
 Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess
 We have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
 Having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity
 And in our efforts to build a new earth,
 We have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.
 Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
 To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;
 Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
 We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes;
 And to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.¹²

ⁱ It was Thursday, June 1, 2000. As I had my devotional time that morning, I read the passage in Mark that I read earlier in this service, and my thoughts were arrested by the last verse: “*Who is this man, that even the wind and waves obey him?*” (Mark 4:41).

Later that day, I went to lunch with Gene Patton, our Building Manager, and Dr. Ron Oliver, the Chair of our Building & Grounds Committee, and in that conversation Gene told us that for several months he had noticed that the light at the top of the stair to the men’s baptistry robing area was on every morning when he opened the building. This light was on even when Gene knew he had been the last person out of the building the night before and had been the first person in that morning.

The campus was outfitted with motion detectors all over the place, and there was one by that door, so no one could have moved about that area during the night without the three of us having been awakened by ADT. When Gene mentioned this, I remembered that I had also noticed that light being on when I opened the campus on Sunday mornings, but I hadn’t thought much about it.

The story got more interesting. About a month prior to this conversation, Midge Denton and Virginia Mardis of our building staff had been cleaning and restocking the men’s and women’s robing areas. Midge had been working on the women’s side of the baptistry, and Virginia had been on the men’s side, where this light was.

Suddenly, Virginia gave a blood-curdling scream, and Midge dashed around the baptistry ledge to see what was happening. As Midge opened the door, she saw Virginia running toward her, and she could see a female figure in dark clothing standing behind Virginia. But then, suddenly, the figure vanished.

A week or two passed. Gene, Midge and Virginia were working in the large foyer area in front of the sanctuary when they simultaneously became aware of a presence behind them. When they turned around, the same figure was standing silently looking at them, dressed in a dark, hooded garment.

The figure turned and went up the skywalk to the balcony, with Gene close behind her. There are three exits from the top landing of the skywalk. When Gene reached the landing, only moments behind the hooded figure, she was gone . . . and all three doors were locked.

I puzzled over these events as I drove back to the church. Our family had joined the church some years before on the Sunday that the building was dedicated, and as the Church Administrator (among other things), I knew just about everything that had ever happened in that building. I’m not into ghosts,

¹² Attributed to Sir Francis Drake, 1577, but I have not been able to confirm this.

the paranormal, or psychic phenomena, but I had the strong impression that a spiritual confrontation was called for.

Not wanting to be thought crazy, I didn't tell anyone what I was about to do. I went over to the sanctuary and up to the baptistry area, which was about as remote as one could be from the office areas of the campus. I was more than a little afraid.

As I ascended the stairs, I remembered Paul's words about spiritual warfare: "*In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" (Ephesians 6:16-17). And I remembered John's guidelines for testing the spirits: "*This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world*" (1 John 4:2-3).

As I walked from room to room in the baptistry area, I said aloud (because that helped me to feel less afraid), "If there is a spirit here, and if you acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and if you have a message for me, I am ready to hear it, and I will obey you. But if not, then I banish you forever from this holy place by the power of the blood of Christ. You have no place here." I told no one what I had done.

The next morning, I asked Gene, "Was the light on this morning?" "No," he said. And it has never been on in that mysterious way again, nor has the shadowy figure been seen.

This was all awesome enough, but several weeks later I told Paul Fruits, a good friend in another state, about this experience. When I told Paul about having begun the day in meditation on "*Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him,*" he became very quiet. "What day was that?" he asked.

Because the luncheon appointment was on my calendar, I looked and told Paul that this had happened on June 1st. Paul took a deep breath and said, "In my devotions that same morning, God took me to that very verse, and the Spirit told me to pray earnestly for you, because you were in great danger."

I have "goose bumps" every time I tell this story. As it has been said, "The universe is a far stranger place than we have imagined. Indeed, it is a stranger place than we *can* imagine."