

Jesus Stirs and Stills Storms

Job 38:1-11, Mark 4:35-41 by Patty Friesen (June 20/21)

On my sabbatical in Grasslands National Park East, there was a May 8 blizzard of 10 centimetres of heavy wet snow. The day before was terrifically windy. I've never experienced such wind that took my breath away when I had to face into it to get back from a hike. I felt completely vulnerable in face of its power. When I got to the top of a bluff, it nearly blew me off. I had to crouch and crawl along the edge. I was tempted just to lift my arms and see if I would be carried away on the wind. I've never come so close to the sensation of flying. That terrifying wind blew and shook my trailer all night and in the morning, a complete white-out. Tenting campers were quickly packing up, throwing their gear into their vehicles and four wheel driving out of the campground through mud and snow. I thought it was safer to stay put and ride it out so I cranked up the propane heat and settled in for reading, drinking tea and watching Downton Abbey until the storm was over.

In today's storm, Mark 4 begins ominously with "On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." It was evening, dark was descending, and they were crossing to the "other side," of the Sea of Galilee, which represents their first passage to Gentile territory, a journey to the unknown, the foreign. (p. 195 Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man*). A great windstorm arose and the waves beat into the boat in the darkness. The poor disciples were scared to death with the swamped boat. Meanwhile Jesus was sleeping in the stern, comfy on a cushion! The disciples were angry, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

Storms have been a primal human fear from the beginning of time. Many ancient Near Eastern myths depict a great storm god triumphing over a sea monster in the raging waters of chaos. The Psalms and Book of Job describe the Hebrew God as the victor in combat with the sea monster and forces of chaos (cf. Ps 107:23-25). The mythological and poetic imagery of God triumphing over the raging waters makes clear the response to the disciples' question, "Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (v. 41). Jesus is no mere mortal. Jesus has *God's* power to still storms. Once again, the gospel

readers know that Jesus is the Beloved Child of God (1:1, 11, 24). But the disciples seem unable to decipher the significance of Jesus' identity.

When Jesus calms the storm, he speaks to the wind as though speaking to a demon in other healings (cf. 1:24); leading some interpreters to describe this story as an exorcism. Use of exorcism language provides a cosmological context for the story. Just as the sea monster in ancient mythology represents the powers of evil and chaos, so also the raging storm here in Mark's Gospel reflects all the powers evil. Jesus' exorcisms are evidence that he is the stronger one, able to break up Satan's kingdom (3:23-27).

Given the fact that at least four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their terror indicates the severity of the incident. The usual pattern for a sea miracle in scriptures involves a plea to the deity for help, but Mark's version lacks such a plea. Matthew's gospel, writing after Mark's gospel, changes the disciples' words to fit the anticipated pattern, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" in Matt. 8:25. In Mark, however, when the disciples awaken Jesus, they accuse him of being *indifferent* to their plight. The tone of this accusation also parallels the story of Jonah, where the captain charges the sleeping prophet with not caring about the fate of those on the ship (cf. Jonah 1:6). The captain then follows the normal pattern by asking Jonah to pray to his God. Mark permits the disciples' accusation to stand without any request for help.

The lack of a request for help raises the question of whether the disciples believe that Jesus *can* rescue them from the storm. The complete calm that follows Jesus' command to the sea and the wind leaves no doubt about his power to do so. Jesus then chides the disciples for their fear and lack of trust. Given the details that exhibit how severe the storm is, such fear is plausible. In order to transcend fear, the disciples must recognize that Jesus is not a mere mortal with unusual abilities to preach, heal, and exorcise. They must acknowledge that Jesus is the Beloved Child of God. This should reassure all of us that Jesus has the power to save us even in the worst circumstances.

As if to test the disciples on their trust, in Mark 6 Jesus sends them across the water to the other side again in the evening but this time by themselves as he goes up to the mountain to pray. Once again

they are caught in a storm all night and Jesus comes walking on the water towards them early in the morning. They think he is a ghost like they do at the resurrection but he speaks to them in the same resurrection words, saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And he gets in the boat with them and the wind ceases and they are astounded at him.

The question of Jesus’ identity appears repeatedly in Mark as a constant struggle. When the disciples show a lack of trust in God’s power working through Jesus and even accuse Jesus of not caring, we modern readers are challenged to examine our own trust. Doubts about God always emerge in times of crisis. Mark’s readers in the Roman empire were familiar with persecution and their own doubts. The fears exhibited by Jesus’ disciples encourage all of us to persist despite doubts about God’s saving presence. In the end, we will all discover the One whom wind and sea obey.

When the disciples say to Jesus, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” their panic distances them from trust and relationship with Jesus. How can he not care? He is in the boat with them! But Jesus does not react to their panic. He speaks first to the raging elements, the wind and sea. Then he asks his stunned disciples about their trust. They must trust him in storms because there are going to be many more storms coming up after his death and resurrection. (New Interpreter’s Commentary)

The other interesting interpretation from theologian Ched Meyers is that this stormy crossing to the other side of Gentile territory reflects the conflict of Jesus’ work with the Gentiles as Jesus includes them in the Jewish family of faith. “These harrowing sea stories dramatize the difficulties facing the early church as it tries to overcome the institutionalized social and religious divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Through this metaphorical stormy crossing, the community struggles to make their crossing to integration (as the storm always appears en route to the Gentile shore, never on the way back to the Jewish shore.) It is no wonder the disciples demonstrate reluctance; all the power of religious segregation oppose this journey. And no doubt the real-life social hostility to such a project of integration treated to drown the early church. But Mark insists that Jesus will rescue this project and silence the winds of opposition (p. 197).

We see this conflict of integrating Gentiles in the early church throughout the book of Acts. Time and time again, the Holy Spirit comes to the Gentiles to prove that God has accepted them to the disbelief and resistance of the Jewish followers of Christ. Whole religious ways of seeing the world have collided with other whole religious ways of seeing the world, namely that the “originally called” children of God with their sacrifices and circumcision, are the only chosen children of God. With this lens of resistance to Gentiles, the disciples’ accusation, “Teacher, don’t you care about *us*?” makes me wonder if it has a deeper cultural meaning. I wonder if the disciples could also be asking the question in a culturally religiously offended way, such as, “Why, Jesus, would you put *us* at such risk in these dangerous crossings to include Gentiles? Don’t you care about *us* first? Aren’t we the first ones, the chosen ones, the most important ones, the ones who sit at the right hand of God? Why risk everything for these late-coming interlopers?”

It almost sounds like **disciple fragility** and insecurity in their own position as God’s beloved children. If they were secure in their beloved begotten-ness, they wouldn’t be threatened by God’s adoption of other children. Jesus asks them if they trust him enough to not only save them from the danger of the sea but also to guide them into God’s hard work of an integrated church where all are chosen and all are important. Only their deep trust will help them overcome their fears of such dramatic social and religious change.

How does the scripture challenge us today? On all psychological, spiritual and social levels! We need to trust Jesus. These are stormy days of racial and religious reckoning in our society. These are stormy days of vaccination reckoning in our own families. Every one of my conversations this week had folks struggling with the vaccination in their extended families.

Professor Debra Dean Murphy writes on our current storm with masks and vaccinations but her reflection applies to all kinds of cultural and religious differences. She says,

“With regard to masks, my favourite comment comes from the movie the Princess Bride where Inigo Montoya prophesies on his mask-wearing as a swordsman, “I think everyone will wear them in the future.” But the mask jokes mask the pain of this fractious time and the truth that many damaged

relationships may never heal. Because it is not about the piece of cloth. It's about what has been unmasked in the wearing and not wearing - of masks. Whole ways of seeing the world have collided with other whole ways of seeing the world. It seems especially quaint now to imagine that a reasoned argument will convince a recalcitrant (who may be someone we love) of our way of seeing the world. But it has always been the case that we rarely talk someone out of a firmly held conviction, since the conviction is lodged deep in a narrative and moral framework we likely do not share, may find abhorrent, or cannot even recognize. We are exhausted and incredulous that we can make no inroads to understanding, no progress in persuading another of what seems intuitively, ridiculously obvious to us. We have been stuck here before on many other issues.

Our masks have unmasked us. These of us who wear them diligently as irritating and uncomfortable as they are, telegraph our trust in their medical efficacy and our conviction that we are responsible to and for one another. But the unmasked and the unvaccinated, tell a different story, one with plot points around individual freedom or global conspiracies or both. I am not persuaded by their story, nor are they moved by mine. We do not see the world the same way. Rational discourse gets us nowhere because the conflicts reside not in our heads but in our emotions, namely the emotion of fear.

Canadian Mennonite University professor Justin Neufeld, says our entrenched arguments of social good vs. individual freedom often are smoke screens for our deeper emotions of fear. Fear is the root emotion we all share in common. Fear of loss of freedom. Fear of catching the virus and fear of passing it on. We will get to the place of understanding each other if we can get vulnerable about our fears.

In this fraught, painful storm of pandemic and social tensions, we need to practice what the late congressman John Lewis called *public* love; a regard for the humanity of another that wants their well-being so much that we are willing - we are called - to confront our fears, and fragility, so that we might love to death all that robs us of love. This love is the antithesis of sentimentality. It is instead the risky, emotionally exhausting work of encounter, where failure is common and victories are small. It is a love that exposes fear but does so from a place of humility, since genuine encounter with another always

reveals my own weaknesses and fears. For this to happen, “the heart has got to open in a fundamental way,” as Leonard Cohen wrote. My neighbour’s heart and mine.” (p. 35 Our masks have unmasked us, Christian Century, Nov. 4/2020)

There will be lots of facing of fears and reconciliation work in these weeks and months as we ease our way out of restrictions with our families and face the shaming racism of our society. May we trust Jesus to lead us to the other side. Let us pray...May the Love which overcomes all differences, which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears, which reconciles all who are separated, be in us and among us now and always. Amen. #906 VT

Sing: Calm me Lord #680 VT