

Power Over Sea and Spirits

Mark 4:35-5:20

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One summer when I was in college I worked as a youth director for some churches in southeast Kansas. One evening we went to a cook-out at someone's farm. On that prairie you can see a storm coming for miles. I'd never seen anything quite like the storm that blew in that evening. It was interesting—and a little frightening—to stand right at the edge of a storm. Skies were clear to one side and then there was a line of clouds, strange-colored and churning, moving toward us. It was an awesome and powerful display. The party broke up and we all got home before the worst of the storm hit.

We've all seen and felt the power and fury of storms. Almost every year we see on the news what the latest hurricane has done to cities on the coast. Often we've also seen human violence storm across various places. And what about the "storm" of COVID we've endured for a year?

In the stories we've read from Mark, Jesus and his disciples felt first-hand the power of a violent storm at sea. And they met a man who was full of violence because a storm of evil was inside him. They confronted a "stormy sea and a stormy man" (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. The Biblical Journey*).

In both cases the gospel shows us the power and authority of Jesus. In fact, this whole section (4:35-5:43) shows Jesus' power over nature, over demons, over disease, and over death. Underlying this is an emphasis on Jesus' victory over evil in all its forms and forces. These were actual events that reveal who Jesus was and *is*. He still has the power and authority he demonstrated then. And he's present now in the Holy Spirit and in the word that tells us about him.

Today, we're considering Jesus' power over sea and spirits. Next week we'll see a display of Jesus' power over disease and death.

One thing to remember from this is that Jesus is Lord even in—maybe especially in—life's storms. When devastating illness or loss or grief or pain or—you name the storm in your life—comes to us or people we love, Jesus

is with us. He is calm, powerful, in charge. He speaks peace and brings deliverance.

Remember, Jesus has been sitting in a boat at the lakeshore teaching (4:1). At the end of the day he's worn out and wants to get away with his disciples to the other side of the lake. So they get in the boat with him and head across the water.

While they're on the lake, a furious storm blows in. Lake Galilee is in a basin surrounded by mountains and it's subject to sudden storms. Cool air from the Mediterranean rushes in through narrow mountain passes and clashes with hot, humid air over the lake.

This storm is especially severe. Mark calls it a "storm of great wind." Waves are crashing over the boat, threatening to swamp it. And Jesus is asleep in the boat's stern. The disciples wake him, screaming, "Master! Don't you care if we drown?"

Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind, and silences the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" The word in Greek means "Be muzzled!" That gives the idea of the sea as a kind of animal or perhaps a demonic force that Jesus subdues. The storm stopped. The wind and waves died down. There was a "great calm."

The Jews often saw the sea as a symbol of chaos and evil. In the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, God is depicted as overcoming the chaotic ocean that's sometimes pictured as a sea monster. God's control of the waters of the Red Sea when he delivered Israel out of Egypt is celebrated throughout the OT.

In this scene in the Gospel, Jesus is acting like God. He's doing the kinds of things God does. He has power over nature, and he overcomes evil that's symbolized by the raging sea.

In this brief moment, the kingdom of God—which is mostly in hidden form in Jesus' ministry—shines out in open display. Jesus' true nature—which was a secret to most people—is revealed.

The early Christians who first read Mark's Gospel would've seen a special meaning for their situation. For them, the boat was a symbol of the church. And a storm of persecution was battering them at the time. They may well have wondered, "Is the church going to make it? Will we survive?"

And this story held the assurance that the Lord of the church has power to bring evil into submission and that he was with them in their storm.

And he is with us. The church will make it, the church will prevail as long as the Lord of sea and storm is in the boat with us.

We can experience this reality in our own lives as well. In your storms, remember who Jesus is and that he is with you.

Jim Buskirk's dad was a pastor who entered the ministry later in life. He went back to school—high school. He was a high school student at the same time he was the Methodist pastor in town. Not only was Jim's dad a high school student while Jim was in grade school, but a lot of boys in Jim's class thought that preachers' kids were sissies. Jim says he felt called to correct that misunderstanding. He got into a lot of fights. One day, a gang of boys came after him. With his back to a tree, he fought them as best he could, but there were just too many of them. Then he saw his father wade into the crowd and pull those boys off one at a time. He set them down and they froze. Then he came and stood by Jim and said, "You can take him one at a time—and I'll be here."

Can you get an image of your heavenly Father walking into your situation, pulling your attackers off you, and promising to be with you so you can take them on?

In the quiet following the storm on Galilee, Jesus says to his disciples, "Why are you so cowardly? Do you still have no faith?" The disciples now have "great fear." With eyes open wide and jaws dropping, they look at each other and ask, "*Who is this?* Even the wind and the waves obey him." They still haven't caught on to Jesus' true significance. And Mark intends to emphasize that question: "Who is this?"

The story continues. After crossing the lake, they arrive in the region of the Gerasenes. This is a Gentile area on the east side of Lake Galilee. No sooner do they get to shore than they hear a blood-curdling cry and see a man come running toward them from the graveyard. He's half-naked, has chains hanging from his wrists and ankles, he's bleeding and crying out and he has a wild look in his eyes.

I like how songwriters retell Bible stories and help us enter into them. Bob Bennett wrote and recorded a song about this event called "Man of the Tombs." I'm going to weave his words into our look at this account.

Man of the tombs, he lives in a place where no one goes
And he tears at himself and lives with a pain that no one knows
He counts himself dead among the living
He knows no mercy and no forgiving
Deep in the night he's driven to cry out loud
Can you hear him cry out loud?

Man of the tombs, possessed by an unseen enemy
He breaks every chain
And mistakes his freedom for being free
Shame and shamelessness equally there
Like a random toss of a coin in the air
Man of the tombs, he's driven to cry out loud

Underneath this thing that I've become
A fading memory of flesh and blood
I curse the womb and bless the grave
I've lost my heart, I cannot be saved
Like those who fear me, I'm afraid
Like those I've hurt, I can feel pain
Naked now before my sin
And these stones that cut against my skin
Some try to touch me but no one can
For man of the tombs I am

Seeing this man running out of the graveyard and screaming, the disciples may have looked at each other and said, "Let's get back in the boat." But Jesus stands his ground. This man is possessed, demonized, he's as storm-tossed by demons as the disciples' boat had been on the lake. And he comes running up to Jesus. He falls on his knees in front of Jesus

and shouts at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

Here's the answer to the disciples' earlier question "Who is Jesus?" He is Son of the Most High God. It's ironic that the demons recognized Jesus before his own disciples did.

The description of the man and his condition, his confrontation with Jesus, and the destruction of the pigs are intended to show what a powerful force Jesus was dealing with. A Roman legion had 6,000 soldiers. So Jesus was confronting a tremendous concentration or infestation of evil power. The use of the word *Legion* here makes the scene appear as a battle between the powers of evil and Jesus, who comes in the name of God's kingdom.

The man's described as fully captive to the evil powers and beyond human help. He's unclean because he's a gentile and because of his contact with the tombs. He's like a dead man. He's self-destructive and in torment. He's pulled in a thousand directions. This is a powerful picture of how the New Testament describes any person apart from Christ. Without Jesus we're all spiritually dead; we're in bondage to evil.

But all of this also serves to highlight the power of Jesus. He demonstrates his authority over the demons. He delivers and heals the man. What a Savior! He still has power to overcome sin and deliver us from whatever bondage we're in. Since his cross and resurrection, that power to overcome and deliver and heal is loose in the world. It's available to everyone.

Down at the shoreline two sets of footprints meet
One voice is screaming, other voice begins to speak
In only a moment and only a word
The evil departs like a thundering herd
And man of the tombs he hears this cry out loud

Underneath this thing that you've become
I see a man of flesh and blood
I give you life beyond the grave

I heal your heart, I come to save
No need to fear, be not afraid
This Man of Sorrows knows your pain
I come to take away your sin
And bear its marks upon my skin
When no one can touch you, still I can
For Son of God I am

A crowd from the nearby town comes to see what's happened. The formerly demon-possessed man, now clothed and in his right mind, is a powerful testimony that something tremendous has happened. But all the people seem to care about is the loss of some property. They see only the dead pigs floating on the lake. They don't see the living miracle right in front of them. And they certainly don't see the significance of Jesus shown in the miracle. Like the disciples earlier, they're afraid. They can't handle someone with that kind of power among them.

The people begin to beg Jesus to go away. As he turns to leave, the man of the tombs asks, begs to go with him. Jesus instead sends him back home and says, "Tell your family how much *the Lord* has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went throughout that whole region, telling how much *Jesus* had done for him. Note the identification of Jesus as Lord. Mark is reminding us again who Jesus is.

Dressed now and seated
Clean in spirit and healthy of mind
Man of the tombs, he begs to follow but must stay behind
He'll return to his family with stories to tell
Of mercy and madness of heaven and hell
Man of the tombs, soon he will cry out loud:

Underneath this thing that I once was
Now I'm a man of flesh and blood
I have a life beyond the grave
I found my heart, I can now be saved

No need to fear, I am not afraid
This Man of Sorrows took my pain
He comes to take away our sin
And bear its marks upon his skin
I'm telling you this story because
Man of the tombs I was

(Bob Bennett, 1989 Matters Of The Heart Music, from the album *Lord of the Past*; http://lyrics.christiansunite.com/lyrics_1624_14.shtml)

What has Jesus done for you? What storms has he stilled in your life? What evil has he overcome in you? What bondage has he freed you from? We each have a story to tell about what Jesus means to us and what he's done in our lives. And no one can tell your story like you can. People are waiting to hear it and to hear what Jesus can do for them. Will we tell them?

If you don't feel like you have a story to tell about Jesus, maybe you need to experience Jesus as the Lord who overcomes and the Savior who liberates. Look to him in faith. Open your heart to him. Receive him into your life with all of his love and power.