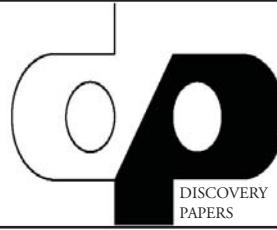


QUESTIONS OF FAITH

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 4:35-41
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Counselors use questions to great effect. By asking questions, they uncover an individual's thoughts in order to help him. A question, especially a personal one, can access our deepest fears and hopes. One question can change the entire course of a life. When Saul was persecuting followers of Jesus, he heard a voice. The voice didn't say, "Stop it!" No, the voice said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4) It was the voice of Jesus, whose question began the conversion of the man we know today as the apostle Paul.

Jesus asks us two questions in Mark 4:35-41. The questions probe our hopes and fears. We may have to linger with the questions and dig deep to answer them honestly. If we do so, however, Jesus will help us build a faith that's better able to weather the storms of life.

In Mark 4:1-34, Jesus taught the crowd, including the disciples, parables concerning the kingdom of God. Now it's time for the disciples to put into practice what they've learned. Like the disciples, we will need what we learn from the parables in our lives. The lesson is over. The storm begins.

Mark 4:35-41:

On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?" They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"¹

Jesus questions his disciples

At the end of the day, after teaching a crowd that had gathered in Capernaum on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus proposes that he and his disciples travel across the sea to the eastern shore. The east bank is Gentile territory. Although Jesus draws crowds in Jewish territory on the west side, powerful forces are lining up against him there because he opposes conventional notions of the kingdom of God. However, his message, which features the power of the God of Israel, is decidedly Jewish. To venture into Gentile territory with such a message is a risky

mission. Nevertheless, his disciples respond immediately. Jesus has been teaching from a boat, so they took him with them "in the boat, just as he was," without delay.

A menacing storm, however, threatens the mission, not to mention the lives of Jesus and his disciples. Mark contrasts the confidence of Jesus—he is, in fact, sleeping as the waves break over the boat—with the fear of the disciples. They rouse him and implore him to help them survive the storm. Although they have seen him heal the sick and cast out demons, they don't fathom that Jesus will start giving orders to the wind and the sea. In fact, he speaks to the wind and sea as if he is commanding a demon. In Capernaum, Jesus "rebuked" a demon and commanded it to "be quiet" (Mark 1:25). Now he rebukes the wind and tells the sea to be quiet. The authority of Jesus, which Mark has emphasized, extends even to creation (Mark 1:27).

Those who read Mark 4:35-41 with an ear to the Hebrew Scriptures will hear an echo from the story of Jonah. When Jonah, a Jewish prophet, refused to preach to the pagan city of Nineveh and instead boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, God hurled a great wind on the sea and the ship began to break apart. Jonah, though, was asleep in the hold of the ship. The captain roused him and told him to call on his God, whereupon Jonah informed his shipmates of his disobedience. Therefore, they threw him overboard, and the storm abated (Jonah 1). When the disciples rouse Jesus, they have no reason to throw him overboard. Unlike Jonah, Jesus obeys God and willingly takes up the vocation of Israel to be a light to the nations by bringing the gospel to Gentile territory. The storm abates with Jesus in the boat, not in the water.

In the aftermath of the storm, Jesus asks the disciples two soul-searching questions: 1) "Why are you afraid?" 2) "How is it that you have no faith?" The simple answer to the first question is obvious: they were afraid because they thought they were drowning. Jesus, however, deems it possible for his disciples to respond differently to such a storm—ergo, the second question. Faith would enable them to respond differently. How, Jesus asks them, has it come to pass that they have no faith? Faith, as defined by the gospel of Mark, consists of believing that the kingdom of God is breaking into this world in the person of Jesus (Mark 1:14-15). The disciples had faith to venture with him into Gentile territory, but they didn't have faith to conquer their cowardice when the water was filling the boat. Jesus thinks that their experience with him up to this point has given them reason to respond with faith instead of cowardice. Based on his mastery over demons and disease and on his teaching concerning the arrival of the kingdom of God, they were in position to believe in

his mastery over wind and waves. Yet, when they woke him up, their intent was not to ask him to do anything about the storm; they didn't believe that he could do anything about it.

The disciples, who responded to the storm with fear, become "very much afraid" in the aftermath of the storm. If the storm brought them to their knees and Jesus is more powerful than the storm, whom should they fear more? Jesus asked his disciples two questions; now they ask themselves a question: "Who then is his, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" As readers, we know the answer: he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the king of the world (Mark 1:1). Later, before heading south to Jerusalem to bring in the kingdom, Jesus himself will ask the question of his disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" By then, Peter, one of his disciples, knew the answer (Mark 8:29-30). For now, the question dangles in their minds as Jesus' questions regarding cowardice and faith work their way into their hearts.

Jesus questions us

We enter the narrative through the dialogue—by hearing Jesus, speaking to him, and speaking to ourselves as if we are the disciples.

Jesus says, "Let us go over to the other side." He invites us to follow him, for the sake of the gospel, into unfamiliar territory. For the Jewish disciples, that meant following Jesus into Gentile territory. For us, the territory may be another part of the world, or it may be another part of our neighborhood. For some of us, going across an ocean on a short-term trip carries with it less risk than walking across the street or picking up the phone and calling a family member. Ongoing proximity means the possibility—or threat—of ongoing involvement. For some of us, the unfamiliar territory consists of regions in our own heart. We've never visited those places for fear of what we might discover: festering wounds, searing regret, unmet longings. If we visit such places and take Jesus with us, he may lead us from those places to minister with heart-felt compassion to people in pain.

Hear Jesus' invitation: "Let us go over to the other side." Is our Lord inviting you to venture into some unknown territory for his sake?

Some of us, like the disciples, unhesitatingly step out into unknown territory but then discover that we're in over our heads. At such times (and when are we ever in our depth, anyway?), you might want to consider looking toward the back of the boat. Jesus, not Jonah, is in the boat. For crying out loud, don't throw him overboard! But what if he's sleeping? What if he seems oblivious to your crisis? What if you've gotten yourself in over your head and he's letting you drown? Inactivity does not necessarily imply aloofness. It can equally imply confidence. The storms of life unnerve us; they don't unnerve Jesus.

When I was a reporter, I went on a ride-along with a California Highway Patrol officer on Highway 17, a treacherous stretch of road, in order to learn more about

the beat I was covering. Before I got into the car, the officer told me, "If we get into a chase, don't panic. You have to trust me." The "if" sounded more like a "when." About then I began wondering why I volunteered for this mission. Sure enough, not long into our excursion, he took off after someone in a high-speed chase, siren screaming, lights flashing. I panicked. Plastered to the back of my seat, I managed to peek at the officer. He was calm as could be, weaving in and out of traffic on the curvy mountain road at ninety miles per hour. He didn't seem in the least concerned for my plight. His inattention, though, implied not aloofness but confidence. He'd been in such chases hundreds of times. He was a man in control.

When Jesus seems oblivious to your plight, trust in his confidence. He is in authority over stormy circumstances, just as he was in authority over the wind and waves that threatened his first disciples. The storms of life often push our faith where it needs to go: to the back of the boat. When there's no one else to petition but the man sleeping there, we open our hearts to him, almost by necessity, in a new way.

You rouse him and pray, "Don't you care that we are perishing?" He may or may not quiet the storm immediately. In any case, he wants you to believe that his inactivity signifies confidence, not aloofness. Even if he does nothing, he knows what he's doing—or not doing, as the case may be.

After you finish questioning Jesus, he questions you. First, he asks, "Why are you afraid?" What? The waves are breaking over the boat, you're going down, and he's asking why you're afraid? Has he lost his mind? What does he want of you? Apparently, he wants you to trust him, for he asks another question: "How is it that you have no faith?" What does he mean "no faith"? You have some faith, but not the kind of faith that's able to stand up to this kind of storm. Apparently, Jesus wants more from you. How might he get it? Probably by sleeping through the storm until the point where all hope seems lost but hope in him.

Hear Jesus ask you, "Why are you afraid?" Let the question excavate your fears. What, exactly, are you afraid of? Are you afraid of failure? Rejection? Conflict? Missing out on something? The fate of a loved one? Loss of some kind? Relational heartache? Depression? Losing your health? Death? Answering honestly allows Jesus to address your fears.

As an intern at a church, I took on temporary leadership of a junior high ministry. At one point, the youth pastor discerned that I was flailing. At lunch one day, he asked me a question. I don't remember it precisely, but I do remember it had the word "why" in it. I also remember my answer: "Because I'm incompetent." When I answered his question, it was as if something, including dammed-up emotion, was released within me. A simple question excavated one

of my deepest fears. Until I answered his question, I didn't know that my fear of being incompetent had something to do with my flailing leadership.

After Jesus excavates your fears, he addresses them by asking a second question: "How is it that you have no faith?" Well, how about it? Have you been able to get by thus far without the kind of faith Jesus wants for you? Have you minimized or discounted faith for intellectual reasons? Have you kept Jesus at arm's length in order to protect yourself? Did the church fail you in some way? Did Jesus himself, from your perspective, fail you? Have you never placed yourself or found yourself in the kind of positions that tested your faith? Did you fail to move from an earlier encounter with Jesus by going deeper in your relationship with him?

You might discover that your reasons for faithlessness don't hold up. The disciples had experienced Jesus to the extent that he had cause to hope that they'd respond with faith instead of cowardice. What have you experienced of Jesus? Perhaps connecting with your experience of Jesus will help you respond in faith. In Mark 4:40, Jesus questions his disciples in the context showing them something about himself—that his authority extends to creation. As you hear Jesus question you and as you answer him honestly, what is he showing you about himself? In answering Jesus' questions, you may find that the reasons against faith don't measure up to the reasons for faith. What, in your world, is more trustworthy than Jesus? What, other than Jesus, can effectively address your fears? If you choose not to trust Jesus, you're trusting in something less.

In the middle of a storm in his life, a character in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* named Levin finds a question haunting him. Tolstoy writes:

The question was: "If I do not accept the replies Christianity offers to the problems of my life, then what replies do I accept?" And in the entire arsenal of his convictions he not only failed to find an answer, but anything resembling an answer. He was in the position of a man looking for food in a toyshop or at a gunsmith's.²

In Tolstoy's novel, Levin's answer to his own question led him to see the inadequacy of alternatives to faith in Christ. In like manner, the questions Jesus asks us lead us to see that if we're looking for answers to the problems of life other than the faith he inspires, we're like a man looking for food in a toyshop or at a gunsmith's.

Answering the questions Jesus puts to us leads us to ask ourselves the most important question of all: "Who then is this?" If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, would the Spirit of God use Mark 4:35-41 to strengthen your faith? If so, perhaps when the next storm comes, you'll go ahead and ask Jesus to do something about it but with greater confidence that he can and will do exactly what needs to be done. If the wind and sea obey him, which—or who—deserves more respect: the storm or the one in authority over the storm?

Learning from the parables

Mark anchors the story of the calming of the sea in Jesus' parabolic teaching in a way that foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection. In the parables, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was coming—but not in a way that anyone expected.

In the parable of the sower, some who hear the word of the kingdom fall away because of affliction or persecution. When the storm comes, will the disciples likewise fall away? The parables of the lamp and the measure challenged the disciples to listen carefully to the teaching of Jesus because they would need it later. As the waves swamp the boat, their time of need has come. The kingdom that Jesus and his disciples are advancing is like the little mustard seed in one of the parables. Will the mustard seed grow up to become larger than all the garden plants, or will it drown in the Sea of Galilee?

In the parable of the seed, the man goes to sleep and literally "rises" to see that the seeds have sprouted. In the story of the calming of the sea, Jesus goes to sleep and literally "rises," whereupon he stills the storm. Jesus would figuratively go to sleep on the cross but literally rise from the tomb. The structure of Mark 4:35-41 places the "rising" of Jesus at the climactic center (see footnote number 1 below). The kingdom of God is coming in and through Jesus—through his death and resurrection—confounding even his disciples. Just as fear grips the disciples after Jesus calms the sea, fear gripped his followers after the resurrection (Mark 16:8). At this point, the disciples are like worried farmers, unable to trust that the seed, once planted, will sprout—that Jesus, once crucified, will rise from the dead. They have much to learn about the kingdom of God.

We too have much to learn about the kingdom of God and much to learn from the parables, which disclose its working. The parables teach us to look beyond appearances, to listen carefully to Jesus, to believe that nothing on heaven or earth can stop the kingdom of God—neither wind nor waves, neither Republicans nor Democrats, neither terrorists nor economic instability. The parables teach us to keep believing and to keep doing the work of the gospel even in the face of the fiercest storm. They teach us faith.

I return to two movies every few years because they challenge my fears and encourage my faith: *Braveheart* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. The parables of Jesus, without benefit of moving images and dramatic sound, work like that. Whereas the stories featured in *Braveheart* and *The Shawshank Redemption* at best echo something biblical, the parables are something biblical. They make you feel uncomfortable with feeling comfortable. They challenge your fears and encourage your faith so that you might follow Jesus in mission to the world.

The story reaches its climax

In this passage, Mark evokes an overarching storyline from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The creation story tells how the Lord gathered the waters and made dry land appear (Genesis 1:9). Reflecting on the creation story, the psalmist says that the waters fled at God's "rebuke," just as the wind died down when Jesus rebuked it (Psalm 104:7). The Israelites, not a seafaring lot, equated the seas with the abode of evil.

In the exodus, the Israelites became frightened when the Egyptians drew near, just as the disciples became frightened in the storm. However, God divided the waters of the Red Sea with a strong wind so that dry land appeared and thus allowed the Israelites to finally extricate themselves from the Egyptians, who were drowned when the sea returned to its normal state. In contrast, Jesus turned back a strong wind to rescue his disciples (Exodus 14).

During the exile, while Babylon held Israel captive, the prophet Daniel had a vision in which four evil beasts, evocative of the kingdoms of the world, emerged from the wind-whipped sea. These kingdoms, though, gave way to "one like a Son of Man," whose dominion is everlasting (Daniel 7). Jesus, who has already identified himself as the Son of Man, conquers the waves that emerge from the sea (Mark 2:10, 28).

In the first century, Israel, held captive by Rome, expected the decisive triumph of the kingdom of God to take the form of a new exodus: a greater return from exile. God would act in a powerful way to restore his people (Isaiah 40:1-11, 43:1-7). Israel saw itself as a sort of lynchpin: its restoration would signal the restoration of creation. Creation, in bondage to futility since sin entered the world, would experience its own exodus (Romans 8:18-22).

Mark's story also echoes Psalm 107:23-32, which recounts how God, in the context of his faithfulness to defeat evil, rescued terrified sailors who cried out to him:

He caused the storm to be still,
So that the waves of the sea were hushed. (Psalm 107:29)

When Jesus makes a way through the sea, rescuing his frightened disciples, Mark wants us to see that the story of Israel—and therefore the story of creation—is reaching its climax in Jesus the Messiah. God is defeating everything evil. All that Israel could hope for, all that the world could hope for, all that creation could hope for—all that we could hope for—is coming true. The kingdom of God has drawn near. When Jesus conquers a storm in your life or enables you to persevere and go deeper in faith in the middle of a storm, it's a sign that the kingdom of God has drawn near—drawn near to you.

Answering questions and building faith

Answering the questions Jesus asks us in Mark 4:35-41,

especially in the context of the storms of life, builds our faith in him—the kind of faith that's willing to follow him into unfamiliar territory for the sake of the gospel.

Some months ago, I began praying about an opportunity to go to one particular unsafe place for the sake of the gospel. It's a place where followers of Jesus are persecuted and sometimes killed. (For security reasons, I'm not disclosing the name of the place.) I've gone to such places before, but that was before I became the father of two little girls. Jesus asks me, "Why are you afraid?" I answer: I'm afraid my daughters will grow up without a father and my wife will be a single mother. Jesus asks me, "How is it that you have no faith?" I answer: I think I want faith. Jesus tells me, "Let us go over to the other side." I say, okay, I trust you. Let's go.

Based on Mark 4:35-41, I decided to go. Jesus and I, along with two brothers in Christ, will be leaving soon. I'm not afraid.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A Jesus "said to them"; disciples obeyed (35-36)

B Literally a "great" wind and waves (37)

X Disciples literally "raise" Jesus (38)

B' Sea becomes literally "greatly" calm (39)

A' Jesus "said to them"; disciples lack faith (40-41)

² Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina (New York: Signet Classics, 1961) 778.