

Frightful Crossings: reading Mark 4:35-41 in Mark's Context and Ours

Introduction of the Passage

Mark's account here in chapter 4 of the stilling of the storm belongs to a longer sequence of stories that emphasize Jesus' mastery over Torah, over the chaos of creation, over the demonic, and even over death itself. It also intersects with critical themes that course throughout Mark's narrative. As Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee in Mark 4, they do so with the intent of getting to the "other side." This crossing, in tandem with what takes place in the surrounding narrative, lead us to encounter two primary impulses of Mark's gospel. They lead us to see that the darker forces within creation which Jesus confronts include the boundaries and injustices we force upon one another. They also lead us to see that Jesus' ministry of healing, hope, and justice, when taken up by his disciples, has the power to overcome these demonic divisions and usher the reign of God into their midst.

Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Mark 4 in its First Century Context: the world behind the text

I believe that in order for us to understand what is going on in this story and how it might speak to us in our context, we need to read it not only as a part of Mark's larger narrative, but also against the backdrop of the first century world: the Roman world. If we do not engage Mark's historical context, we will likely miss several important dimensions of this narrative, and several resonances to our time and place. And so, in what follows, I will dust off that scheme that many clergy learn in seminary when taught about the importance of reading biblical texts in context. We will examine the world behind the text, the world in front of the text, and the world of the text as we reflect on how this passage might guide us in our time and place.

Three things that are important for us to know about the Roman context of Mark:

1. Rome was a world of steep social and economic stratification, resulting in debilitating social and economic oppression for the vast majority of its subjects
 - a. The Roman socio-economic circulatory system: slavery, peasant labor, taxation, and land rent ensured the flow of resources to the elite (diagram)
 - b. According to cultural anthropologists, the elite consisted of 2-5% of the population in ancient Rome, and as little as 2% in Roman Palestine. Yet they possessed 50-65%

of their society's resources. Of the remaining 35-50% of those resources, the retainer class took a disproportionate amount, as sanctioned by the elite they served. As a result, the vast majority of the population, consisting of peasants, artisans, slaves, and expendables, about 80%, lived at, slightly above, or well below a subsistence level. For most of these folk, life was nasty, brutish and short. Cultural anthropologists estimate that the life expectancy of the urban peasantry was 27, the rural peasantry, 32. Infant mortality rates were about 30%, and half of all children living past age 1 would be dead by age 16. For those of the peasant class who were fortunate to be alive, their bodies would likely be plagued by protein deficiency, parasites, rotting teeth, and disease. You know those portraits of Jesus hanging in the hallways of many of our churches, or gracing the pages of children's bibles? The ones that portray Jesus with golden hair, fair complexion, pearly white teeth, and clorox clean garments? The ones we tell our children—hey, that's Jesus! That ain't Jesus. That is a sanitized version of Jesus reflecting our North American tendency to ignore many of the political and economic realities of Jesus' historical context and his proclamation of the Reign of God. It is also a portrait that sits comfortably in church members' hearts who privilege whiteness—but more on that later.

- c. In Palestine, the highest levels of the Israelite priesthood, including the Sadducees, and the Herodian family, were the elite who ruled as an extension of Roman control. Lower ranking priests, government officials, and likely some Pharisees, served as retainers to the Israelite elite. The tax burden for Palestinian Israelites was especially severe due to the additional tithing required for the temple, reaching as high as 40% of their meager incomes. Many rural Israelites lost their ancestral landholdings to the priestly elite, and their freedom, when they defaulted on loans the priestly elite graciously provided with extremely high rates of interest. Much of the population of Palestine suffered bitterly under their regime.

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2. The elite's hegemonic hold on political, social, economic and religious power was normalized through a culture of division, elite claims to mastery, and fear.
 - a. It was a basic assumption of many in the first century world, as it is of many today, that humans are not of equal worth. It is also basic assumption of many that it is impossible for resources to equally shared. Most humans then and perhaps now viewed life as a zero-sum game: if you have more, then I have less. Cultural anthropologists refer to this as the principle of limited good; goodness in limited supply. Most viewed life as a struggle against scarcity, and a struggle against others. Most did not view or live life as the sharing of abundance.
 - b. And so, policies and narratives needed to be established which legitimated the inequitable distribution of resources as mandated by those in power. The Roman

and Israelite elite, as the political, social, and religious leaders of their respective realms, composed those policies and narratives. And they consistently reminded the subjects under their control of the proper order of things through propaganda-laden ceremonies and rituals that saturated social life. In short, the elite were in charge of overseeing the economic, and religious capital under their control because heaven has deemed it so. The Romans leaders ruled with the favor of the gods, and the Israelite elite ruled over temple and Israelite society because God, through Moses, had established them as God's priests. Moreover, the Israelite elite and their retainers like the Pharisees and scribes shaped policies of purity and tithing and sacrifice that further reinforced their own social position and financial coffers while also circumscribing others' access to God's healing and forgiveness. They created a system of insiders and outsiders, clean and unclean, and they established themselves as the caretakers, the brokers, of this system. You want access to God and God's blessing? You need to go through them. And it is going to cost you.

- c. And when claims to a divine mandate by the elite were not enough to legitimate their mastery over others and the resources of the empire and the blessings of heaven, they simply overpowered any who might openly resist with force. For minor resistance or lax participation in practices of purity, reprisals in the form of public dishonoring or the threat of violence were often effective, and these were much cheaper forms of social control. But when these were not enough, or resistance escalated to revolt, jails and whips, swords and crosses, were readily at hand. The Roman elite knew from years of experience that some among those ungrateful ingrates would stir up trouble from time to time. And so they imprisoned, enslaved, killed, and crucified prodigiously, so that fear was always on their side.

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3. Despite the elite's claims to and exercise of mastery over the majority, many within Israel did resist. They resisted in three ways:
 - a. They resisted by not buying into the elite propaganda that the current order of things was mandated by God. In fact, some bold Israelites countered, though most often in subtle and in veiled forms, that the Roman elite and the Israelite elite serving under them ruled not with a divine mandate as the elite claimed, but a demonic one. Caesar and his officials, the chief priests and the Herodians, were not agents of the divine, but agents of Satan. These apocalyptically minded Israelites, including early Christians, announced to one another that a day is coming when God will cleanse heaven and earth of all these evil ones, human and demonic alike.
 - b. Many within Israel resisted by creating alternative communities of practice. Some, like the covenantors of Qumran, formed communities apart from Israelite society.

More formed groups and associations that more subtly and covertly resisted elite hegemony. They adopted different practices of purity, engaging in rituals of cleansing and penance unregulated by the elite. Their drawing of boundaries between clean and unclean, insiders and outsiders, often deviated from the boundaries stipulated by the elite and tended to be much more variable and sometimes—though not always—more inclusive. Like the early Christians, some also adopted radically different systems of resource distribution, distributing resources based on need, not one's social location.

- c. And some resisted by open revolt, embracing the desperate hope that they could free themselves of Roman control through physical force. Mark's gospel was likely written during or shortly after that tragic time in the first century when thousands within Palestine took up arms against the Romans and their client rulers. Known as the Jewish Revolt, the end result was devastating for Israelite communities in Judea and throughout Palestine. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Scores of Israelites were killed or enslaved. The place of Israelite society in Palestine was radically altered and greatly diminished.

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Analogous Realities in our Context: the world in front of the text

Now I will shift our purview to our context today—the world in front of the text. As we consider how this story from Mark 4 may speak to our time and place, what are some realities in our society that are analogous to the world in which Mark composed his gospel?

America is not first century Rome. At least not yet. For one, we don't have an emperor. There are real and significant differences in how most fair socially and economically within American society, compared to the widespread deprivation that was so common in ancient Rome. For instance, we still have a fairly strong, albeit weakening middle class. Life expectancies are more than double than that of ancient Rome. Many, many more people today are educated at levels only very few achieved in ancient Rome. We are not Rome. And yet, there are, I think, troubling parallels between the world in which we live, and the world in which Jesus and his earliest followers lived.

1. Ours is a society of increasing economic stratification, with wealth becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of an elite few, and more concentrated among white people. According to data released by the Federal Reserve, the top 1% now holds 38.6% of the nation's wealth, up from 33.7% in 2007. The bottom 90% now holds only 22.8% of the nation's total wealth, down from 28.5% in 2007. Take note of what that means: the nation's top 1% hold more wealth than the bottom 90% combined. This contributes to significant economic pressures for major segments of the population, perpetuating competition for what are perceived to be limited resources. It is one major reason the perception of limited good continues among us today. And for many within America,

scarcity of resources is not simply a perception, but a reality. From the latest census data of 2016, over 12% of Americans, 40.6 million Americans, live in poverty. According to the latest ALICE report compiled by the United Way, which utilizes a measure based on the actual costs of living county by county, 960,131 households in Wisconsin – fully 42%, and triple the number previously thought – fall short of the ALICE threshold which researchers believe represents a basic level of economic stability. Poverty rates between white households and black and Latino households reveal notable disparities. The poverty rate for black residents in 2016 was 22%, for Hispanics 19.4%, compared to 8.8% for whites. The wealth gap between white Americans and Latino and Black Americans is even more extreme. According to the New York Times, for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families hold just \$5.04. The Economic Policy Institute found that more than one in four black households have zero or negative net worth, compared to less than one in ten white families without wealth. The Institute for Policy Studies' recent report entitled, *The Road to Zero Wealth: How the Racial Divide is Hollowing Out the America's Middle Class*, shows that between 1983 and 2013, the wealth of the median black household declined 75% (from \$6,800 to \$1,700), and the median Latino household declined 50% (from \$4,000 to \$2,000). At the same time, wealth for the median white household *increased* 14% from \$102,000 to \$116,800. Despite some improvements in the economic outlook for the black community, such as reductions in black unemployment, the trajectory of these long-established trends is not likely to shift. In fact, by 2020 black and Latino households are projected to lose even more wealth: 18% for the former, 12% for the latter. After those declines, the median white household will own 86 times more wealth than its black counterpart, and 68 times more wealth than its Latino one. These disparities have, of course, significant implications on black and Latino communities and families, and are a contributing factor to a host of related issues, such as access to health care, affordable housing, and quality education; stability of relationships and teen pregnancy; graduation rates for both high school and college, and incarceration rates. It is no surprise that many economists see the wealth gap as one of the most pressing economic and social issues we now face as Americans. Sadly, many of our own elite continue to promote the pursuit of wealth seemingly unconcerned about its effects on others. An evangelical, Michael Gerson, who served as a policy adviser and the chief speechwriter to President George W. Bush, published a lengthy article in the April edition of *The Atlantic* titled "The Last Temptation." The article puzzles over support for Donald Trump and his policies by white Christians. Gerson's critique is wide-ranging and passionate. But this section captures one of his main points:

Trump supporters tend to dismiss moral concerns about Trump's behavior as squeamishness over the president's "style." But the problem is the distinctly non-Christian substance of his *values*. Trump's unapologetic materialism—his equation of financial and social success with human achievement and worth—is a negation of Christian teaching. His tribalism and hatred for "the other" stand in direct opposition to Jesus's radical ethic of neighbor love. Trump's strength-worship and contempt for

“losers” smack more of Nietzsche than of Christ. *Blessed are the proud. Blessed are the ruthless. Blessed are the shameless. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after fame.*
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/the-last-temptation/554066/>

In some important respects, we are not so different from ancient Rome after all. *Ours is a society of increasing economic stratification, with wealth becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of an elite few.*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/09/new-census-data-shows-more-americans-emerging-from-poverty/539589/>

https://cdn.ymaws.com/unitedwaywi.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/FINAL_Lowres_9.26.16_16UW_AL.pdf

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianthompson1/2018/02/18/the-racial-wealth-gap-addressing-americas-most-pressing-epidemic/#56155cfd7a48>

2. Within American society, and still today, white people's hegemonic hold on political, social, and economic power has been normalized through a history and culture of division, white claims to mastery, and fear. Slavery, the strategic and persistent efforts of many whites to undermine Black political and economic power during reconstruction, the cultural and physical genocide committed against native Americans, the white supremacist movement of the late 1800's and the 1900's during which white Christians lynched between 4,000-6,000 African Americans, segregation as manifested not only in the Jim Crow laws of this earlier era but still in the lingering effects and realities of housing codes, loan policies, freeway systems, suburbia, and inner cities; disparities in educational resources, job opportunities, wages; and the ongoing reality of racial profiling in all levels of our criminal justice system. Donald Trump's characterization of Latino immigrants as rapists, murderers and drug dealers, his characterization of Muslims as dangerous terrorists, his characterization of white supremacists marching in Charlottesville chanting Nazi slogans as "good people," and his patronizing dismissal of uppity, son of a bitch athletes who dare to kneel during the national anthem. We continue to perpetuate systemic racism and white privilege. These realities have become so normalized, so the way things should be, that many white Americans refuse to believe they even exist despite the mountains of historical, statistical and testimonial evidence that they do. If only they would play by the rules. If only they would embrace our American values. If only they would work hard like we did to get what we earned. God helps those who help themselves, you know. The Bible says. And when such white, male, heterosexual supremacy is asked to share political and social power and cultural space with others, as has been increasingly the case over the last 50 years, what happens? The rhetoric of fear and privilege happens, Make America Great Again happens, small mindedness and small heartedness happen, even among, especially among white Christians. In a *Sojourner's* article entitled, "American Christianity has Failed," Stephen Mattson argues that the predominant theme of Westernized Christendom is to proclaim Christian rhetoric while practicing the opposite in reality. He states

While the gospels instruct followers of Christ to help the poor, oppressed, maligned, mistreated, sick, and those most in need of help, Christians in America have largely

supported measures that have rejected refugees, refused aid to immigrants, cut social services to the poor, diminished help for the sick, fueled xenophobia, reinforced misogyny, ignored racism, stoked hatred, reinforced corruption, and largely increased inequality, prejudice, and fear.

<https://sojo.net/articles/american-christianity-has-failed>

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3. Many in ancient Rome resisted the politics of hegemony and disparity that had become systematized by the elite. Thankfully, so too is it the case that many are resisting the politics of hegemony and disparity still at work in our midst today. How might this story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the divide from Mark 4 inspire us to do this holy work more boldly and more faithfully?

Crossing Over to the Other Side: the world of Mark's text

In the narrative preceding Jesus' crossing of the sea and the stilling of the storm, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the Reign of God through parables. Here Jesus makes several things clear about the saving Rule of God. Through these parables, including the parable of the sower and its interpretation, Jesus teaches that becoming a recipient of God's blessing entails a total commitment to the ways of God over against the ways of the world. Jesus also teaches his disciples that the Kingdom of God is divisive—the arrival of the Kingdom, the reality of the Kingdom in Jesus compels a decision either for God or against God. And Jesus teaches them that ones' embrace or rejection of the Rule of God has extremely serious consequences. Rejecting God's Rule leads to pettiness of spirit, the worship of self-sufficiency, dessication of mind and soul, scarcity, and death. Embracing the Reign of God leads to trust in God's provision, and abundant blessing for others.

After concluding these teachings, Jesus tells his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." This crossing of the Sea of Galilee is much more than a geographical flourish to Mark's account. Jesus calls his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee here in Mark 4, in direct discourse mind you, as he sets his sights on Gerasene. This is a clear and obtrusive call to transgress boundaries. This is an object lesson of how Jesus' teaching on embracing the Kingdom of God he just relayed to his disciples is to be lived out. Jesus is leading his disciples to places where decent people just do not go, at least not decent Israelites. To draw from some contemporary phrasing, Jesus is taking his disciples to a shit-hole country where shit-hole people live. You know, Gentiles. Let's go to the other side, Jesus says! We've got seeds to sow. We've got secrets to disclose. We've got blessing to share. And so they leave the adoring crowd behind, jump into their rickety boats, and set sail for Gerasene, where demons dwell.

At this point in the story, it important for us to note that Mark is one of those apocalyptically oriented Israelite Christians who believes that demons and Satan are real. He believes that the depraved vocation of these malevolent beings is to suck the blessing and joy out of life, leaving death and destruction in their wake. They are demeters, white walkers, Sith, Nazgul. Because of them, the world has become a painfully inhospitable place in which to (try to) live. If we were to page through Mark's gospel, we would find that at nearly every turn disease, maladies, evil spirits, hunger and enmity plague humanity. Cursing, not blessing, is the norm. Satan and sin seem to be having their way, and the result is a people besieged with forces that defy life and spawn suffering. Mark's world, like the Roman world in general, is a world of desperate struggle and want.

Mark is also one of those apocalyptically oriented Israelite Christians who believe that the Roman and Israelite elite are among those who have surrendered their hearts to Satan and now act as his agents. A not so subtle nod in this direction is provided by the name Mark reports for the many-headed demon Jesus will encounter when they land in Gerasene: Legion. Another indication is the persistent contrast Mark weaves into his account between the values of the elite and the values of Jesus.

Many readers have noted that Mark's narrative presents two contrasting orientations to life: what God wills for people, and what people will for themselves. Human sinfulness is reflected in the fact that people are self-oriented and self-serving. Darkness clouds the thoughts and hearts of humanity. Fear pulls people away from trusting in God and God's instruction, leading them to entrust themselves to that which does not lead to blessing. In his depiction of the Israelite elite, Mark reveals them as embodiments of these worldly values. They are obsessed with wealth and fear. The pursuit and maintenance of wealth, especially in the agonistic, hierarchical world of Rome, is a quest for power and self-preservation. Fear is its consort. Herod fears John the Baptist (6:20), but not more than he fears being shamed by his guests (6:26). Pilate fears the crowd, and so hands Jesus over to be flogged and crucified (15:15). The Israelite leaders fear having their status compromised by this itinerant healer and preacher, who challenges their system of piety (Mark 3:1-6; 7:1-23), the propriety of the temple cult (11:15-19), and their pursuit of wealth and honor (7:1-13). Thus, already by 3:6, alliances are forged among the elite in opposition to their common enemy: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him."

The misalignment of, the perversion of, the elite's value system is repeatedly unmasked by Jesus, by the things he says, and by the things he does. He dares to do things like cross over to the other side. He dares to transgress demon-inspired boundaries that sow heart-numbing fear, greed, and division into God's human creatures. And as Mark tells the gospel story, this really scares the hell out of the elite, and it also scares the hell out of Satan. Jesus' crossing to the other side is not a geographical flourish, and the sudden onslaught of a violent storm as Jesus and his disciples head out to sea is not a random meteorological happenstance. It is no coincidence that when Jesus lands on the other side he is immediately accosted by a Legion of a demon who attempts to bar

Jesus' trespass. Satan does not want this crossing to happen. Satan does not want these boundaries breached! Purity codes, age-old enmities, long standing prejudices, greed and fear borne out of scarcity, and scarcity itself borne of greed and fear. What delicious circularity! Satan loves those things! They're the greatest! Satan has worked long and hard to warp human hearts to this design. Go back to your shore where you belong Jesus! Stay away from those Gentiles, Jesus! Satan rages and bellows, beats against that boat and its crew, in hopes of sending it into the chaotic depths where it belongs. How dare you, Jesus! These boundaries are mine! And so the wind howls and chaos swamps their boats, calling them all to watery graves. The disciples are understandably terrified. This is no normal storm.

The threat of giving in to fear was very real for Jesus' disciples on the sea that day. The threat of giving in to fear was also very real among those to whom Mark composed this gospel. Most scholars believe that Mark's community was suffering from intense persecution by the elite and those who embraced the elite worldview. In light of the suffering they were experiencing, it would make sense for these Christians to mute their witness against the elite's warped value systems of greed and division. Keeping their heads down gave them a better chance of avoiding Rome's bloody crosses. Acquiescence would be the prudent course. But Jesus shakes his head, and says "Where is your faith?" We need to cross over. We need to go to the other side. We need to sow there as well so that blessing may abound for them. "Where is your faith in me? I can help you overcome the demonic bluster of Satan and his servants. You are not perishing, you are finally discovering a life worth living and dying for. Where is your faith in God? God called you to be stewards of this good news for the sake of all people. Where is your faith in the Kingdom I have just started to reveal to you—just a glimpse, yes, but even this glimpse of God's good realm of peace, and abundance, and blessing for all should be enough for you to finally abandon the perverse kingdom you are living in, even if it costs you your lives. You are my disciples. You must not be silent. You must sow hope, love, and justice. Where is your faith?"

The inequity and white privilege we have sown into the fabric of American culture, and American hearts, is nothing short of demonic. Satan has worked long and hard to warp our souls to this design. It is pervasive and insidious. Worst of all, it is normal. And when it is challenged, Satan, and people aligned with his designs, will rant and rage; they will plot, lie and scheme. Still, Jesus tells us. You need to cross over these boundaries that divide. You must not be silent. You must sow hope, love, and justice for all people. Where is your faith?"