

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 06/23/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, June 23rd

Mark 4:35-41

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Rocking the boat

Following on from last week's text, Jesus leaves the crowds to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee into Gentile country. On the way they encounter a violent storm. While Jesus sleeps through the storm, the disciples panic and urge Jesus to act. This is a story about fear and faith and which of these we choose to be driven by. The way to shalom is through faith and not by acting out of fear. We must embrace the storms that we experience by following Jesus – not seek to avoid them. The boat has been a symbol of the church from its earliest days. The church is like a small boat tossed about on a sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution. It is not without some degree of irony that many in the church today are seeking to avoid such storms – to avoid rocking the boat. The Gospel, however, is a tempest that continues to turn the world upside down.

Mark 4:35-41 Commentary

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."³⁶ And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.

Jesus had no problem leaving the crowds. Popularity was not a metric He used to judge His success. The church today appears to have the opposite view. Where Jesus left the crowds in order to continue His ministry, much of the church is willing to change the Gospel to avoid becoming unpopular. The other side refers to Gentile territory.

³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.

The Greek text emphasizes the violent nature of this storm. While such storms were common on the Sea of Galilee due to its location 700 feet below sea level and surrounded by high cliffs, the fact that seasoned fishermen were in fear of their lives indicates the seriousness of the situation.

³⁸ But he 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?"

Despite the predicament, Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat. Perhaps Jesus' apparent lack of concern might have served as a calming influence, but the disciples were panicked enough to wake Jesus with their urgent plea. If anything, the disciples' plea is also a veiled rebuke – don't you care we are dying?! In the other synoptic Gospels, the plea is softened somewhat. Mark's portrayal illustrates how the disciples allowed their fear to overcome their faith.

³⁹ *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.*

Jesus now awakens and rebukes the wind. The same word "rebuke" (*epitimaō*) is used when Jesus "rebukes" demons/unclean Spirits (1:25; 9:25). Jesus' actions parallel God in the parting of the Red Sea: "*He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert.*" (Psalm 106:9) The connection here is unmissable.

⁴⁰ *He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"* ⁴¹ *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

Rather than rejoicing at their immediate salvation from the storm, the disciples are now "*filled with great fear*" of Jesus' power – perhaps more afraid than they were of the storm! The text reveals how the disciples have once again failed the faith test. Their question about Jesus' identity implies an answer – one that Mark is working up to and is eventually revealed (beyond his prologue) by the Centurion after Jesus' death on the cross: "*Truly this man was the Son of God!*" (15:39).

Reflection and Application

The passage opens with Jesus asking His disciples to cross to the other side of the lake. The disciples encountered the storm in the first place because they followed Jesus. Jesus trusted the Father. Jesus was assured enough that God was in control that He was able to sleep through the storm. The fact that He needed to sleep demonstrates His human nature. The fact that He controlled the elements reflects His divine nature. While Jesus was physically present with the disciples in the boat, He was asleep. His disciples experienced Him as though He was not actively present with them. The fact that Jesus slept through the storm should have been reassurance enough – like a flight attendant showing no hint of concern after the aircraft experiences turbulence! The text illustrates how the disciples did not trust Jesus. The disciples thus chose fear over faith. They needed His active reassurance and thus woke Him in a panic.

To Mark's readers, the imagery of a small boat being tossed about on the Sea of Galilee must have been symbolic of dangers faced by this small community surrounded by a sea of hostility. The boat is still a valid symbol for the church today. Although Jesus is not physically present with us in the boat, He remains actively present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Today we may think we have a bigger boat – but we are all familiar with the story of the Titanic. In the storms through which the church is currently navigating, merely rearranging deckchairs is not a viable solution. Embrace the storms with faith and, if necessary, rock the boat even more.

This text reminds us:

- (1) Following Jesus may lead us into storms.
- (2) Jesus is present with us in the boat. In our times of difficulty, we do not need to wake Jesus. Rather, we need to awaken our faith.
- (3) God is in control. All things work together for good, even though we may not be able to see the big picture from the vantage point of the storm. Peace ultimately comes through faith and trust, rather than acting from fear.