

Who is this?

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[0 : 0 0] This evening's reading is taken from Mark chapter 4, beginning at verse 35, and it can be found in page 1006 in the Church of the Bibles.

Mark chapter 4, beginning at verse 35. That day, when evening came, he said to his disciples, let us go over to the other side, leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.

There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

The disciples woke him and said to him, teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, rebuked the wind, and said to the waves, quiet, be still.

Then the wind died down, and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?

[1 : 1 2] They were terrified and asked each other, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him. Brilliant. Thanks, Andy.

Good evening. My name is Simon. If you've not met, I am a trainee minister here at St. Silas. I'll be opening up God's word to us from Mark this evening. So let's pray for his help.

Father God, thank you that you have promised that you speak by your words, by your spirit. We pray that you would open up your word to our hearts this evening, that we may know you better, that we may see the Lord Jesus and worship him fully.

Amen. Not that many things in the modern West make us feel like we're at the mercy of nature. It's quite unusual. Normally, we're very well insulated from that.

We don't really feel much of the danger that nature poses to us. At worst, in Glasgow at the moment, we get drenched in the rain, and maybe it just takes an extra hour to get down Great Western Road because of the floods, although the road works make that bad enough.

[2 : 2 7] But sometimes, there's just those moments where we see actually we are actually quite powerless in the face of some of these forces. It can be quite hard when we're so comfortable and so secure most of the time to really understand that for most of the world today, and most of the world in history, being at the mercy of nature has been a big feeling.

But I maybe wonder if in the last few years, we've begun to understand a bit more of that. When we got to the pandemic, we got a little flavor of our powerlessness before greater forces at work in the world.

Being at the mercy of a virus having to stay in our homes with significant limitations because there's something in our environment that's just dangerous for us. It was a sure sign to us that as much as we can pretend, we're actually not in control of this world.

And that exposes something in us. Where do we turn when we feel powerless? When things are totally beyond our control?

How do I respond to God in situations in which only he can change the outcome? And as we go into this next section of Mark's Gospel, we get to see how the disciples learned about that idea from what Jesus did.

[3 : 46] Now, as we've been going through Mark in the last few weeks, we've been seeing who Jesus is and what he came to do. And we're getting a growing sense of his power as we see him healing people and teaching the crowds.

In the recent chapter leading up to tonight's story, we've been hearing about the power of Jesus' words. We've seen through the parables, the small stories that he tells, that though his words seem very small now, they're revealing truth to the world.

And through them, he will build his multi-generational, international, everlasting kingdom. So as a disciple, as a reader of Mark's Gospel, we might start to think, well, that's great.

But these do just feel like words. For all this talk of the kingdom, does Jesus actually have the power to bring this about in our world?

And so as we move on to this section, we get turned from the crowds to the disciples, seeing what Jesus teaches his closest followers. And this evening's event in this passage is so big that we're left with the disciples asking, who is this of Jesus?

[5 : 01] And so as we build up our picture of Jesus from Mark's story, we will also find ourselves asking, who is this that we are reading about?

So where are we? Well, verse 35 tells us this is the same day that Jesus has been teaching. Now, it's taken us three weeks to get through Jesus' teaching, but for Mark's readers, it's just been one day of Jesus' teaching for the whole day.

Likely, Jesus would be tired after this full day of teaching. So he decides to leave the crowds behind, and he and his disciples, in the evening, set off across to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

Now, going south, that would be about a 20-kilometer journey, given where he ends up in the next section. And in verse 36, we hear, they took him along just as he was in the book.

And so we just get the sense that as they set sail, there's no indication in this story that something big is about to happen. Now, one of the problems we might have in making connections to stories like this, partially, is our own familiarity.

[6 : 07] There are many of you for whom this story is something that you've heard since you were children. For some of you here, this is completely new, but for all of us, this is a story that we hear, and to find it may be hard to make a connection with.

I can't imagine many of you have been in a storm on the high seas, although if some of you are from the Outer Hebrides, that might actually be a thing. But few of us have experienced being in a stormy sea.

So to help us imagine how scary that might be, there's going to be a video on the screen. Now, I will say that the man in this video is a professional fisherman. He was totally fine. But this is what it would be like being at sea in storm.

I just want you to watch this video whilst you hear these words from verse 37. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat so that it was nearly swamped.

Now, imagine this picture, but the disciples don't have a modern fishing boat. They don't have navigation instruments. They don't have a mechanical motor. They have a wooden fishing boat, and it is getting dark as the storm picks up.

[7 : 14] The situation is just getting worse and worse. And you've got to remember that these disciples are career fishermen. They know a storm, but this one's got them terrified.

They're in the middle of a lake in a huge storm, five kilometers from the nearest shore, and water's pouring in. It doesn't look good. Yet below deck, verse 38 says, Jesus was asleep in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

Raging storm, asleep on a cushion. You can't really get two images that are further away from each other, can you? It would be almost comical if it weren't just so terrifying for the disciples.

The disciples are fearing for their lives in a boat that's going down in a storm, and there's Jesus asleep on a cushion. And so the disciples wake him and say, Teacher, don't you care if we drown?

And you can almost hear the rebuke in that statement. Don't you care? Get on up. Come on, help bail out the boat. We all need to be in this. We're going to die. Clearly, they want Jesus to help, but the response that they get is far beyond their expectations.

[8 : 27] Because at the point at which your ship is going down in the sea, possibly the most ridiculous thing a person could do is to shout at the sky. So hear how ridiculous this would initially seem.

Verse 39, he got up and rebuked the wind and said to the waves, Quiet, be still. And then the wind died down, and it was completely calm.

Jesus tells the wind and the waves to calm down, and they obey. Like a pacified child or a dog brought to heel, it's gone from furious to fair, from calamity to calm, and there's no ritual, there's no ceremony, there's no magic, just a word, a command, and the storm is stilled.

As I was reading about this passage, a commentator pointed out that after there's been a storm at somewhere like the Lake of Galilee, when the wind stops and the storm ends, the sea is still choppy for days because the swell keeps going.

But here, complete stillness. Jesus has been saying for this whole chapter that his words are powerful, and in this story, we get to see how powerful those words really are.

[9 : 47] And imagine being one of the disciples on this boat. You send someone to go and get Jesus desperately bailing water out of the boat thinking that that might have been the last you saw of your wife and kids. And Jesus comes up and instead of helping, he talks to the sky and all of a sudden it is completely calm.

And then Jesus turns to you and says, why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? Why so afraid?

Why? Well, the immediate answer is, isn't it? Well, because we're going to die. In his question, Jesus is showing them something of who he is that had they understood would have led them to not fear the storm.

They still don't understand who he is. They still don't have faith. And thus, when they respond to Jesus in verse 41, their response is fear. Who is this?

They won't even say it to him. Even the wind and the waves obey him. And so we come back to that question, who is this? Who indeed? Now, if you were reading the story purely in isolation in the book of Mark, you might well struggle to answer that question for quite a while.

[11 : 02] But this passage has echoes of the much bigger story. The story of God and his people that runs through the whole Bible. So I want to just spend a bit of time letting us hear some of those echoes from across Scripture that actually help us frame this story and understand it and answer that who is this question.

So all the way back in Genesis chapter 1, if you want to follow along, I'll give the references for the pages. So page 3 of the church Bibles. The very first page of our entire Bible, we get God creating the universe by his words.

He speaks creation into being. And his words have power over the waters. So in Genesis 1, verse 9 says this, God said, let the water under the sky be gathered into one place and let dry ground appear.

And it was so. God in creation commands the waters with his words and they do what he says. He makes order out of chaos and for him it is easy.

Next, we have the Exodus, the story of God's great rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt. For those following along, it's going to be Exodus 14, page 71. At just the point when things look their worst, when Israel is trapped between the Egyptians and the deep Red Sea, their leader Moses cries out to God and God says in verse 15, Why are you crying out to me?

[12 : 30] Tell the Israelites to move on, raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so the Israelites can go through as on dry ground. And lo and behold, at the command of God, the sea splits and the Israelites pass through safely and are saved from the Egyptians.

God's people cry out and they are saved through water. Later in the Psalms, the songbook of God's people, there are so many images of God's power over the waves and over the sea and over the water.

Just a small one of these, Psalm 107, page 611, if you want to follow that. Speaking of sailors in danger at the storm, verse 28 says, They cried out to the Lord in their trouble and he brought them out of their distress.

He stilled the storm to a whisper and the waves of the sea were hushed. And so radiating throughout Scripture is this image of a God for whom it is not hard to calm the waters, who is in complete control over this creation.

But finally, and maybe in some ways strangely, if you were Jewish, you would know that this story in Mark reminds you very much of a story from one of the prophets. That is the prophet Jonah.

[13 : 45] So if you could follow along with Jonah chapter 1 to some page 928 of the church Bibles. The book of Jonah tells the story of a prophet sent by God to a pagan city and long story short, he doesn't want to go so he runs away on a boat into the sea to get away from God.

And I want you to notice the similarities and differences as I read out a bit of Jonah chapter 1 to the story that we read in Mark's Gospel. So Jonah chapter 1 starting at verse 4 says this, So both stories.

A dangerous storm, things are bleak and there's a man asleep under the deck woken up being expected to join in. So far so similar. When they ask Jonah who he is, he replies, I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

And at that the sailors are terrified. Jonah says this is all happening because of him and the only way to stop it will be to throw him overboard. And after trying everything else, they throw Jonah overboard and the raging sea grows calm.

And then Jonah says, At this the men greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. Yes, the storm is terrifying, utterly so.

[15 : 37] But when confronted by the power of the God who made the sea, they are far more terrified. So much so that these pagan sailors turned to follow God.

And the big difference between the story in Jonah and the story in Mark is that instead of a man under the deck running away from God, the man under the deck is God.

So back to our disciples' question, who is this that even the wind and waves obey him? This is God. This is Yahweh of the Old Testament. This is Jesus, the creator God of the universe whose words still winds calm oceans and command storms.

So no wonder the disciples are terrified. They're beginning to realize that they're standing in the presence of the creator of the universe. And that, as readers, makes us ask the question, am I listening to Jesus' words as if he really is God?

Do I believe his words are powerful? Because if his words still storms, maybe, just maybe, they can build kingdoms. And there's something rightly confronting about Jesus in this passage because we see his identity as the divine, eternal Son of God on display.

[16 : 59] The one who rules over the chaos is here. In a situation of absolute human powerlessness, the creator God clothed in humanity calms the storm by his powerful word and saves his people.

And this story then gives us insight into his kingdom because as human beings at the mercy of nature, we trust that his kingdom will be one where nature will no longer be an enemy but a friend.

Where floods and earthquakes and storms will cease and we will all live in safety because Jesus has power over chaos. Whatever the storms may be, there will never be anything above or beyond him.

The question for us as disciples is, first, do we know this? But then secondly, how are we going to respond to him? Now, for disciples in the first century reading Mark's gospel, it would probably have felt like quite a chaotic time in the early church.

We know from the history books that in the first few hundred years of the church, Jesus' people are persecuted by the Jewish nation and then they're persecuted by the Romans and then the persecution just intensifies.

[18 : 15] hearing that Jesus is the creator of the world is very good news because they are part of his kingdom and what they have will not be taken away from them.

They need only continuing faith. The Romans can take away their lives but they can't take away the kingdom that Jesus has given them at all. And so for many of them, they may not be saved from the persecution but they will be saved through it.

And the question comes to them as it comes to any reader of Mark's gospel, how will you respond to Jesus when the storms do not cease? Will we respond to his authority with fear or with faith?

So as we look backwards through the passage and our second and much shorter point here, we're just going to see how Jesus' identity and our understanding of that makes us read his words to the disciples and their words to him slightly differently.

And they'll ask us, well, how are we responding to him? So the first words are said to the disciples, said by the disciples to Jesus, sorry, in the heart of the storm in verse 38.

[19 : 27] Teacher, don't you care if we drown? And honestly, the first time we read this, don't we kind of just think, well, yeah, fair enough. He's asleep on a pillow and they're bailing out the boat with buckets.

But when we think about who Jesus really is, doesn't it make that comparison seem really silly? If you knew you had the creator of the universe who could command the waves on your boat, would you be worried about his bucket work?

Or would you just ask him to help? But in their fear of the storm, they aren't seeing that. The question is really an accusation. You don't care about what's drowning or you would be helping.

And their fear of the storm makes sense of their circumstances, but not of who Jesus is. And that exposes something of their hearts. They haven't understood who Jesus is.

And they haven't understood his power. And they haven't understood his love. They are yet to trust his ability or love, so they don't yet trust his promises about the kingdom.

[20 : 33] And as we understand that then, we can make sense of what Jesus then says to them in verse 40. After calming the storm with just a word, he says to them, why are you so afraid?

Do you still have no faith? And those two questions, they're two responses, aren't they? Fear or faith? The disciples have gone from fear of the storm to fear of Jesus.

But not yet faith. Now there is a right and reverent fear of the Lord, but this is, as we see, this is terror. They have the information about Jesus, they've listened to his words, they've seen him do miracles and heal, but they've yet to put that faith into action.

These disciples have not yet understood who Jesus really is, or they'll be responding differently to this event. The storm is worthy of fear, but in comparison to the one who made it, it is not so powerful.

And so then this entire episode is just a big teaching moment of Jesus for his disciples, calling them to faith and driving home that question, who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?

[21 : 46] And the answer is, well, if this really is God, then we can respond in dependent faith. They wouldn't have asked if he cared about them drowning, they would have been trusting him to guide them through the storm, assured by his presence with them.

And that question in the gospel of, are they going to learn who he is? Are they going to respond with fear or faith? Honestly, it runs through the whole gospel. We'll see that right up to the last page of Mark. How are these disciples responding?

And so then that question is reflected back to us as readers of Mark's gospel, because it's meant to teach us. Now, Jesus doesn't reject the disciples for getting this wrong, but he does rebuke them for their response.

Whilst they could have been exasperated at the time, reflecting on it, there was something for them here to learn. Because Jesus' plan wasn't to save them from the storm, but through the storm.

And in this fallen world that we live in, it almost always looks a little bit like chaos reigns. There are just so many things that are beyond our control, so many moments in life that make us feel really futile.

[22 : 56] But in all of those, we have a call to respond to Jesus in those things. In Mark's gospel, Jesus doesn't promise that all pain will disappear now, that he will take away every hard circumstance.

He does not promise that. But instead, we're promised something bigger, promised his kingdom where there will no longer be any pain, no longer be any reason for fear, when even creation will be fully at peace and totally in line with Jesus' will.

And so when we're confronted with the chaos, when we feel our powerlessness, what is our gut instinct? Do you respond in fear or in faith?

When we look at the world, the scary political and economic situations that are just so far above us, do we think that God has abandoned us, or do we feel the call to trust him in a time of turmoil?

When we live through crises in our own health and in our own family, do we cry out to God, trusting his presence, or do we just worry that he's absent? When faced with pain, do we think it's a sign of God's rejection because we had to suffer, or do we trust that even in the deepest of valleys and most painful of circumstances, he will never leave us or forsake us?

[24 : 13] Jesus won't always save us from the storm, but he will always be with us in the midst of it. He is an ever-present help in times of trouble.

Because in the end, Jesus either is who Mark says he is, or he isn't. He either is the creator of the universe, or he is not. Now if he isn't, then friends, everything we're doing is pointless.

You may as well leave the building right now. But if he is who he's claiming to be, if he really is the creator God of the universe, then he is absolutely worth following.

Because the kingdom is coming. Faith by its very nature will always call us beyond our mere senses and understanding to follow Jesus in the storms, to trust him with our fears, knowing that he is more powerful than anything we will ever face.

And it's okay to sometimes get that response wrong, but we need to feel that rebuke. Responding in faith would be so much better for us than responding in fear. Our perspective as disciples must be, then, that in the storms, Jesus is calling us to deep faith in him and deeper trust, as he invites us to confident and assured faith of his presence with us, but also of his plan for his kingdom.

[25 : 39] kingdom. Because Jesus does care about the lives of disciples. He cares enough to come and die in our place that we may share in his resurrected life and invite us to his eternal kingdom forever.

That is a savior worth putting your faith in. And so no matter what the circumstances, we trust that one day he will bring the perfect peace of his kingdom to us.

And with that in our minds, let's pray. Psalm 46 says this, God is our refuge and our strength and ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore, we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Lord Jesus, you are Lord over the storm.

You are above the chaos and powerful in every way that we are not. Would you help us to respond to you in the scariest and most painful of life circumstances with faith and not with fear, trusting that you are with us, that you never leave us or forsake us.

[26 : 55] Help us to follow you, to have a right and reverent fear of you, but to always put you first and to have faith in your saving help and the coming of your kingdom. And it's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.