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Questions from the Storm

ALEX ROBINSON

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4.35–41 RSV)

Do you hear the *questions* in this passage? Let's listen to them again; hear them as *invitations* into this stormy story: "Don't you care?" "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" "Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?" "Pay close attention to the questions in the text of Mark," one commentator says. "When there's a question that's not answered in the narrative, you know that the question is being forwarded to you. If no one in the story answers the question, then that's one the narrator is giving to the audience."¹ None of the questions in this story are answered; they are all "forwarded" along to us, the readers and hearers.

These questions not only invite us into the story, they reveal a lot about who the disciples think Jesus is before and after the storm, how the disciples' understanding of Jesus is changing. During the course of this story, the disciples see Jesus, their rabbi, the one whose teaching had "authority," exercise a power and authority that, up until then, they would have attributed to God alone. I think that these questions, and this story, can help shape our own understanding of who Jesus is and what he calls us to do and to be in the world today. So, let's take a closer look.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side' (Mark 4.35). Jesus spent that entire day teaching both the crowd and his disciples (not just the Twelve, but others who were close to him, see Mark 4.10). Jesus teaches from a boat that was pushed out a little ways from the shore while people sat in front of him on a hillside, creating a natural amphitheater for his teaching. When evening comes, Jesus suggests that he and the Twelve and the other disciples with him travel across the Sea of Galilee. I wonder why Jesus waited until evening to suggest this trip. A storm at sea is bad, but a storm at sea at *night*, that's even worse.

"And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him" (Mark 4.36). Note that, though the trip was Jesus' idea, presumably the fishermen take charge at this point and *take him with them* in the boat. Jesus goes "just as he was." This probably refers back to the fact

1. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 37.

that he was already in the boat, unless it means that he didn't have time to run back to Capernaum and grab his utility belt, complete with Galilean Storm Repellent. All joking aside, "as he was" could also remind us that Jesus is probably tired after a long day of teaching. So they take him "as he was," and there are other boats with them (this detail is left out by Matthew and Luke). Who is in the other boats? Probably Jesus' close followers, who were with him in addition to the Twelve (again, see Mark 4.10).

Everything changes in verse 37. ". . . a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling." Storms can blow in very quickly on the Sea of Galilee. Their boat is tossed around by the waves and it begins to fill with water. It's sinking fast and the disciples begin to fear for their lives. In the ancient world, the sea represented chaos and evil. At creation, the earth is said to be formless and void, and darkness is over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God is "hovering over the waters" (Gen 1.1–2). What does God do? God brings light and creates order in this darkness and chaos. Because of this association of the sea with chaos, fear existed concerning it: "Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me" (Ps 69.14–15). This same concern can be heard in the disciples' voices in the next verse.

"But he [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?'" (Mark 4.38). Jesus is asleep—and on a pillow, no less. He was probably on the raised, rear afterdeck (which explains why water apparently isn't rising around him, yet). Contrast this image, of Jesus sleeping peacefully, with the image of the raging storm. He's not bothered by the storm in the least! Jesus is sawing logs. The sea is raging. The boat is tossed about. The disciples are gripped with terror, and one of them snaps. This is too much for the poor disciple to take. Can you imagine? Perhaps the disciples are bailing water frantically. The storm comes up so fast, maybe they lost track of what Jesus was doing: "Uh, Jesus, we're going to need you to grab a bucket and help . . ." They realize Jesus is still asleep. "Well, at least you're comfortable (on your pillow) WHILE OUR BOAT IS SINKING! Don't you care if we die?!" Put yourself in the disciples' situation. How would you respond? Be honest. It was at Jesus' command that they had gotten into the boat in the first place. Now, the ship is nearly swamped with water from the wind and the waves, and Jesus is asleep. Death is imminent and Jesus is *sleeping?! This brings us to the first question in the story: "Don't you care?" Have you ever asked this of God?*

When my son Will was born, things didn't go "according to plan." My wife was upset. I was on my knees, and this question crossed my mind a couple of times when nothing seemed to change. I think many of us have felt like this. What about in light of the recent earthquake in Haiti, or a tsunami in the Pacific, or hurricanes along the Gulf Coast? "Don't you care?" We pray, but *sometimes* we wonder why we do so, when nothing changes or things change for the worse.

"Don't you care?" We can hear this question on two different levels. We could hear it, I suppose, as the disciples asking the very Son of God if he cares. After all, Mark has let us, the reader, in on the "secret" of who Jesus is since the beginning of the Gospel. But, on another level, the level of the story itself, Jesus' true nature is revealed little by little, and the disciples don't yet understand that Jesus is the Son of God. On this level, they're probably just trying to get Jesus to grab a bucket and do his part. They're in for a big surprise.

Before we move on, though, I need to address the question of why Jesus is sleeping. How could he be so calm when everything around them was chaos? Is he uncaring? Biblically, it represents his sovereignty, his divine nature and his trust in the Father. Psalm 4.8 says, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."

But what does Jesus do when asked if he cares? "*And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm*" (Mark 4.39). Imagine being in one of the other boats (you haven't forgotten them, have you?) and witnessing the scene during this storm at night on the Sea of Galilee as the strobe light lightning flashes, illuminating different scenes, one at a time. Frantic disciples bail water out of their boat. A figure lies huddled and asleep at the stern. One of

the men, a disciple, stands over this figure. This disciple is shouting, but the sound of thunder and waves breaking against the side of the boat obscure what he says. The man who was asleep has now risen, and he stands at his full height. It is Jesus, but his face is stern and his gaze is fixed. "Peace. Be still!" Jesus stands and rebukes the wind and sea like an unruly child. Earlier he had told a demon to be silenced using a very similar phrase (remember that the sea represents evil and chaos).

What does this action reveal about Jesus? Jesus' words and actions echo the words of Psalm 107: ". . . they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed . . . Let them give thanks to the LORD [Yahweh] for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men" (Ps 107.28–29, 31). Or listen to the words of yet another Psalm: "O Lord God of Heaven's Armies . . . You rule the oceans. You subdue their storm-tossed waves" (Ps 89.8–9). To the disciples' understanding, Yahweh, the Creator, the one true God, the God who had revealed himself to Israel through the Law and the Prophets, had the power and authority to calm the raging sea. This act shows, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus has the same divine power as Yahweh, to still the storm to a whisper and hush the waves. Jesus accomplishes what *only God could do*.

Imagine the scene: The dark clouds roll back; the waves die, and the wind ceases. All is now quiet. The disciples are standing there; jaws dropped, clothes soaked, beards dripping, sandals soggy. And then Jesus hits them with this:

" . . . *Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?*" (Mark 4.40). The questions hang there. This is the second set of questions in this passage. In Mark, there's a connection between fear and faith. Faith isn't placed opposite unbelief; it is placed opposite of fear. Faith equals trust. Jesus is saying, "Don't you have any trust that you're going to be cared for? [I've been] telling you that God has come near, that the [reign and rule] of God is breaking in, and you're worried about the wind?"²

Later, Jesus and the disciples would face a different type of storm that would result in an even greater display of the power of God: the storm of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. If they did not trust in God, or they trusted their own power or ability, they could never weather the storm of doubt and confusion that occurred as Jesus was arrested and put to death on a cross and lay in a tomb for three days. Three days, before the "sleeping" Christ rose and calmed the chaos that scattered his disciples at his arrest and stilled the evil forces that had been arrayed against him. And so, you can understand why Jesus might ask them, after he calms this storm on the Sea of Galilee, why they're so afraid and if they still have no faith. This lack of trust won't do. As the disciples stand in their partially swamped, formerly storm-tossed boat on the Sea of Galilee, maybe Jesus is preparing them for what is to come. And maybe this act of salvation on the sea foreshadows the ultimate act of salvation that is to come on the cross. We've learned so much about Jesus through this storm, but it's not even close to what we learn about him in the storm that's coming. "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

"*And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'*" (Mark 4.41). They are awestruck by the *otherness* of the One who alone can subdue the storm-tossed waves. Their understanding of Jesus is beginning to change. "Who is this?" This is the final question in this story. This question begs for a response from the reader or hearer of this story. We've answered this question, in some respects, as we've gone along through the passage, especially in verse 39. But, in other respects, we have a long time left to answer this question, a long journey yet, just like the disciples who have to go through the crucifixion and resurrection experience before they can begin to answer this question. "Who is this?" It's not until Mark 15 that the complete answer to this question is spoken. Jesus' full identity is revealed at the foot of the cross.

In the end, the questions from the storm offer us an opportunity for self-examination and reflection, to account for our own "lack of faith" in view of the storms that threaten our lives. These questions invite us

2. Ibid.

to continue the journey of discipleship toward a deeper and more profound trust in God, and they remind us that it is in the storms of life (in our trials) that our trust in God is put to the test. At the same time, this story assures us that Jesus, who can command the wind and the waves of Galilee, can command the wind and waves of our own lives. “Peace! Be still,” he says, even when it appears that we’re about to be overwhelmed. And we’re left asking, “Who is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?”

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