

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID?

by Ray C. Stedman

I would like to invite you to return to where we left off a few weeks ago in our studies in the gospel of Mark. We will examine two incidents -- the stilling of the storm on the sea of Galilee, and that which follows immediately, the healing of the demoniac. It is very appropriate that these two incidents be brought before us on this first Sunday of 1975, for both deal with the problem of fear, with what to do about fear.

I am sure you feel something of fear, as you look forward into 1975. These are fearful times, and the record of the past few years has not given us any reason to be less fearful as we face the future, with its unknown character, and wonder what is coming for us in 1975. It gives the heart a little clutch to think of the possibilities of what could come. The Scriptures deal often with the subject of fear among believers, or among human beings in general, because it is so common to our humanity. These two incidents will help us. The background of the first is in Chapter 4, Verses 35-36:

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, just as he was, in the boat. And other boats were with him. {Mark 4:35-36 RSV}

It is clear that this comes when our Lord was at the point of utter physical exhaustion. You remember that in this section of Mark we are dealing with a theme which Mark emphasizes in several incidents -- the effects of popularity upon the ministry of Jesus. This is the time in his ministry when he is beset with crowds everywhere he turns, multitudes of people thronging from all over the country, jostling, crowding about him, demanding to be healed of many diseases. Mark tells us how Jesus seeks to quiet their attention toward physical healing and to awaken them toward spiritual truth. The first incidents revealed to us the opposition that popularity awakens. Popularity is not all good; it can be very bad, at times. And it awakened a satanic opposition against his ministry. Then in the next section we saw how this popularity necessitated a dimming of light, as manifested in the parables Jesus began to speak in place of the absolutely open statement of the truth he gave earlier.

And now we come to the physical exhaustion produced by the tremendous demands of the crowds upon Jesus. Here he is, at the end of a very heavy day of teaching, of ministering, and of healing. He is worn out. He gets in the boat and says to the disciples, "Let's get away. Let's go to the other side of the lake" -- to the eastern shore, about five miles away. Mark makes clear that this was unpremeditated on Jesus' part: "They took him with them, just as he was." He made no preparation for this journey. And the incident which follows grew out of these circumstances.

Mark also indicates that there were certain witnesses present to testify to the unusual phenomenon which occurred: "And other boats were with him." Mark adds that to reassure us that what happened during that journey was not an hallucination.

One of the popular commentators on this section suggests that there really was no stilling of the storm, that what happened in the midst of this great storm was that our Lord merely settled the disciples' fear, and that there was a great calm in their hearts. It was the peace that came into their hearts which made them think he had done a miracle and stilled the storm. But this does not take note of the fact that there were other boats nearby whose occupants saw this miracle and bore witness of it.

The incident is recorded in the verses that follow:

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. {Mark 4:37-39 RSV}

There are all the raw elements of drama in that incident. There is the raging storm which came suddenly upon the sea. This happens yet today in the rugged country to the northeast of the sea of Galilee, what today we call the Golan Heights. In that broken, torn terrain, it is easy for the winds to gather and suddenly to break out upon the sea. Under these conditions, a violent and raging storm can arise in just a few moments. As these disciples set out in the calm of the evening to cross to the eastern shore, such a storm broke out. Within moments the sea was frothing, waves mounting up. It was a great wind, Mark says. They found themselves in the midst of this tremendous, raging storm, the boat filling rapidly as water came dashing over the bow. The disciples panicked! Sailors though they were, they knew this storm was greater than anything they had seen before, and they feared they were going to perish. So they came and woke Jesus, asking, "Teacher, do you not care that we perish?"

This indicates the storm had already begun when Jesus went to sleep. If it had not, they would not have charged him with indifference to their plight. If he had gone to sleep immediately and not even known the storm had arisen, they would have wakened him to let him know. But they charged him with indifference. In the midst of a growing peril, Jesus had gone to sleep. This is what bothered the disciples. So they came to him, concerned and upset not only because of their common peril but because of the apparent indifference of the Lord to their need.

Have you ever felt like that? These incidents in Scripture are not merely to tell us what happened two thousand years ago; they are parables for us, designed to illustrate exactly what happens to us in the spiritual realm of our lives. Who of us has not felt this way at times? Here we are in trouble, and God does not seem to care. There is no answer to our prayers. He seems indifferent. Nothing seems to happen when we go to him troubled and distraught and panicky. We cry out, and there is no answer. This was the trouble with these disciples.

But then as they woke him, our Lord arose and, without saying a word to them at first, rebuked the wind and, literally, "muzzled" the sea, and then reproached the disciples. They had come with the words, "Don't you care that we're perishing?" Matthew adds that they said, "Save us, Lord, or we perish!" {cf, Matt 8:25}. I do not know what they expected him to do. What he did do took them utterly by surprise; they did not expect it. But they were panicky, and when we panic, this is our attitude is it not? They were saying, in effect, "Don't just lie there; do something!" So he arose, and his first words were to rebuke the wind and muzzle the sea. He said to the wind, "Peace!" and to the sea, "Be still!" And what happened astonished these disciples there suddenly came a great calm.

Now, the miracle lies not in the stilling of the storm, for even nature would do that eventually, but in the suddenness with which it happened. All of a sudden the wind, which had been roaring and beating about their ears, stopped, and there was absolute stillness. And the waves, which had been dashing over the bow, filling the boat, threatening them, mounting up higher on every side, were suddenly stilled, as though a giant hand pressed them down, and there was a great calm. This is what impressed them. All the way across the lake to the other side, and to the mountains on the east, the whole lake suddenly stilled, and they realized that this was indeed a supernatural stilling of the storm.

When the account says that the Lord rebuked the wind and spoke to the sea, "Be muzzled, Be quiet!" we need to understand that he was not really speaking to the elements. After all, what good does it do to address the air as it is flowing by? Or to speak to water that is raging? I think of the story of the king who tried to stop the tides, commanded them to cease, and they ignored him, as tides will, and came rolling right on in. No, I do not think our Lord was really speaking to these elements of air and sea. What we need to understand from this is that he, knowing so clearly and so well that which is invisible to us and which we so often forget, spoke rather to the demonic forces behind the raging of the storm and the sea.

We must never forget that we live in a fallen world, and that, as the Scriptures tell us, the whole world is in the grip of the devil and his agents. This includes the physical world as well. Behind the disasters we read of so frequently, and sometimes experience -- earthquakes, famines, floods, droughts, cyclones, tornadoes,

hurricanes -- is oftentimes the malevolent attack of Satan upon humanity. Jesus understood this, and he rebuked not the wind, but the one who aroused it. He lived in the constant realization, as the Apostle Paul said, that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, wicked spirits in high places" {Eph 6:12 KJV}, who are able to affect humanity at various levels of life. It was these Jesus rebuked. Interestingly, the words he used here are exactly the same words he used when he rebuked the demon that interrupted his discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum, as recorded in the first chapter of this book. So he is addressing the unseen, invisible world here. The result was a great calm.

Then he chided the disciples:

He said to them, "Why are you afraid?" {Mark 4:40b RSV}

Is that not a strange question to ask men who were in danger of losing their lives? Just a moment earlier they were tossing about in a boat which was filling rapidly with water, in the midst of a raging storm, with no hope of help. Why shouldn't they be afraid? Yet Jesus asked them, "Why are you afraid?" And then he put his finger on the reason:

"Have you no faith?" {Mark 4:40c RSV}

This is why people become afraid -- because they lose faith. Faith is the answer to fear. This is the first lesson which comes to us out of this incident. Faith is always the answer to our fears, regardless of what they are. Jesus put his finger right on it: "Have you no faith?"

Well, evidently they did not. They had forgotten all the things he said to them in the Sermon on the Mount about the extent of God's care for them: "You are much more valuable than flowers and birds. God cares for them; will he not much more care for you, O ye of little faith?" {cf, Matt 6:30}. Here he was in the boat with them; their fate would be his fate; and yet they had forgotten this.

How would these men have acted, do you think, if they had had faith? Suppose their faith had been strong -- their faith in him and in God's care and love -- what would they have done? One thing is certain: they would not have wakened him; they would have let him rest. He was weary and tired, and needed the rest badly. They would have done so because their faith would have reminded them of two great facts: One, the boat will not sink; it cannot sink when the Master of ocean and earth and sky is in it. Two, the storm will not last forever.

A year or so ago, a good friend of mine, a handsome young evangelist from another country, told me about all the troubles he and his wife were going through. He was very dejected. She was struggling with severe physical problems ill health arising from asthma and bronchitis which constantly kept her down. They had gone through years of struggle with this condition of hers already, and it seemed to pull the bottom out of everything he attempted to do. Here they were planning to go back to their own country, and now she was sick again. He came to me so discouraged.

I remember turning to this incident in Mark and reciting this story, and saying to him, "Remember, the boat will not sink, and the storm will not last forever. That is having faith -- to remember those facts." He thanked me, we prayed together, and he left. I did not see him for a couple of months; then we ran into each other. I said, "How are things going? How is your wife?" He said, "Oh, not much better. She's still having terrible struggles. She can't breathe, and can't take care of the children or the house, and we have a hard time. But I do remember two things: the boat will not sink, and the storm will not last forever!" So I prayed with him again.

Just a couple weeks ago I received a note from him. They had gone back to their country, and there they had found the answer. A doctor discovered a minor deficiency in her diet which needed to be remedied. When that was done, the asthma and bronchitis disappeared, and she was in glorious, radiant health, and they were rejoicing together. At the bottom of the page he had written, "The boat will not sink, and the storm will not last forever."

Today I received a note that read, "This past week this young man sent word that his wife is in the hospital, and the doctors suspect leukemia. Her asthma is under control. Pray that he will remember what you told him

about the boat and the storm." So a new storm has broken out in their lives. But remember, the boat will not sink, and the storm will not last forever. As C. S. Lewis wrote,

I'll tell you how to look at it. Haven't you noticed how, in our own little war here on earth, there are different phases, and while any one phase is going on people get into the habit of thinking and behaving as if it were going to be permanent? But really the thing is changing under your hands all the time, and neither your assets nor your dangers are the same as the year before.

The significance of this event to us is that faith is the answer to fear -- faith in the goodness and care of God in our lives, faith that he loves us and he is able to work in our midst. But there is still another lesson. It is that failure in faith is the doorway to greater vision. What happened here?

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 winds and sea obey him?"

The word translated "awe" means "fear," but it is a different kind of fear than that which occurs earlier. Then it was cowardly fear; here it is that sense of deep respect which has awe at its heart. Thus out of the failure of their faith there came this deeper impression, this glimpse into the mystery of his Personhood, which filled them with a deep sense of awe: "Who can this be, that even wind and sea obey him, who controls all the elements of the natural world. Who then is this?" The wonderful thing about this incident is that even though the disciples flunked their examination of faith, the groundwork was laid for a new expression of faith the next time they were under test. Thus their own failure opened the possibility for a new expression of faith to come.

This is the way the Lord works in our life. He does this very same thing with us. He tests our faith all the time, in order that we might grow. And if our faith is strong enough we will see that he can handle the problem, that he knows how. But even if our faith is weak, he still will not let us collapse utterly. He will hold us up and see us through and, somehow in the process, lay the foundation of a new glimpse of his might and power which will enable our faith to grow stronger for the next time.

Let us turn now to the next incident, which follows immediately in Chapter 5:

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had come out of the boat, there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who lived among the tombs; and no one could bind him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been bound with fetters and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out, and bruising himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped him [i.e., knelt before him]; and crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me. " For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many. "And he begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country [to the abyss] . Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him, "Send us to the swine, let us enter them. " So he gave them leave. And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. {Mark 5:1-13 RSV}

This incident opens before us again the whole realm of the occult and the demonic, and the oppression of mankind by these evil and unclean spirits. In this day we have seen ample demonstration of the actuality of these forces in our world and perhaps we are much more prepared to understand this story than we would have been ten years ago. In this account we have a very remarkable listing for us of the signs of "demon possession."

I was interested to note that the New Testament never actually uses the term "demon possession." It is a term which has been invented, but it may not be very accurate. The word in Scripture is always "demonized." Whether it means possession or control or influence or whatever, this is the word which is used. We have read

into it the idea of "demon possession." Perhaps that is an accurate term; I am not prepared, at the moment at least, to say categorically that it is not. But I do not think it wise to use it, because it is not used in Scripture.

It is evident that there are various stages and degrees to which demons, evil spirits, can affect and possess or control human beings. In this incident we have an extreme case, and there are listed here some seven signs which indicate when demonic spirits are at work in the life of an individual. The first is the word "unclean". There is always an element of the unclean present in demonic effect. Some moral or physical filth or pollution is evident. In this case, the man lived among the tombs, i.e., among the dead bodies in the limestone caves which lined the cliffs along the sea of Galilee where they placed their dead. You always find this element -- the demonic living in the midst of dirt and squalor and rubbish, or evidencing moral pollution. It is no accident that the rise of satanism and occultism in these last few years has been coincident with the spread of pornography and obscenity in the media, in our movies and literature. These are always related. There is an uncleanness about these evil spirits. They love filth and obscenity and pollution.

The second sign evident here is the isolation in which this man lived. He had a home, and he had friends, because Jesus sent him back to both at the end of the story. But he chose to live by himself in utter segregation, away from humanity, cut off from them. In every case of demonic influence you find this attitude of withdrawal, a willingness to be separate physically or emotionally from other people.

Then there was the supernatural strength he exhibited. This is often the case. There are many instances today of people possessed or controlled by demons exercising unusual strength. This man had been bound with chains and fetters. But he had snapped the chains and torn off the fetters, and no one had the strength to subdue him -- a remarkable demonstration of demonic power.

Another mark which is always present is a sense of torment. This man was tormented. At first, demonic influence can seem to be very alluring and seductive, very attractive and fascinating. But that is designed to lead one on until finally this torment sets in, the deep sense of restlessness which this man exhibited, wandering up and down the mountains, crying out in pain at the torment he felt within, bruising himself with stones -- evidently in an attempt to drive out his inner torment. This is very characteristic of demonic influence.

Another element always present is the immediate recognition of the authority of Jesus. This man, when he saw Jesus, knew immediately who he was. He came running to him and called him by name, using the phrase demons always employ, "Son of the Most High God." This is very revealing, because it is the highest name a nonbeliever can know or use to refer to God -- "the Most High God." It is used all through the Old Testament by members of the Gentile nations. Israel knew him as Jehovah -- "Lord." Everyone else knew him as El Elyon, "God Most High." This is how the demons refer to him.

Then there is the duality or multiplicity of personality which is exhibited here. Notice Verse 9: "Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion, for we are many.'" And in Verse 10 the demoniac begged Jesus not to send them to the abyss. There is this awareness of at least a double personality, what psychologists call "schizophrenia."

The last mark is that of suicidal tendencies, the destructiveness which is present in demonic influence. Not all suicidal tendencies come from this, but this is clearly a mark here. When the demons were cast out, they entered into the swine, and what did they do? All two thousand of them rushed down the mountainside and drowned in the sea. Thus the demons, who had asked to enter the swine in order not to go into the abyss, defeated their own purpose, and, because of the death of the swine, had to enter the abyss anyway. That is why Jesus gave them permission to enter into the swine. The death of the swine was a tremendous testimony to this man that he was indeed free from the demons that had inhabited him. But it was also the means by which these demons were sent into the abyss where they belonged.

Now we have the sequel to the story:

The herdsmen fled, and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus, and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the man who had had the legion; and they were

afraid. And those who had seen it told what happened to the demoniac and to the swine. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood. {Mark 5:14-17 RSV}

What a strange reaction -- and yet it is not so strange, is it? When these people heard the news several hours later, they came to see what had happened. By this time the man had gone home and clothed himself, had come back to Jesus, and was sitting at his feet, listening to him. They saw him sitting there at rest -- this man who had been so restless -- and clothed, prepared to enter society again, no longer withdrawn, afraid of people. And he was in his right mind -- at peace with himself, no civil war raging within any longer. They saw this deliverance. It was evident to them that here was a man set free.

But they are hit in the most tender part of their anatomy -- their pocketbook. And instead of rejoicing, they plead with Jesus to leave. Society is always doing this. We see it in our own day. Just last week the newspapers reported a court order to shut down a steel company's open-hearth furnaces in Indiana, because they were polluting the atmosphere and threatening to render the whole region uninhabitable. Yet people were very upset because of the financial loss to the company and to the employees involved. Whenever there is a question of the welfare of an individual versus the wealth of the many, society invariably chooses the wealth of the many rather than the welfare of one.

Twenty-five years or more ago, I read a poem by John Oxenham based upon this incident in Scripture. I never memorized it all, but one stanza sticks in my memory. He put it very graphically. These people came to Jesus and said to him,

Rabbi, be gone! And take this fool of thine!
You love his soul; we prefer swine.

This is what humanity says so frequently.

Well, the end of the story is that as Jesus, obeying this injunction to leave the neighborhood,

... was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. But he refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled. {Mark 5:18b-20 RSV}

The Decapolis were ten Greek cities on the eastern side of the sea of Galilee, including Damascus. It was to this Gentile community that Jesus commanded this man to go and bear witness. Among the Jews, he told them not to say a word, lest he be overwhelmed by people mobbing him, making impossible an orderly ministry. But here among the Gentiles he sent this man back. What a beautiful pattern of witness he established!

He told him to go home, and not to go around from door to door explaining the plan of salvation, but simply to tell his friends what happened to him. That is what a witness is. I am not against evangelizing, but we need to understand that witnessing and evangelizing are two different things.

This man was sent to be a witness, to tell people what had happened to him. And what a story he had to tell -- of how he had lived in anguish and torment, how he had been against all of humanity, a menace to anyone who came by, angry and hostile and rebellious; and yet Jesus had freed him, given him peace and joy! No wonder that as he went about in all these cities, men marveled at what they heard.

Now what is the significance of these two incidents in our lives?

Mark has put them together to help us to see that Jesus is Lord -- whether the enemy that threatens us and frightens us is some circumstance or event outside us, as the storm was for the disciples, or whether that which betrays and subverts us and sabotages everything we try to do is something arising from within -- some habit, some attitude, some long-standing hostility or resentment we bear against another, or even some demonic influence which is ripping us and tearing us apart, making us restless and discontent. Whatever it is, Jesus is Lord.

This is the message of these stories. Within or without, he reigns now in our lives.

Therefore his question to us throughout the coming year remains: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your power over all the events of our lives, over all the forces which influence us. As we enter the new year, we thank you, Lord, that in the boat of this new year you are here with us to comfort and strengthen us, to reassure us, and to take us through whatever storms may come. We know you are not here to stop the storms from coming, but to take us through them. And we know that whatever forces arise from within us to distress or frighten us, you are able to handle them. And now may our spirits worship you, as we think of the greatness and glory of the One who has come to us, to be in us and among us. We thank you in your name, Amen.

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