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## The Gospel of Mark

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SSNT 418: The Gospel of Mark  
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The passage chosen for this exegesis paper is a short narrative in Mark's gospel 4: 35-41 entitled "The Calming of the Storm at Sea." This story, though concise and short, illustrates one of the most powerful and extraordinary miracles of Jesus. This scene follows four parables by Jesus in Mark's gospel and is followed by four miracles. The reader notices that the parable of the mustard seed preceding the miracle of the storm at sea is connected as they take place on the same day. The setting for the boat story is later that same day, "On that day as evening drew near" in 4:35 and is tied to the setting of 4:12. Robert H. Stein says, "The placement of this miracle story after Jesus's teaching in parables should not surprise the reader for word and deed go hand in hand in Mark's description of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> One reads that Jesus "explained everything in private" to his disciples. Even as they are instructed by Jesus as to his identity and mission, the miracle at sea shows that, in a moment of danger, their fear is an expression of their inability to truly grasp who Jesus is and what his kingdom is all about. The miracle stories continue to 6:45-52 with Jesus walking on the water as does the unfolding of Jesus' identity. As Jesus commands the water, "Quiet! Be still," one is reminded of similar words of Jesus in curing the demoniac in the beginning of Mark's gospel as persons are "amazed" saying in Mark 1: 27, "What is this?" In Mark 4: 41, the disciples exclaim. "Who is this?"<sup>2</sup> Jesus' fame is increasing throughout Galilee and the miracle of the storm at sea is, indeed, a most compelling one as it shows Jesus' authority, even over nature, in his later Galilean ministry. The sea is featured as a central setting in this story and continues through Mark 8. In the disciples' experience, they learn a profound lesson about faith and trust from Jesus, their Teacher.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 241.

<sup>2</sup> New American Bible, Revised Edition (Washington D.C.: American Bible Society, 2010). All scriptural citations, unless otherwise noted, will be from this edition.

This is the first time in the gospel that Jesus is addressed as a teacher. Brendan Byrne situates this for the reader in stating, “Now the Teacher confirms his words with a series of acts in which the power of the Kingdom confronts destructive demonic rule in a variety of manifestations: in nature, in demonic possession, in life-destroying illness, and in death itself. Each scene drives further the issue of Jesus’ identity and, correspondingly on the human side, the importance of faith.”<sup>3</sup> The reader may wonder why the disciples address Jesus as “teacher” as it does not appear to fit in well with a miracle story. Collins’ and Attridge’s insight is helpful here as they look at the other synoptic gospels: “Matthew changes the address to “Lord” and also changes their question to a confident prayer for help (Matt 8:25). Luke replaces “teacher” with “Master, Master.” The linking of the title “teacher” with miracle-working is characteristic of Mark. As in 1:21-28, so here, the implication is that the teaching of Jesus is validated and illustrated by his miracle-working power.”<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Matthew’s gospel, unlike Mark’s, does not say that Jesus was in the boat with the disciples, though one may infer this. Rather, Matthew 8:23 says, “Jesus got into a boat and his disciples followed him.” Prior to this statement by Jesus, Matthew shows Jesus curing Peter’s mother-in-law and doing other healings in which he drives out the spirit by a word” (8:16). Then in Matthew 8:18, “When Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side.” Gunther Bornkamm interestingly observes: “Here, in distinction from Mark, Jesus goes ahead and the disciples follow him...The preceding sayings about discipleship rather serve to illustrate the meaning of what takes place in the stilling of the storm.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins and Harold W. Attridge, *Mark a Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 259.  
<sup>5</sup> Gunther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, Heinz Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (The Westminster Press), 54.

Bornkamm, furthermore, takes a more positive look at the disciples' distress:

Matthew is not only a hander-on of the narrative, but also its oldest exegete, and in fact the first to interpret the journey of the disciples with Jesus in the storm and the stilling of the storm with reference to discipleship, and that means with reference to the little ship of the Church...Only in his case is the disciples' cry for help an ejaculatory prayer... The term of address thus designates him not only, as in Mark and Luke with a human title of respect, but with a divine predicate of majesty...The cry of the disciples in 8:25 is thus a prayer."<sup>6</sup>

The author's insight on the disciples' cry in Matthew as prayer allows the reader to see them having more faith and trust in Jesus, so it may seem, as the thrust may be more on Jesus' continued healing, this time over nature, than it is on exposing a faltering faith of the disciples as depicted in Mark.

Mark shows Jesus already in the boat and the disciples took him "just as he was." This may indicate the continuity of the mission of Jesus as he brings the message of the kingdom to the other side, to an outside group, and is teaching his disciples the inclusivity of the kingdom despite the chaotic forces symbolized by the waters that are calmed and ordered by Jesus' power. Eugene Boring captures the passage well: "The boat is thus the encompassing image that includes Jesus who teaches and the Twelve as the core of a larger group of disciples who are called to proclaim, crossing through stormy water to the Gentile territory, encountering threatening demonic power en route that terrifies them, but delivered and rebuked by Jesus who acts and speaks with the power of God."<sup>7</sup>

In traveling by boat from the western shore of the sea of Galilee, where the Jewish crowds are taught by Jesus, to the eastern shore where Jesus teaches and preaches to the Gentile crowd, Jesus is expanding his mission. Jesus is trying to help the apostles understand that the Kingdom is open to Gentiles as well as Jews and he is forging new territory here. Mark mentions that "other boats were with

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene M. Boring, *Mark a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 145.

them.” The reader is able to join in the scene by seeing oneself as a disciple in the other boats<sup>8</sup> as no one can point to the actual significance of this phrase. Alan R. Culpepper comments that “The Sea of Galilee functions as a symbolic barrier between the two. Breaking the social barrier, Jesus crosses the sea, but the sea crossing is rough and fraught with danger. By crossing the sea and exercising the power of the Kingdom among both Jews and Gentiles, Jesus revealed the power of the kingdom to transcend barriers and bring unity.”<sup>9</sup>

Mark does not say anything more about the trip to the other side except what is told in 4:35-41. The reader of Mark is aware that disciples are fishermen who made a living from the sea, and yet they ask Jesus for help during the storm. One might assume they had experience and skills to know what to do, yet succumb to fear and panic. David Hamilton’s insight support this assumption about the disciples: “They knew its waters so well, and they knew how treacherous it could be, for the lake of Galilee is known to be subject to sudden squalls that can be highly dangerous. Yet, despite their knowledge of these waters, and whether through tiredness or complacency, they set out to ferry their leader across the lake.”<sup>10</sup> Mark contrasts the event of the ferocious storm and the disciples’ distress with Jesus peacefully sleeping “in the stern.” One surmises that Jesus is protected from the waves which are coming into the boat. The reader may wonder why Jesus is sleeping? That Jesus could sleep during the raging storm testifies, perhaps, to his absolute trust in God. Jesus is tired after a long day of ministry. In waking Jesus up to help them in their peril, they ask him, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” (4:38). D.A. Hare posits that the disciples “think Jesus is indifferent to their desperate plight, as if he has no concern for their safety or survival. How often God’s people reproach him this way, from the Old

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<sup>8</sup> Byrne 93.

<sup>9</sup> Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2007), 154.

<sup>10</sup> David G. Hamilton, “Who is this Man?” (Mark 4:41), *The Expository Times* (2009): 396.

Testament to this day...Their cowardice reflects their old world, which regards God as absent or uninvolved.”<sup>11</sup>

One may speculate as to why the disciples might even think that Jesus does not care. Jesus is continually bearing the message of God’s saving love and care, yet during a critical event, the disciples show fear and doubt. Their faith seems weak in the face of danger. They do not see that their Teacher is Christ, the Messiah. They do not really see Jesus’ divine role. Do they not know that Jesus would not have called them as apostles only to let them perish in a storm at sea? Dennis Hamm remarks that “Though Jesus is with them, the fact that he is, like Jonah, sleeping through it all leads them to feel he is out of touch with their crisis...Jesus challenges their lack of faith, and they respond in words that acknowledge Jesus as far more than a sleepy teacher: “Who then is this that even wind and sea obey?” Jesus as Teacher challenges them, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” (4:40)<sup>12</sup> The reader notices that the disciples do not express gratitude for their lives being saved but rather “awe” as if they, too, may perceive their own lack of faith as well as the calm faithfulness of Jesus.

Hamilton further says, “Jesus rises and commands the wind to cease. As the waters become calm, he turns to his disciples and rebukes them for their fecklessness and lack of faith. The disciples are left bewildered and fearful of this man who exercises such power over the natural elements.”<sup>13</sup> Hare attests to this well in stating, “Their abject terror of the forces of nature has been replaced by reverent fear of the presence of God in Jesus. Jesus’ subduing the sea is an epiphany, a manifestation of his divine authority. “Who then is this?” is a question not only for Jesus’ disciples but for all contemporary readers of the gospel As the disciples witness the power of Jesus, their inability to comprehend his identity is

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<sup>11</sup> D. R. Hare, *Mark* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis Hamm, “At Sea with Jesus,” *America* (1997):31

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, 396.

indicated by their collective question. It may seem somewhat surprising to the reader why this wondrous deed by Jesus evoked a question rather than a statement of certitude concerning Jesus' identity. However, the reader of Mark is also aware that the disciples' lack of faith is a theme throughout his gospel. Whereas Matthew's gospel makes reference to the disciples being afraid in the "calming of the storm story," Luke's does not. In Matthew 8:26, Jesus says to them, "Why are you terrified. O you of little faith?" In Luke 8:25, Jesus says to them, "Where is your faith?" Mark's text highlights their faltering faith as a tension throughout the narrative, perhaps, to point to the strong faith of a true discipleship that Jesus is expecting from them. In his love for his twelve friends, he is a patient and persistent teacher.

A striking contrast appears as the great storm changes into a great calm. Even though Jesus has performed previous miracles in his earlier Galilean ministry, this miracle is mighty as it illustrates Jesus has power over chaos and the forces of nature. H.R. Stein notes, "The twofold command, "Quiet! Be still!" is directed to a twofold adversary: the first to the wind and the second to the waves. In response to Jesus' command, the wind "ceases." He brings this about by his own word. He does what only God can do. Like Yahweh, Jesus is also Lord over nature, and this leads to a great christological confession of 4:41."<sup>14</sup> After the wind calms down, Jesus asks the questions that gets to the heart and meaning of the stilling of the storm narrative in 4:40: "Why are you afraid? Do you not yet have faith?" Stein suggests that Mark may have concluded the story "with a high Christological confession, rather than with an example of the disciples' failures. His Gospel is, after all, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, not the story of the disciples' failures. In addition, Boring adds a salient point concerning the disciples' faith in Mark: "He uses the miracle stories as a vehicle of his Christology-belief that Jesus can work miracles is inadequate, is *not yet faith*, which will come only in light of crucifixion and resurrection. Thus their "awesome fear" has the same ambiguity as their "faith." The final question shows the story is not

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<sup>14</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 244.

focused on the nature miracle itself, but christologically on Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> Their deep christological faith in Jesus, will come with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Some scholars have suggested that the disciples’ expression of fear about the storm could be an indication of their failure to believe in God. They surmise that the disciples’ failure to recognize Jesus was tied to their failure to see that God was working in him.

The reader notices that the disciples experience a great storm, a great calm, and the greatness of Jesus. The reader also knows that the radical and authentic faith of their discipleship will manifest itself within the lens of his crucifixion and resurrection. In terms of the type of fear in this passage, Mark does not directly say what kind of fear the disciples display, and perhaps it is a combination of fear, conveying an insubstantial faith or awe, as reverence, as in having fear of the Lord or being in the presence of the Lord. However, the passage ends as they are full of wonder rather than full of recognition of Jesus identity and mission. Moreover, it seems that faith is seen in contrast to fear in this passage, and this lesson is received by his followers in a dramatic fashion through the Teacher who pointedly questions them about their faith. They do not truly realize that Jesus is God at this point in the gospel narrative. A focal theme in Mark’s gospel as to the disciples’ lack of faith and understanding to see that Jesus is God and how exclusively God is at work in Jesus is carried through passages following the miracle at sea story. If they had a strong, sure faith they might have expressed an affirmation of Jesus rather than a question about him, however rhetorical it may seem.

The disciples remain in awe and reverence of Jesus as their faith journey moves forward. The story contains elements of a Hellenistic miracle-type story as Boring observes: “The description of the dire threat, the call for help, the miracle itself, and the response.”<sup>16</sup> In the story of Jonah, a storm is calmed when the men in the boat pray to the Lord, upon Jonah being thrown overboard. The influence

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<sup>15</sup> Boring, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 143.



of the Old Testament is also evident, as Hare suggests, “Because Jesus has not prayed for God’s protection but has instead exhibited divine power in a direct way, Mark’s readers are reminded of passages in the Psalms that attribute control of the chaotic sea to God, especially 107:29, “He (Yahweh) made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.”<sup>17</sup> In a similar manner, Jesus “rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” The wind ceased and there was great calm” (4:39). Healy notes Jesus’ use of the word “rebuke” and comments:

It is the same word used to describe his casting out of unclean spirits (1:25; 3:12), suggesting that demonic powers somehow instigated the squall that threatens to deflect him and his disciples from their mission. In the Old Testament the sea is often viewed as a symbol of chaos and the habitation of evil powers. Jesus exorcises these adverse forces of nature with the same authority with which he freed human beings from demonic oppression. Instantly the howling wind subsides and the choppy waters become calm.<sup>18</sup>

Only God has power over the chaos of these waters to save his people. When Jesus questions his disciples with a mix of sternness and compassion as to why they are afraid, he is exhorting them to a new faith in his divine power, one that loves and saves his people.

Most scholars concur that Mark was written about 70C.E. for a Christian audience whose lives were under pressure and persecution in Rome. Abraham Smith offers the following: “Mark certainly is interested in issues of authority and power...And Mark’s apocalyptic perspective decidedly resists the claim that the world is under the rule of anyone besides God.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps one reason why Mark’s gospel shows Jesus on the go, active, almost in a hurry is because his ministry reflects the critical urgency of his role as Messiah for the world at this crucial time and for all time to come. Stein’s remark on the boat story highlights this: “This passage has frequently been allegorized to serve as a word of encouragement to the church (as symbolized by the boat) to remain faithful during times of persecution and

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<sup>17</sup> Hare, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Healy and Peter S. Williamson, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 96.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Smith, “Cultural Studies” Chapter 7, ed. Janice Capel and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 196.

tribulation.”<sup>20</sup> Culpepper reiterates this as well in saying, “Disciples of Jesus can face hardship and uncertainty with a deep and abiding confidence in the sufficiency of God’s power. In the end God will prevail and that is all that matters”<sup>21</sup> Robert Guelich offers a somewhat different perspective from Stein and Culpepper as he notes, “Mark most likely underscores this struggle in order to call his own community of “disciples” to account for their lack of faith in view of the storms that threaten their lives.”<sup>22</sup> Boring provides a salient and broad point, indicating the symbolic meanings in the narrative: “For Mark the boat conveying Jesus and the disciples represents the church, the storm stands for persecution. Jesus’ sleep means the delay of the Parousia, and the calming of the storm is the peace Jesus brings at his return.”<sup>23</sup>

Much to Jesus’ disappointment is the failure and lack of understanding of his disciples to truly know him and what he is about. Jesus shows frustration toward the disciples in the boat story and the Teacher has to assist them continually to see with eyes of faith- to realize and act on what discipleship not only means but what it demands. He challenges and rebukes them for “not yet” having the kind of faith needed as his followers. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington note that “Disciples are still on a journey to true faith. Their “failure” here, which will heighten as the narrative unfolds, simply means that their closeness to Jesus does not absolve them from the need to enter more deeply into the

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<sup>20</sup> Stein 243.

<sup>21</sup> Alan R. Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2007), 161.

<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Guelich, *World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 34* (Dallas, Word Books, 1989), 271.

<sup>23</sup> Boring, 145.

mystery and paradox of God's reign."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Mark tends to show the disciples' lack of strong faith for much of the gospel. The word "obtuse" is often used in commentaries to describe them, in fact. Moreover, neither Jesus' question to them nor their collective question at the conclusion of the boat scene is answered. Mark may be pointing to the idea that the questions remain, as understanding of them unfolds in the gospel narrative. Not only does Mark show conflict<sup>25</sup> as integral to the plot in this story but weaves it throughout the gospel. Jesus resolves the conflict between chaotic forces and God and is victorious over the forces, restoring order and calm to the cosmic world, yet the conflict and tension between who and what Messiah is and their slowness to attain a radical faith and deeper trust is yet to be resolved.

Mark draws the reader into the gospel narrative and one can know some things the characters do not at a certain point. This stylistic device Mark employs invites the reader into the story and reinforces that the narrative is not a history but rather a sacred gospel narrative speaking to Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as with those of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. "Who then is this?" is truly a profound faith question. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza contributes the following insights pertaining to the boat narrative:

Mark's audience, of course, knows who Jesus is earlier in the narrative. Mark has identified him as the Christ and described the baptism and demons' recognition. The characters in the narrative are not aware of this information. Thus Mark's audience is engaged in watching how the characters understand-or fail to understand-what it already knows. Mark uses this device to teach his audience. Discipleship calls for faith, faith in God's beneficent power active in Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

The disciples are being prepared for mission, and along with faith and trust, courage is also necessary. As they are witness to the supernatural power of Jesus over the power of chaos which terrifies them, they are called to have faith. In addition, they are twelve persons chosen to continue the mission. What this means is not clear to them yet but it will in the future. They learn, too, that Jesus

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<sup>24</sup> John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 161.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism." Chapter 2, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 39.

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza *Searching the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 480.

does not abandon them in times of distress. Hare says, “The disciples have not yet been transformed by the awareness that God is actively present in Jesus’ ministry...It is clear to them that he is more than a holy teacher and more than a prophet like Jonah, but what is he?”<sup>27</sup> The reader knows that it is later in the gospel, Mark 8:29, that Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah. It is of interest to note that while the characters in the story fail to understand Jesus as Messiah, the audience does know and sees that discipleship calls for faith, not fear. As Edwin Broadhead says, “He who is heard by the wind and the waves is the Teacher who seeks to call out faithful discipleship from his followers.”<sup>28</sup>

In waking Jesus from his sleep, the disciples most likely are asking for his assistance in some way, yet the dramatic miracle they witness leaves them in “awe” of their Teacher as more of his identity is revealed. Regarding this, Byrne states that, “Hence, they are filled with great awe—the human response to the presence of the divine. In the compass of this one short scene the Markan narrative has swiftly moved from a view of Jesus as very human to one in which he displays divine power in a most dramatic way.”<sup>29</sup> In this boat narrative, the reader notices how Jesus as Teacher uses only a few far-reaching words in a form of a question to challenge the disciples toward a deeper understanding of his identity and mission.

Collins and Attridge note how the storm at sea passage is a shift from “discourse to mighty deed, indicating a transition to a new section of the Gospel, 4:35-6:6a, devoted to epiphanies of the divine power at work in Jesus and the various responses to it. This section is unified by “faith” or “trust” and “unbelief” or “lack of trust.”<sup>30</sup> They indicate that the evangelist writes the story to highlight divine epiphany. Perhaps the disciples’ lack of faith is illustrated in the story by the lack of progress they make in managing the boat crisis more confidently; rather, fear, like the waves, overcomes them. Certainly, if

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<sup>27</sup> Hare, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Edwin Keith Broadhead, *Mark* (Sheffield:Sheffield Phoenix Press,2009),50.

<sup>29</sup> Byrne, 94.

<sup>30</sup> Collins and Attridge, 258.

they feel they are about to perish, the disciples' response is to ask Jesus for help. However, as Jesus is in the boat with them, one might expect them to trust that they will be safe with Jesus in the boat. The power of the Lord is sovereign over all creation. Jesus, in the boat narrative, has power over chaotic forces of the sea and restores order and calm to the sea, to creation. Jesus looks after his disciples and all believers in times that are threatening or tranquil. He is always in the boat with his people, so to speak. Jesus completely trusts that God loves, cares, and looks after him, his beloved Son, and tries to teach his own disciples to come to this providential trust and belief also. W. R. Telford incisively comments on three boat scenes in relation to the disciples' lack of success in understanding Jesus.

These three boat scenes, the stilling of the storm (4:35-41), the encounter with Jesus on the water (6:45-52), and the discussion in the boat (8:14-21), isolate Jesus and the disciples from the crowds by the setting of the scenes and highlight the attitude of the disciples. The first two boat scenes are connected by the motifs of the disciples' difficulty with the sea, Jesus' miraculous power, and the disciples' fear and lack of understanding. The third is not a miracle story, but it is linked to the second by references in both to Jesus' feeding of a multitude, and it presents in a most emphatic way the disciples' failure to understand.<sup>31</sup>

One needs to look at these in the context as to how Mark developed his theme concerning the disciples' lack of understanding. In the first section of Mark's gospel, he has the disciples look more favorable and identifiable as those who have the privilege to follow Jesus and chosen to be in close connection with him. One could say that the reader has "high hopes" for them at the outset and as the narrative progresses, one perceives that the disciples do not really "get it" yet as Jesus has to explain the parable of the sower to them privately, for instance. Likewise in 4:11 Jesus tries to convey a most essential lesson to the Twelve: "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you," and in 4:13 says, "Do you not understand the parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?" An observation by P.J. Achtemeier is noteworthy here: "If they could see the glorious end that results from such beginnings, they would surely grasp the meaning of the whole career of Jesus, because, as the parables and sayings in chap. 4 make clear, it is only that glorious end that lets one see the beginning in

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<sup>31</sup> W.R.Telford, *Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 183.

its true and proper perspective.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the two boat scenes that follow the calming of the storm scene follow the feeding of the multitudes. Jesus is critical of their irresponsible behavior in the feeding narrative and Jesus plays the key role in responding to the crowd while the disciples play a lesser one. Telford remarks, “The fear and astonishment which the disciples show at their encounter with Jesus on the water is attributed in 6:52 to their failure to understand the feeding and to their hardened hearts.”<sup>33</sup> As the story unfolds, the reader may sense Jesus’ discouragement in his efforts to teach his disciples as a similar situation happens in the next feeding scene. In 8:4, the disciples asked Jesus, “Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?” Afterward in the boat, Jesus is critical of them for their concern about having only one loaf of bread on board. He reminds them of miracle of the loaves that resulted in some bread also left over after the crowd had eaten, and persistently questions them again in 8:21, “Do you still not understand?” It is of value to reference the before and after scenes in Mark’s gospel narrative, so as to obtain a clearer perspective on his unfolding theme of the disciples lack of understanding and slow progress in attaining a radical and authentic faith, the sort of faith that true discipleship demands.

The early Christians, in the midst of peril, forming the backdrop of Mark’s gospel, are encouraged and exhorted to trust in God who is for them and with them, even if they lose their lives physically, they will be saved due to their faith in Christ. The disciples do not know the cost of what it will mean to follow Christ or the perils, rough waters they will cross after the resurrection to bring the gospel “to all nations” but the storm at sea narrative may foreshadow this, as well as the calm and

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<sup>32</sup> P.J. Achtemeier, *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 70.

<sup>33</sup> Telford, 183.

peace that accompanies it. This short pericope can be seen as an introduction to the mission of Jesus and the twelve into Gentile territory. The demands of mission and discipleship are dangerous and threatening as chaotic forces are present and must be overcome to bring forth the kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus calms the sea through a dramatic miracle, while on another level calms the fear and doubt of the disciples in a critical moment. Although they still do not “get” who Jesus is they are learning in a most powerful way. Later, in Mark 13, Jesus is warning the disciples about impending trials and in 13:10, says “But the gospel must first be preached to all nations.” This mission extends to all the earth and Jesus tells them not to let the fear of persecution be a roadblock for them. As illustrated in the boat narrative, discipleship demands a bold courage and faith in crossing all boundaries to proclaim the kingdom of God.

While the disciples are slow to attain the radical disciple-like faith and trust the gospel demands, they are in a process of faith transformation. Dramatic miracles manifesting Jesus’ divine power over chaotic forces of nature as seen in the boat narrative continue on in the demonic story, the woman with a hemorrhage, and the raising of Jairus’ daughter. While these miracles are of great significance, Jesus calls for faith that is not based on miracles but on great belief and trust in Jesus’ messiahship. The power of God’s kingdom prevails over all forces that threaten it as symbolized by the chaotic sea crossing. The disciples are challenged to be confident in God’s power, protection and love which triumphs all dangers, doubts and fears. “Why are you terrified?” (4:40). As Jesus restores the waters to a calm, Jesus restores his people to calm and stillness, renewing trust, faith and courage as the disciples enter more deeply into the question, “Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?” (4:41). It is a question for all readers of Mark’s gospel as well.

The “Calming of the Storm at Sea” has pastoral significance in contemporary life. In the first century the Sea of Galilee provided fishing for the villages along its shoreline. In actuality it is a lake approximately seven miles wide and thirteen miles long. Still today, the lake is characterized by the

strong winds and storms that come quickly and can be threatening to smaller boats. Jesus desires disciples to have a faith that is not overwhelmed when fear or peril come into their lives. A reader of this story in Mark's gospel may try to imagine the sense of distress, helplessness, and fear the disciples face in the midst of this violent storm at sea. He or she might ask if they expected Jesus to save them from perishing or if they were asking him to be with them if they did perish? This is considered a most extraordinary miracle of Jesus, for it shows he had authority over forces of nature, over chaos, over darkness, "To command nothing less than the deep, with its untamed powers of destruction? That showed real authority."<sup>34</sup> In his pastoral way, Jesus took care of his friends in this critical moment, yet like a good teacher, he also challenges their behavior and expected them to believe even in perilous times. One's faith can grow in experiencing a miracle such as this, yet Jesus wanted them to believe despite miracles or signs. He invites persons to a deeper faith-Jesus is with his people and does not abandon them ever, not even in dark, chaotic, or terrifying times. When will we, too, truly realize Jesus is loving and sovereign Lord over our lives and all creation?

As Christ's followers we can ask whether a critical moment is needed before one turns to Jesus for assistance, peace, wisdom, and more, or if we believe Jesus is with us and near us always? The gospel demands a faith and trust that is bold and strong to overcome oppositional forces that ministers in the Church encounter. Without a deep and transformative faith it is unlikely that one could effectively live the gospel call. After Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples realized, of course, that there was something more to Jesus, yet like them, we as followers of Christ, have a ways to go in developing a deeper realization of him. Whatever trials or risks one goes through in being his disciple, Jesus is with us, overcoming any darkness or turbulence we may encounter. One may feel that Jesus is disappointed in us for not having that kind of faith he is asking for, yet he stays with us, asking for a sustained trust and faith demanded of discipleship. His spirit is with us always. Jim Callahan says it this way, concerning the

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<sup>34</sup> "I Am With You Always," *Word Among Us* (2005), 10.



boat narrative in Mark: “His gospel is addressed to believers who knew every kind of terror, every kind of loss, but who yet endured and yet believed. His gospel was written to assure believers that their losses and grief, their sorrows and anguish, were not the last word...The Son of man knew and trusted that glorious sunrise like no one else in the world.”<sup>35</sup>

Jesus shows and tells the disciples who he is in teaching, healing, preaching, in parables and in an extraordinary miracle of power over the wind and waves of the sea. It is difficult for disciples to comprehend the full identity and truth of Jesus. In a complex world where global turmoil exists, faith can give way to fear at times, and leave persons feeling as helpless as the disciples. God is always there, moreover, present in the boat, present in his Church, encouraging believers to spread the gospel and not to be afraid- rather, be bold. God’s saving love is always present.

The twelve apostles are chosen to carry on Christ’s mission, but their obtuseness in understanding the life and mission of Jesus, and their own and what it entails, is a continual tension and theme in Mark’s gospel. When will the disciples make the connection between Jesus and the Kingdom of God? It is a question we can ask ourselves for it is important in ministry to continually understand the word of God and to live it. We too, must open our hearts and minds to the mystery of the Kingdom. People sometimes turn to Jesus in times of distress or when they are in crisis as illustrated in the boat narrative. Sometimes we may wonder where Jesus is when we are in turmoil. Jesus is right there, always faithful to us. Jesus is continually encouraging us not to fear, rather inviting us to seek the still, peaceful waters of our lives, our boats, with Jesus always there and present. In ministry, it is important to encourage others to turn to Jesus at all times-when the waters of our lives are serene or stormy. If we look beyond ourselves and our fears, the risen Christ will lead us into something new. The disciples learn a powerful lesson about faith and trust in the Lord yet still have further transformation to become faithful followers of Jesus. The disciples of Mark’s gospel and disciples today are called to journey to the

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<sup>35</sup> Jim Callahan, “Weatherproof.” *The Christian Century* 117.18 (Jun-Jun14, 2000), 643.

other side. It is time to proclaim the kingdom of God to others. "Who then is this?" Even though this question remains with the disciples, they may be a step closer to answering it.

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