

THE COSMIC POWER & PERSONAL CARE OF JESUS

MARK 4:35-5:20

I am deathly afraid of bugs. Spiders, moths, bees, praying mantises, big, small, poisonous, friendly, it doesn't matter, I'm afraid of them. Some of you have had experiences with my fear of bugs. At least Pastor Mike knows about it from our trip to Kenya - I don't know why he was so surprised to find me screaming like one of my daughters, there was an 8 inch praying mantis in our bathroom... but of all the people who know about my fear - my wife suffers the most because of it. I mean, 1/2 the reason she got married was to have someone deal with the spiders in her life, and on multiple occasions I have utterly failed her. Early on in our marriage Eli actually refused to sleep in our bedroom because a spider I had intended to put to death suddenly demonstrated incredible vanishing powers. I don't know what I was supposed to do with the fact that this spider was a mutant superhero.

Well, every one of us deals with fear on some level don't we? Fear is one of those elements that seems common to the human condition. I was looking this week at some lists of the top ten human fears. And those lists included everything from common phobias like being afraid of snakes or fearing closed in spaces, to deeper level fears. Many people, maybe many of you, have deeply rooted fears of failure and insignificance, of loneliness, of natural disasters and tragedy, of pain and sickness and suffering, or the fundamental fear underneath almost every other, death.

And it's not surprising that we fear these things, because on some level each of these things involves hardship, and loss, and especially just uncertainty. We fear what is out of our control, what we can't manage, what we don't have power over. We don't want to experience that feeling of powerlessness - whether it's the loss of my reputation or the loss of my life - these things that we can't control are what keep us up at night, right? They're the source of our worry, and anxiety, and fear. They can hold us captive and eat away at our joy. We don't want to experience suffering, or sickness, or loss, or uncertainty, and yet these things on some level are a part of our lives, aren't they?

Well, on the pages of the Gospel of Mark this morning, Jesus steps right into the teeth of our fear. He confronts and deals with the heart of human fear head on. Mark is showing us in this text that Jesus wants to rescue us, not from every moment of suffering and hardship and loss we will ever face, but from the ability of these things to create fear in us. In these two stories that we read, Jesus enters into the places of our deepest fears and he shows us the two things he provides that we desperately need to be free from that fear: namely, his cosmic power over everything that is fearful, and his personal care for those held in the grip of fear.

So the way we're going to unpack this text this morning is going to be simply to look at these two stories. To enter into these narratives that Mark ties together. And by placing ourselves on this boat with Jesus in the midst of the storm, and among the tombs of the Gerasenes with Jesus, my prayer is that we

will see that this Jesus who acted 2000 years ago is the risen Christ who wants to act in us and on us in the same way today.

PRAY.

Well, grab your Bibles with me and open back up to the passage we read this morning beginning in Mark 4:35.

If you remember the progression of Mark's account, Jesus has been teaching beside the sea of Galilee, near his hometown of Nazareth, and the crowd that forms is so huge that Jesus has to get into a fishing boat and begin teaching from the boat, to the land so there is room for everyone. (Talk about being squeezed for space right?)

And at the tail end here of chapter 4, when Jesus wraps up his teaching, Mark transitions into this section of narrative by telling us that, "when evening had come (v. 35), [Jesus says] to [his disciples], "Let us go across to the other side."

And so Jesus and his disciples get into boats on the Sea of Galilee, and they begin heading south-east, toward the sea's eastern shore. "And [as they're going, as they are out in the middle of the sea, with the last rays of the day dipping below the western horizon to the backs], a great storm arose (v. 37), [and what was left of the red glow of the middle-eastern sunset, in a moment, is suddenly hidden by dark and foreboding thunderheads, and drops of rain begin to pelt the water, and the winds start to whip across the surface of what has been a calm sea], and the waves, Mark records, were breaking into the boat so that the boat was already filling."

How many of you have ever been in a storm at sea? (response) Well, I grew up on the coast of British Columbia, and actually spent three years of high school traveling by ferry every weekend back and forth from Vancouver Island to the mainland. And during those years there were a handful of times that the ferry should have been canceled and ran anyway. And as that ferry made the 14 mile crossing from Powell River to Comox, on those evenings, everyone was taking note of where the life rafts and flotation devices were. Babies were crying. Grown men were throwing up over the side of the ship. There were times you'd come up over a wave and think the ship was going to plunge bow first into the abyss. As the ship's two props would come up out of the water the boat would shake so bad you thought it was going to fall apart. Everyone was flipping out. And that was on a 400 ft. ship designed and constructed with modern engineering. Imagine yourself on a 25ft. 1st century, wooden fishing boat in the midst of this squall.

And remember, the disciples on this boat aren't just soft, urban hipsters with fisherman's beards wearing flannel and work boots who have never been out on the water before. These guys were raised on the sea. They had hands calloused from years hauling in nets, Forearms scarred with grooves where ropes had cut into their skin. This wasn't their first rodeo. These guys are dudes, and as they realize the gravity of their situation, that this might actually be the storm that takes them down to the bottom of this sea, they start to get pretty afraid.

And so fellas here this morning, my brothers sitting here, I don't want you to shut things off because we're talking about fear, and worry and anxiety, because the disciples are showing us pretty quick that fear isn't the exclusive territory of women and children. Brothers, when the wind and waves start kicking up in your life, let's not pretend that we manage just fine. Let's not put on this show that we're tougher than all that, that we've got our jobs, and our finances and our families and our own reputations so under control that nothing fazes us. We're as desperate for what Jesus offers us in this passage as anyone else.

So the disciples are in this desperate situation, and as they are frantically bailing water just trying to keep their craft afloat, they look at the back of the boat, and there is Jesus, asleep on the cushion. Cushion is sort of a mistranslation, this is actually the sandbag that served as ballast in the boat's stern, and Jesus is back there snoring on it.

And so, desperate and despairing, they wake Jesus up with this question (v. 38), "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Notice, their question is not - Jesus, how can you be sleeping at a time like this? Not - would you do something to help, Jesus? Not- use your miraculous power to save us Jesus! But this question - Don't you care that we're going to die? Don't we matter to you? Don't you care about us?

I'm sure that many of you, in the midst of your moments fear, and anxiety, and worry have asked the same question of Jesus. When it feels like you're being taken down into the abyss, when the storm is swirling around you, when you feel like you're dying from circumstances on the outside and emptiness on the inside, when you're bailing water just to stay afloat, and in the midst of it God feels aloof, he seems distant, he seems asleep in the stern - you wonder if he even cares at all?

When you're afraid that you won't be able to provide for your family because every month it seems like the ends just won't meet you wonder - does God even care? When your kids are not following Jesus and no matter how much you talk to them and love them and pray for them, things don't seem to change, and you're afraid they never will and you'll be the only one reading the Bible to your grandkids you wonder - where's God in this?

Well, Jesus wakes up, and he stands up, and he looks out over this storm, over this raging sea, like telling a rowdy and difficult child to sit down and be quiet, he stands over the wind and waves and with a firm word of rebuke, "Peace, be still," everything is restored to order. Everything becomes calm.

This is Jesus, at work, doing things only God can do.

In this moment, Jesus is putting on display the kind of cosmic authority and power over the universe that only the God who created it possesses. The wind and the sea are bowing to the words of the one who spoke them into existence. They obey only the one who made them and will one day remake them. In fact, in this miracle on the sea, as Jared Wilson says, "Jesus is bending creation back to order," and in doing so he's pointing forward that day when he will remake all of it in the New Creation. This is the kind of cosmic level power that only belongs to God.

But we're not going to fully grasp what Jesus is doing here unless we also understand what the sea represented. Throughout the story of Scripture, and in Hebrew culture and story, the waters are a symbol of chaos. The sea symbolized all that humanity had no control over, the reality of an untamable evil in the world, it represented everything humanity feared. It was what God fought against and would one day destroy. This is why in the book of Revelation we get this strange announcement in Ch. 21 that in the New Heavens and the New Earth, the sea will be no more - why? Because there will be no more mourning, or crying, or pain... death and all its effects, represented in the imagery of the sea, will be gone.

And so when Jesus tames the untamable sea, he's demonstrating his power and authority, his sovereignty over everything in this broken world that would cause us to fear. And what we should realize, when we see this power and authority displayed as Jesus wakes, is that even as he sleeps, Jesus hasn't stopped being sovereign. The disciples are as safe when he is asleep as when he's awake, they just don't know it.

Brothers and sisters, no matter what you are going through, and no matter how distant God feels to you, how aloof he seems from your circumstances, how asleep at the wheel you think he is, he remains the supremely sovereign and cosmically powerful master and commander of the sea. No matter what you think about what his intentions are, or what he's doing, or what he may *be*, one thing he is not is limited in his power to act in your life.

And so after showing his cosmic power, Jesus says to them, v. 40: "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" You've seen this before, Jesus says, maybe not on the scale that you just saw, but you've seen my power at work healing and delivering and doing the things only God can do. Do you still not get who I am?

And they don't, do they? Mark tells us as much in the next verse: "And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him."

Now a lot of sermons I've heard on this passage end there. They see this as a declaration of belief and a recognition by the disciples of Jesus' status as Son of God. But in Mark's writing, fear is always set in contrast with faith. And if we see the progression of the disciples, they move from fear in front of the force of the sea, to terror before the power of Jesus'. And so at the end of v. 41 there are several things that are still left unresolved. This is either like a troubling Cormac McCarthy book that leaves us utterly disappointed in the plot resolution, or Mark is doing something intentional.

I think it's the latter, and here's why:

If all we know of this Jesus, if the only characteristic we see of him is this cosmic, Creator of the universe level power, our fear just has another object. If power-alone is fundamental to who Jesus is, the only things we can do is tremble.

Church, this is why, as we care for one another, we need to know more than just the truth of the sovereignty of God. If someone is struggling and full of fear, if that's you, if you're wrestling with anxiety

and stress and fear, and *all* I do is come up and tell you that God is powerful and sovereign over your circumstances, what does that do for you?

First of all, don't do that - the first thing you do is let that person cry their heart out and listen to them, then you pray for them - but the answer is - it does nothing because you've still left unanswered the same two questions that haven't been answered for us by the end of Mark 4.

It's crucial to know the cosmic power of Jesus, because if he doesn't have power over the things we fear, nothing else he says matters, but if we're going to truly move from fear into faith we're going to need an answer to these two questions the disciples ask - does this cosmically powerful Jesus actually care, and besides his identity as the powerful-sovereign, who is he? This is why Mark pairs the end of Chapter 4 with the beginning of Chapter 5. In fact, the next three stories that play out in Chapter 5 answer these two questions, but we're only going to look at the first this morning.

OK, so are you tracking here? We've seen the Jesus has the power and authority to deal with everything that underlies our fear, with all that makes us anxious, with all the things in life that are out of our control, but we're still left with these two questions - does he care? and who is he, really (beyond just manifested power)? As Jesus arrives on the other side of the Sea, these questions begin to get answered.

Chapter 5, verse 1. "They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit."

As this second story opens, we might be tempted to think Jesus somehow took the wrong bus, and ended up on the wrong side of town. The Gerasenes were a region within the Decapolis, a Gentile region on the east of the Jordan River, and it wasn't an area that a good Jewish boy went to for the day. Because everything about it was unclean. For a Jew, ritual purity was a crucial mark of being part of God's people, and to come into contact with what was considered unclean, would mean separation from God and from God's community. And if you go back to the Levitical laws laying out purity and impurity, you'll find that at the source of almost all impurity, whether it was what you touched or where in the presence of, was an association with death.

And everything about this situation is saturated with the stench of death. Jesus arrives in this unclean region, and immediately out of the tombs, out of the place of the dead, comes a man with an unclean spirit. "He lived among the tombs," Mark says (v. 3). "And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones."

This man is living under the shadow of death. Just a moment ago, on the sea, Jesus encountered this uncontrollable cosmic storm threatening the lives of the disciples, but here in the Gerasenes something different happens, he comes face to face with something much more personal, there's another type of storm - equally unmanageable and just as threatening - going on internally in this individual.

Jesus doesn't do anything by accident. Jesus has come here, to this side of the sea, by intention. This is staggering, because what we find out about Jesus, and what we see about him throughout Mark's gospel actually, is that Jesus intentionally moves toward messy, unclean places and messy, unclean circumstances, in order to encounter and care for messy and unclean people. People whose situations and circumstances are dominating them, people living in the grip of fear, people living under the shadow of death, are the exact people Jesus loves to come near to.

You see, it's one thing for me to know that Jesus has power and authority *over* my situation and circumstances, it's completely another thing to know his care and compassion and presence *in* my situation and circumstances.

Church, whatever you walked in the door this morning struggling with. Whatever your fears and anxieties and worries, whatever is spinning out of control for you, wherever you feel the shadow of death creeping across the landscape of your life - Jesus isn't turning the boat around and heading back home. Jesus knows your deepest fears and the places of greatest distrust in you. He's not repelled or repulsed by your hardships, he's not plugging his nose at the stench of death in your life, he's not concerned about dirtying his hands in the muck of your heart. In fact, it's your very desperation in the midst of those circumstances that attracts him to come near.

So back to the disciples' first question: "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?"

v. 6: "And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?'" (The demons always recognize him, don't they. The problem is they see him, but won't submit to him.) "I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' For he was saying, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' And Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion for we are many.'

Just a note as we read - in our western, rationalistic, post-enlightenment, modernistic minds we don't have a lot of categories for what's going on here. We have categories for individual sin, and we have boxes for the results of the curse, the brokenness of the world, but we don't have a lot of space for a personal evil that exists in the world with the sole intention of opposing God and oppressing humanity. But Satan and his demons are a very real presence in this world. Now that doesn't mean we see a demon behind every rock and tree, but we need to have categories for their presence and activity. I can't fully explain all that's going on here, but I want us to recognize that there is more at work in the world than just individual human sin. OK, I'm not going to say this morning - but that's for free.

v. 10 - And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.

v. 14 - The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed in his right mind, and they were afraid.

Do you see the parallel here? This man's personal storm has been stilled. All that was unmanageable and uncontrollable and unbindable in him has been put back in order. The cosmic power Jesus puts on display on the sea as he stands over the wind and the waves, is now put into action, in a much more personal way in this man's life.

But look again at where we're left - more fear right? This time its the townspeople. All they see is Jesus cosmic power - and their dead pigs - and they're afraid. They're not sure what to make of this Jesus. In fact, they want him to get out of there as quickly as possible. But before he does, Jesus has this incredibly personal moment with the man he's just healed.

v. 18 - "As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And [Jesus] did not permit him but said to him, 'Go home to your friends and tell them how much *the Lord* has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much *Jesus* had done for him, and everyone marveled."

Do you remember the two questions we were left with at the end of Chapter 4? Does Jesus care? and Who is this Jesus? I mean, beyond just powerful, who is he really? In this encounter with the demoniac we see that first question answered, but the second is still vague. We're left with people still afraid, still not getting it, still not responding to Jesus in faith. But in a subtle way, Mark begins to point us toward the answer to that question in this summary sentence in v. 20.

Look at Jesus' exhortation to this man - "Go and tell your friends what?" How much the Lord has done for you. And what does Mark say he did? He went and proclaimed how much Jesus had done for him. Mark, and Jesus I think, are drawing a parallel here between the Lord and Jesus. What's significant about that?

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the name "The Lord" is always used to translate the main name God uses of himself - Yahweh. It's why whenever you see a capitalized L-O-R-D in your English bibles, the Hebrew that stands behind it is God's self-revealed name, the most personal title he uses - Yahweh. This is the name God revealed to Moses in Exodus when he declared his name as "I AM". And what is at the heart of that title? It's that he is "the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And so Mark is saying here that this Jesus who commands the seas, and who drives out demons *is* Yahweh, he is the LORD.

And this changes everything about how we see this Jesus, because what is essential to Yahweh is this incredible joining of cosmic power with personal care. He is not just a God of raw power who stands at a distance from his creation, he is the God who reveals himself and comes near.

If Mark is equating Jesus with Yahweh, it means that this Jesus is the shepherd of Psalm 23 who leads us beside still waters. Who because he comes near, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for he is with us, his rod and his staff comfort us.

It means this Jesus whose voice commanded the wind and waves and the demons is the glorious Lord of Ps. 29, whose voice is over the waters. whose glory thunders, whose voice is full of majesty. and breaks the cedars. Whose voice flashes forth flames of fire and shakes the wilderness. Whose voice makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

It means this Jesus is the Lord of Is. 43 who created you and formed you and who says this (Is. 43:1) "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

It means this Jesus is the rescuing Lord of Psalm 107. And why don't you turn there with me. Ps. 107:23 - look at the parallels here (Ps. 107:23-32)

There one other boat story that Mark tells and it's actually meant to bookend this section of the gospel, and it's in Ch. 6. Jesus' disciples are in a boat again in the evening, just like this story, but Jesus isn't there with them. Then suddenly in the middle of the night, as a storm is kicking up, Jesus shows up walking toward them on the sea. And just like in Ch. 4 here, they are terrified, because they don't know who this is. But here's what Jesus says to them (Mk. 6:50): "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." What Jesus literally says is this, and we don't translate it in this way in English because it sounds awkward, but he says this: "Take heart, I AM. Do not be afraid." Who is this who commands the winds and the sea? He is the I AM, do not be afraid.

Church, what we need to rescue us from our fear is someone powerful enough to conquer everything we're afraid of, and personal enough to care and come near. And if Jesus is Yahweh incarnate, God made flesh, he is the only one who is both of these things.

And we can know that because this Lord, Yahweh, though we rebelled against him, though because of our sin we found ourselves bound in fear and ultimately bound by death, didn't sit aloof in heaven. he didn't leave us imprisoned by our own sin and captive by death and every fear that stems from it. In Jesus he came near. He became one of us and subjected himself to the reality of chaos we face.

And at the cross, through his own death, Jesus ultimately won victory over all that would make us afraid. The voice that resounded over the waters and over the demons, on the cross breathed its last for our redemption.

Heb. 2 says this: "...he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

Will you stop just bailing water in the midst of whatever storm you're facing, whatever fear is gripping you this morning, and put your trust in this Jesus of cosmic power and personal care?