

The Beginning of the Good News
A Study of the Gospel of Mark
The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Fall 2015

Taming Chaos 4:35-41; 6:45-52

Some things to think about...

Being in the boat in the midst of a storm

In the earliest Christian artwork discovered in the catacombs beneath Rome, and in early Christian iconography, a boat frequently signified the church tossed on the seas of persecution or doubt, but nevertheless guided to safety by the Lord. The image may derive from the Old Testament story about the deliverance of Noah and his family aboard the ark during the great flood and/or the basket of reeds that saves the infant Moses from drowning in the Nile.

In the stories from today's readings the boat may also represent Mark's own church community in the decades after the death of Jesus, experiencing doubt and perplexity in the midst of brutal persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire and/or opposition from Jewish or Christian religious leaders.

Going across "to the other side"

In both of today's stories, Jesus directs his disciples to get in the boat and go to "the other side" (4:35; 6:45). Jesus directs his disciples to leave their more comfortable homes in mostly Jewish Galilee to enter Gentile territory. Both destinations - "the country of the Gerasenes" (5:1) and Bethsaida (6:45) - are east of the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee in the Roman province of Gaulinitis (the modern description "Golan Heights" probably derives from this early Roman provincial name). This heavily Gentile region is occupied and more tightly controlled by the military Legions posted on the Roman Empire's easternmost boundary. Jesus' direction to go "to the other side" creates a potentially threatening journey for faithful Jews from Galilee to undertake.

The same might be said about Mark and his early church community a few decades later. Remember that the earliest disciples of Jesus (Peter, James, John, etc.) were faithful Jews and insisted that Gentile followers of the Jewish Messiah had to become Jewish by committing to follow the Jewish Law (Torah). As we also know from Paul's letters (which almost certainly pre-date by two decades the written form of Mark's Gospel), there were other leaders in the early church (like Paul himself) who were making room for Gentiles to become followers of Jesus without having to commit to follow the Torah. This mission to take a Torah-free gospel to the Gentile world was highly controversial and created serious conflict in early Christianity (see, for example, Galatians 1:1-2:21). If, as we have hypothesized in the Introduction to this course, Mark's community included Gentiles and, possibly, missionaries to the Gentile world, this crossing over "to the other side" (to take a Law-free gospel to Gentiles) would have also been a "stormy" undertaking.

Attending to the Word...

As you read both stories, notice that it is Jesus who instructs his disciples to make these potentially hazardous crossings into hostile territory. Is this significant? Why, or why not?

Describe the demeanor of Jesus in each story. Does Jesus demonstrate anxiety about crossing over “to the other side”? What might this suggest?

Fear would seem to be a natural human response to such a perilous storm on the sea. Why do you think Jesus challenges the disciples for their lack of faith in the first story?

In the second story the disciples are “straining at the oars against an adverse wind,” but their *terror* and fear only seem to arise *when they see Jesus walking on the water*. Does their terror and fear in this story differ from their fear in the first story? If so, how?

In the second story, when does the adverse wind abate? What might Mark be suggesting about the source of the “wind”? What might this suggest about the presence of Jesus?

Making the Word your own...

Can you tell a story about a time when Jesus directed you to “cross over to the other side” in your own life? Did the “crossing” involve opposition or “stormy” conditions? Were you fearful? Why, or why not?

Can you tell a story about a time when Jesus directed your congregation to “cross over to the other side” in its common life? Did the “crossing” involve opposition or “stormy” conditions? Were there people in your congregation who were fearful? Why, or why not? Did the fear abate? Why, or why not?

In the second story, the disciples’ terror and fear seem to arise when they see Jesus acting in a miraculous way (walking on water). Can you tell a story about a recent time when you or your congregation became anxious or fearful when something extraordinarily *good* was happening in your life? What does this have to do with faith? How did you or your congregation respond?

Can you tell a story about a time when you or your congregation set out in a new direction or on a new mission, encountered challenges and difficulties along the way, and only then realized that you had forgotten to include Jesus as a partner in undertaking this new direction or mission? What steps did you take to invite Jesus “into the boat” with you? What was the result?

Briefly describe a time in your own life, or that of your congregation, when Jesus appeared in the midst of a particularly difficult and challenging time of change. What happened?