

Third Sunday after Pentecost

CARRIED FROM FEAR TO FAITH

Mark 4:35-41

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

35On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

DIAGNOSIS: Fear

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Afraid of the Storm*

Our story finds us in a flotilla of boats with Jesus and the apostles, going "to the other side." It is the beginning of Jesus' ministry and he has just been talking about the wild generosity with which God spreads the word of God's reign across the earth (4:1-33). But Jesus has also spoken of opposition to this reign from Satan, the Accuser (3:20-27), as he experienced

himself when the Holy Spirit drove him into temptation by Satan (1:12-13), and as we have seen when Jesus faced off with an unclean spirit (1:23-27). Now we feel this opposition as a storm strikes and the winds and waves tip and fill our boat. This wind is not the Holy pneuma that hovered over the waters at creation. This is an anemos. We are under attack on account of the word of Jesus, and like the rocky soil in which the word was first sown and received with joy, we lose our grip on that word when trouble comes, because of our shallow roots (4:16-17). The word of God's reign on earth is forgotten. We are plunged instead into the story of Jonah, and, like the mariners in that tale, we are afraid because we are perishing. Our lives will be lost while Jesus is asleep on the pillow, just like Jonah thought he would be lost to the storm (Jonah 1:4-5).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Afraid of the Absent Lord*

And just like Jonah under God's unpredictable gaze, Jesus is the one who got us into this mess. The apostles seem to feel that the least Jesus could do is get up and pray to his God for us (Jonah 1:6): "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" But if we are in the Jonah's situation, yet Jesus remains in the boat with us, we are doomed. Jonah's companions were only saved by throwing him overboard, because God was angry with Jonah. The storm was a punishment sent by God, maker of the sea, as a sign that Jonah was going in the wrong direction (Jonah 1:7-16). Jesus' apostles must have been wondering if they were following the right person. Maybe those who knew about God's law and God's coming reign were right to say that Jesus was wrong when he acted as if he had the authority to forgive and welcome sinners in God's name (2:1-3:6). When trouble comes, how fearful we become that God has rejected us. We doubt that Jesus' words of forgiveness and welcome are true. We suspect that God does not forgive but punishes sinners, and that maybe we are perishing

because God does not care for us and is not with us. We fear the God whose final word to us is “No; I will send my waves to wash you out of existence.” The apostles do not even speak to this frightening God, so sure are they that God had already turned away from them. No doubt, God reigns. But God’s reign is terrifying. We turn God into Satan, the Accuser.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Afraid of the Present Lord*

When Jesus wakes up, he does not follow the script. He does not take the part of Jonah. He throws his apostles off balance by acting as if they were all in the Psalms instead. Jesus responds as if they had said, “Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?... At an acceptable time, O God, ...answer me. ...Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me” (Psalm 44:23-24, 69:13-15). He acts as if we had been praying to God instead of hiding from God, and he reacts to the prayers as if they were meant for him. “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed” (Psalm 107:28-29). And, although the translation from the New Revised Standard Version above says that the apostles then “were filled with great awe,” the Greek says that they “feared a great fear” (ephobathasan phobon megan) as they asked each other, “Who is this?” The apostles fear God when he seems far away, but even more when he turns out to be so near. Jesus’ words to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?,” lay the apostles and us bare. Jesus refuses to feed such a fearful life, but exposes it, which is why Mark’s gospel is filled with people afraid of Jesus’ power. If we recognize and fear God only as the Accuser, who “commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea” (Psalm

107:25) for the purpose of our destruction, then we will never be able to love God or to trust that God loves us.

PROGNOSIS: Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Faith in the Present Lord*

In his gospel, Mark lets us know more than the apostles know about Jesus. He tells us in line one that Jesus is the Messiah, “the Son of God” (1:1), and he lets us hear what only Jesus hears at his baptism, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:11). So we know that this reign of God that Jesus speaks about is something that Jesus himself is bringing. Jesus reigns as God has always done—by word. For at the beginning of creation, God told the waters where their limits were (Genesis 1:6-10 and Job 38:8-11), and they obeyed. If we keep watching Jesus in Mark’s gospel, we see him in the business of re-creation, of bringing something from nothing again and again. In order to do so, he first goes into the storm, where the chaos and the void are, and he brings us with him to where we do not want to be but where we must be if we are to be transported “to the other side,” from a story of fear to a life of confidence. Even when his apostles later in the gospel shrink from following Jesus into his trial, verdict of guilt, and sentence of death, he refuses to let go of them, to deny his association with all of us sinners, or to submit to the terms that the powers that be want to place on the reign of God. No one stills this storm for Jesus. He is driven all the way under, crying to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1). The verdict is rendered when he is raised into a new life. Then it becomes clear that Jesus was forsaken only by God’s preserving word, not by God’s creating word, which does its work out of nothing. Jesus was made not only to speak the word of God but to be the creating Word of God in living action, moving from death to life, going “to the other side,”

still keeping us in the boat with him. In Jesus, our lives as fearful sinners are brought to death, but our new lives in him are now beyond the powers of sin, fear, death and hell. That journey is enacted with water and word for each of us as we are baptized into Christ's life by the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith in the Hidden Lord*

We can trust that the word God has carried out in the life of Jesus is not contrary to God's inner life that we cannot know. God has integrity. What God says is true. We can trust this because of the way Jesus literally staked his life on it. When we are in deep trouble and we do not understand what is happening or why Jesus seems not to care, then it is time for us to use the word that God has planted in us. Jesus told the sea to be quiet. We need not drown in guilt and fear. Even if God sent the storm, it is not God's final word, of that we can be sure. The wind that God gives us with Christ, the Holy Spirit, blows more steadily and more creatively than any wind that God may send against us. We are authorized to take up our case with God, and even to ask God hard, direct questions, as Job and the Psalmists and Jesus did. We are authorized to face the winds and the waves, confident that they are not the Lord, but are servants of the Lord, and that this Lord is for us, not against us. When Jesus asks his apostles why they are afraid and says, "Have you still no faith?," he seems to think that we can do what he did and rebuke the sea knowing that God reigns over the powers that be and that this God is on our side. Even if we must die, we die in God's reign and are made alive by God's Word that rides with us in the boat. There is a future for us, just as there was for Jonah after he spent three days in the belly of the fish.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Faith to Steady*

the Others

Ours is not the only boatload in the story. Other boats are with us, and we have a word for them in the storm. It is a word against that fear that prevents any interaction between the apostles and the people in the other boats in Mark's story. At this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus had already chosen twelve people to be his apostles, "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (3:14). When we replace the fear of the apostles in the boat with faith, we can make the story come out differently, with the apostles shouting to the others, "Don't be afraid! Hold on to the Word; it will carry us through to the other side! We're all together in this. Don't let a satanic wind blow thoughts into your mind of your own weakness and unworthiness and past actions, no matter how bad they were. Even if you go under, keep looking ahead." This is the "truthful speech, and the power of God" that Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians, when he urges others "not to accept the grace of God in vain. ...See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation. ...We are treated as ...dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, 7-10).