

Be Astonished
Part Two: His Authority Over the Natural World
Mark 4.35-41

February 11

David Henderson

As human beings, with so much that is uncertain in our lives and in our world, we love the idea of control.

But how much is actually within our power to control as limited and finite human beings, who only have so much power and influence? What actually is in your power to control?

Like whether or not the grocery has the ingredient you need for your favorite snack.

Or whether or not your favorite team wins.

Or how many times they show Taylor Swift.

Or whether or not the person you hope to see goes to the watch party?

Or whether or not a light will turn red on the way to the watch party?

Or whether or not you get covid from someone at the watch party?

We love to think we are in control in life. But think of how much in life is actually outside of our control.

I remember one time when I was out sailing a little Sunfish sailboat on Lake Maxinkuckee when I was in my teens.

It was a calm day with a light wind – probably too light to be sailing. But I knew exactly what I was doing.

I sailed out onto the lake with a gentle tailwind that slowly pushed me away from shore.

Then after I'd gone out a ways I figured it was time to turn around and head back. I began to angle my way back toward the shore. And then I tried to tack, which is when you swing the boat around and get it to go the other direction, with the wind hitting the other side of your sail.

But the wind was so light I just kept getting the boat around halfway, but I couldn't finish the turn because there wasn't enough wind and I was going too slow, and the sail would start to luff, which means it would flap around and fail to catch any wind and I'd lose all my momentum and just sit there. And then eventually I'd slip back into going the same direction I was headed before I started my turn, and find myself even further from the dock.

I tried that about seven times. What I would have done for even a tiny bit more breeze. More than once I was tempted to stand on the prow of the sailboat and try to blow on the sails myself.

The good thing is that when you're a teenager you really don't care at all about what other people think, or about having it all together, so it didn't impact in the least that all this was happening in front of the picture window where all of my cousins were sitting and watching me out on the lake.

Then all of a sudden things changed. In a moment the sailboat picked up speed, and even though I was heading straight into the wind, I was able to beeline straight back to the pier where I started.

I suppose I should mention that the thing that suddenly changed was the rope that was tossed to me from a ski boat by my cousin who came out to rescue me after he and my other cousins spent the last half hour painfully watching me trying to come about unsuccessfully half a dozen times.

* * *

This morning we come to the second message in our spring series called *Be Astonished*. The series is an exploration of some of the primary passages in a short ancient biography called The Gospel of Mark.

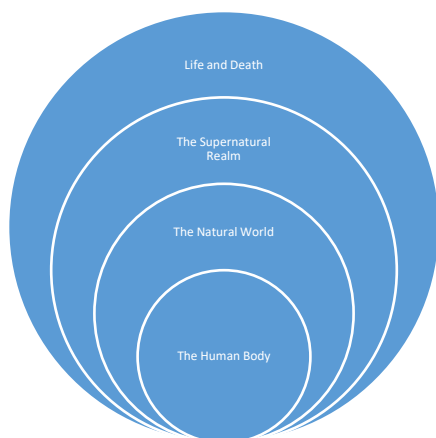
Mark's gospel is a biography of Jesus of Nazareth. And the question that Mark is answering in his biography is what makes Jesus different from every other person who has walked this planet?

There is almost universal scholarly consensus that Mark was written within forty years of his death. And a very strong written tradition that traces all the way back to the end of the first century tells us that all of the stories found in the gospel of Mark come from Peter, the disciple who spent time with Jesus right from the beginning of his ministry. I Peter 5.13 tells us that Mark was Peter's traveling companion for at least part of his ministry, and he wrote down all these sayings and doings of Jesus from the stories Peter told again and again in his preaching.

In this series we're looking specifically at those passages where people responded with astonishment or fear to the things that Jesus said and did.

At first glance, Mark's gospel just seems to be a random collection of stories and teachings. But as you begin to work your way through the book, one of the things you see is that there's a structure to the book . . .

Concentric Circles of Jesus' Authority



Mark shows us in ever widening circles how Jesus demonstrates his power and authority over various realms of human existence: the human body, the human soul, the natural world, the supernatural world, even the realms of life and death.

And with each new circle that we come into, those who see and hear Jesus find themselves responding with astonishment and asking, “Who *is* this?!”

That’s certainly true of the story we explore today from Mark chapter 4. The story is filled with little details that make it clear that it was told by an eyewitness. Listen to the story as Peter relayed it to Mark.

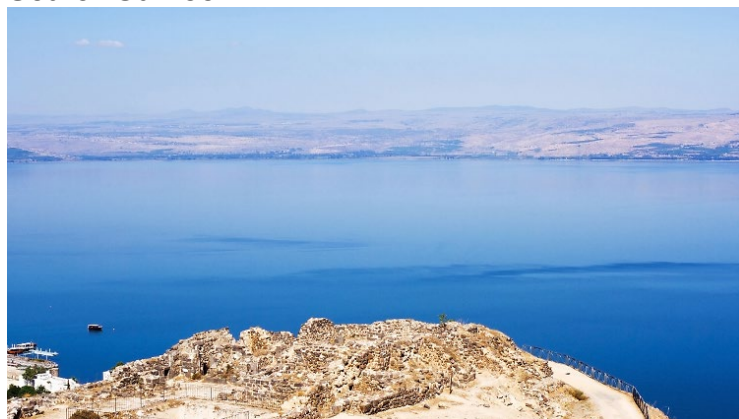
From the beginning of chapter four . . .

Mark 4.1

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge.

The lake referred to here is the Sea of Galilee.

Sea of Galilee



Because the lake was surrounded by people who spoke different languages it had several different names. In addition to Galilee, it was also called Gennesaret, Kinnereth, and the Sea of Tiberias

The lake is good sized, about thirteen miles long and nine miles across. Though it doesn't begin to rival any of the great lakes, it's about twenty five times larger than Lake Maxinkuckee, on which I had my very successful sailing venture.

Galilee is located in the northern part of Israel, far north of Jerusalem. It's found all the way up near the headwaters of the River Jordan, which runs north-south from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea.

The Sea of Galilee happens to be the lowest freshwater lake in the world. Its surface is 700 feet below sea level.

It's estimated that eighty five percent of Jesus' ministry took place on the shores of this huge lake: Peter's house in Capernaum, which sits just fifty yards from the shore, was sort of the home office for his ministry. Other cities that touched the shores of Galilee were Magdala, Tabga, Bethsaida, Decapolis, Tiberius.

So Jesus sits down in the boat and begins to teach. He is seated in a boat teaching so people on shore could easily see and hear him.

I'm going to skip over his teaching for now, because we're focusing in this section of our series on the amazing things Jesus did. We'll come back to that in the second half of this series when we look at the amazing things Jesus said. Hopping up to verse 35 . . .

Mark 4.35-36

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.

What would the boat have been like?

Ancient Fishing Boat from Sea of Galilee



In 1986 the hull of an ancient fishing boat was found in the mud right along the shoreline where so much of his ministry happened. It has been dated to within a few decades either side of Jesus' ministry

The boat gives us a great idea of what the fishing boat Jesus was sitting in would likely have been like. Here's a model of it that gives you an idea of what it would have looked like.

Model of Ancient Fishing Boat



It was 27 feet long, seven feet wide, and four feet high, with the sides reaching about two feet above the water. It was flat-bottomed, with a built-up deck inside on either end.

It had a single mast in the middle that would have held a single square sail, and there were a couple of oars on either side plus a steering oar. It would have been large enough to carry about fifteen people.

Mark 4.37-38

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?”

Furious squall is translated as “a fierce windstorm” (Holman), “a heavy squall” (WNT). “a furious squall” (NIV), and “gale force winds” (CEBA), all good translations.

This kind of a storm is not unheard of on Galilee, which has a reputation for sudden storms. Cold air coming down narrow canyons from the higher elevations hits the hot water on the surface of the lake and creates wild storms, often starting in late afternoon. People who live in the city of Tiberius call them *whistlers*. Arabs in the region call them *sharks*.

People who’ve seen these storms develop write that

In a matter of minutes, these gusts of wind transform the smooth surface of the water into a seething and roaring cauldron. A calm sea can give way to wind-driven waves six to ten feet high!

Recent examples were recorded in 1969, 1992 , 2019, and 2022. In the storm in 2019 they measured 87 mph winds. And in the storm in 2022 they measured eight to ten foot high waves

Waves broke over the boat so it was nearly swamped. Remember, the sides of the boat were only a few feet above the water line, and that’s when the sea is calm.

Because it’s rigged with a single square sail in the middle of the keel it has to sail at an almost perpendicular angle to the wind, so the waves are coming from the side and it is easier for them to crash into the boat and spill over into it.

High Waves at Sea



This isn't a picture of a storm on the Sea of Galilee, but this gives you an idea of what it would be like to be in a storm with the kind of high winds and high waves that they experience.

And Jesus is sound asleep in the back of the boat.

Obviously had to be in a deep sleep to be sleeping through this. I think there are probably two dimensions of that.

I'm convinced that Jesus *fell* asleep because he was exhausted from a long day of ministry. He *stayed* asleep, despite all that was going on around him, because he had such unwavering trust and confidence in the goodness of God regardless of the circumstances.

They woke him and said: Don't you care? Their question is sarcastic, rude, accusing.

CSB Don't you care that we're going to die?

CJB Doesn't it matter to you that we're about to be killed?

RT France Are we to drown for all you care?

You can hear the anger in their voices.

A good friend of mine, a counselor in Cincinnati named Dave Barr, once told me years ago that anger is always a secondary emotion. It's the thing we feel after we feel something else. Dave told me that when we feel anger, the thing we usually feel behind the anger is either fear or hurt or both.

You can hear in their sarcasm and rudeness both fear of what will happen to them and hurt that Jesus isn't doing anything about it. At the very least he could be bailing with them as the ship goes down

A third of these men are skilled sailors, which meant that they understood clearly the danger they were in. You can hear it in their voices.

My good friend Danny Sharpe, who is a skilled and experienced sailor, told me one time he sailed into seven or eight foot waves and he said he was really frightened. His dad had the helm, and he wasn't confident in his sailing skills, and his kids were on board, and he was really worried that they were going to go down.

They don't waste time with niceties. They're afraid and they yell at Jesus.

Mark 4.39

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 doesn't pray. He *speaks*. He is not calling on his father's power. He is speaking out of his *own* power.

The word "Be quiet!" was a word of command that was used in an exorcism to cast out an evil spirit. This is the same word that Jesus speaks to the demon that he casts out of a man in Mark chapter one.

Mark 1.25-27

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him."

Jesus speaks two words to the storm. The first one could be translated: "Hush. Be silent. Hold your peace." And the second one: literally "Put a muzzle on it. Be put to silence. Become speechless." Hold your tongue. Pipe down. Button your mouth. Put a sock in it.

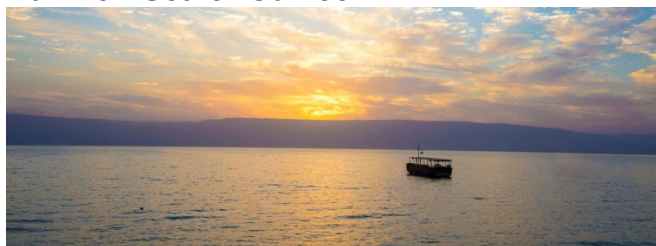
What happens next?

The wind died down and it was completely calm.

Imagine being on that boat. One minute you are drenched from head to toe, holding on for dear life, screaming to be heard over the wind and waves, the spindrift lashing your face, desperately bailing the water that is dumping into the boat, terrified as each new wave rolls toward you, trying to keep the bow heading towards the waves so the boat doesn't flip.

The next moment . . . complete calm, quiet, stillness. The wind stopped and there was a great calm.

Calm on Sea of Galilee



Mark 4.40

He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Jesus rebuked the waves and the wind. Now he turns and rebukes his disciples.

They are viewing their circumstances without seeing the loving God of the universe in the picture alongside those circumstances.

And clearly they don't understand yet how Jesus could be related to the loving God of the universe.

In scripture, faith is not a matter of giving our intellectual assent to certain doctrines: these are the things I believe are true. Yes, there are things we believe are true as part of *the faith*, things like the incarnation and the crucifixion and the resurrection.

But at its essence faith isn't affirming that certain things are true. Faith is confidence in a person.

That's why faith and fear don't really belong in the same space. That's why Jesus challenges them. If I really trust you, I don't need to be fearful for me.

Mark 4.41

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Jesus addressed them. But I'm not sure they even heard him.

It says in verse 40 that they were afraid. Why? Because of the storm that started. Now in verse 41 it says they are even more afraid. Why? Because of the storm that stopped.

This is the point in the message where I want us to just step back and reflect on this a bit.

At least four of them were fishermen, professional sailors/ Peter and Andrew were fishermen who came from Bethsaida, which means house of fishing. James and John were fishermen from the same region. Phillip may have been a fisherman as well.

Think of the job of a fisherman who uses a sailboat. Every aspect of a sailboat is designed as a way of responding to the elements and capitalizing on them. You *harness* the elements without letting them have the last word, make them work for you. You can't change the wind, the water, the waves, but you can get them to work for you.

A hollow hull lets you harness the buoyancy of the water, letting your float on top of the water, Sails let you harness the wind to move you through the water. And a rudder lets you harness the fluidity of water pushing against it to steer you through the water.

Then when you find yourself in a storm, the fury of the storm is too great to harness, now you seek to *mitigate* the damage the wind, water, waves can cause. Again, you can't change the wind, the water, the waves, not in the least, but you can try to minimize their destructive power.

You lower your yard arm, the cross beam that holds the sail, and reef the sail, gathering it in, reducing the surface area so the wind doesn't blow you over. You use buckets to bail the boat so the water in the hull doesn't swamp you. You steer the boat into the wind so the waves don't roll you over. You use the drag from a sea anchor off the bow of the ship in the water to keep the boat heading into the wind so it won't turn sideways and get hit by a wave and roll over.

What is a *given* in this experience is the elements – the wind will blow, the waves will crash, the water will move however it moves. What you are trying to do is work with what you've got, and mitigate against their destructive power

So your whole life as a sailor your every dealing with the wind, the rain, the waves, the weather has been to *respond* to it. You are *under* the weather, in a sense. You are subject to the weather.

And now . . . Jesus is *over* the weather. He controls it. It responds to him rather than the other way around. He censures it. He admonishes it. He forbids it. He silences it. He tames it. He masters it.

These are Jewish boys who have grown up immersed in Scripture, especially in the psalms. And what that psalms teach is that God alone possesses the power to quell storms and calm the sea:

Psalm 65.7 He stills the roaring of the seas and the roaring of the waves

Psalm 89.9 He rules over the surging seas/ when their waves mount up, he stills them

Psalm 104.7 The waters stood above the mountains but at your rebuke the waters fled

Almost certainly the words of Psalm 107 would have come to mind.

Psalm 107.29

He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.

Their reaction: fear in face of storm, and even greater fear in face of this revelation.

They are terrified, they are greatly afraid. Why? Because he does something no one can do. He does something only God can do.

This brings us into the whole cluster of words that runs through Mark's gospel: fear, awe, wonder, astonishment, marveling, amazement. They all have to do with the idea of coming up to the end of human capacity, and then seeing something that goes beyond human capacity happen before your eyes.

We're hungry and we don't have food. And Jesus makes food appear. And the people are astonished.

We're dying and we don't have a cure. And healing comes through Jesus' touch. And the people are amazed.

We're in a storm and we don't have control. And Jesus quiets the storm. And the people are afraid.

All these words are getting at what a person feels when they come directly into contact with God.

Jesus does something only God can do. The disciples are brought face to face with a display of divine power and glory through words spoken by a mere human being.

They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

Who is this Jesus? It is the single most important question you can ask when it comes to exploring the Christian faith.

How do you answer that question? And what is stirred in you?

Prayer

Christ, our God, to Thee we raise this our Sacrifice of Praise.