

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

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Introduction to 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

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 (see diagram on page 4)
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.
3. Despite the elite's claims to and exercise of mastery over the majority, many within Israel resisted elite rule and culture.

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

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 whites.
 - a. The nation's top 1% hold more wealth than the bottom 90% combined.
 - b. Over 12% of Americans, 40.6 million Americans, live in poverty. According to the latest ALICE report compiled by the United Way, 960,131 households in Wisconsin—fully 42%—fall short of the ALICE threshold which researchers believe represents a basic level of economic stability.
 - c. 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.

- d. 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. By 2020, the median white household will own 86 times more wealth than its black counterpart, and 68 times more wealth than its Latino one.

<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>

Michael Gerson, policy adviser and the chief speechwriter to President George W. Bush, states 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/>

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.

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>

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.

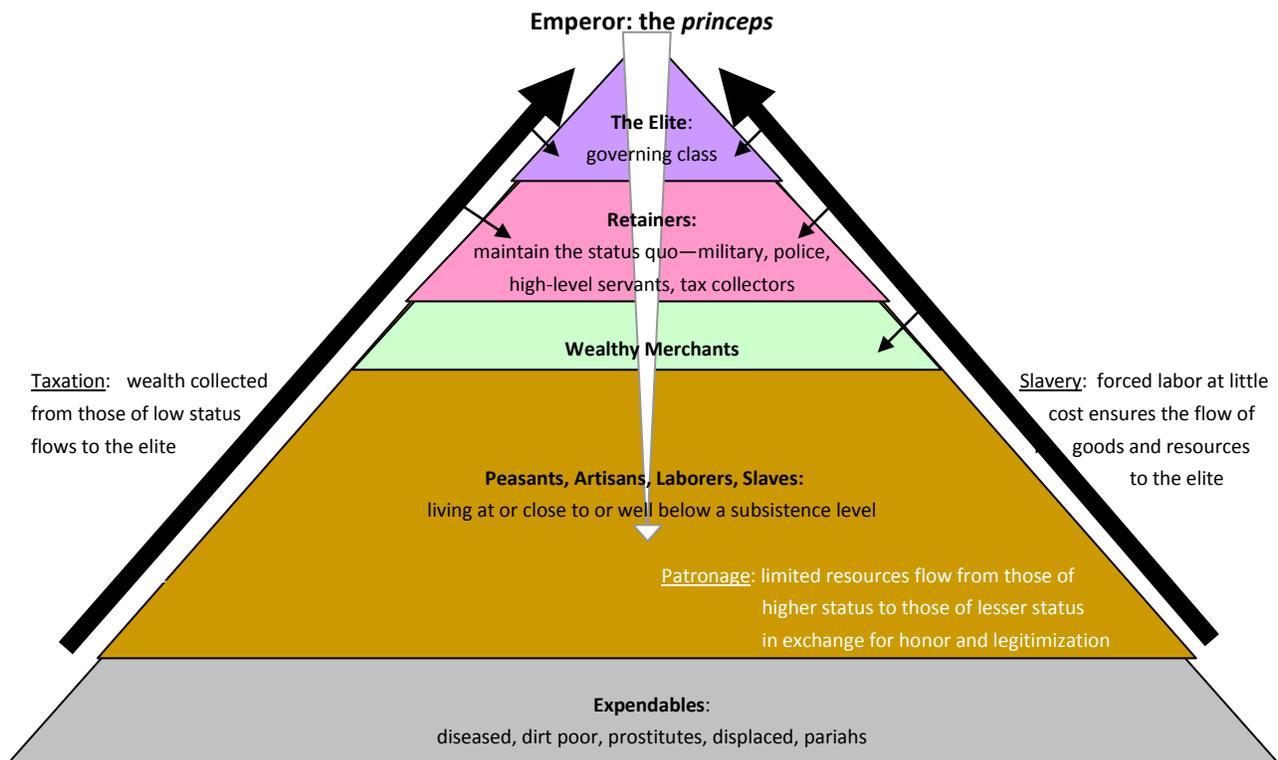
Crossing Over to the Other Side: the world of Mark's text

1. In the narrative preceding Jesus' crossing of the sea and the stilling of the storm, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of God through parables.
 - a. Becoming an agent of God's reign entails a heart and mind open to God and God's rule.
 - b. 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.
 - c. Jesus teaches his disciples 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, desiccation of mind and soul, scarcity, and death. Embracing the Reign of God leads to trust in God's provision, and abundant blessing for others and one's self.
2. Jesus calls his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. This is a clear and obtrusive call to transgress boundaries established by the elite that divide and demean. These boundaries are demonic in origin and intent.
3. Satan resists this crossing of boundaries because it undermines Satan's depraved designs for humanity.
4. Scholars believe that Mark's community was suffering from intense persecution by the elite and those who embraced the elite worldview. But through this story and throughout the gospel, Jesus calls his disciples to resist the division and inequity championed by the elite and to continue sowing hope, love, and justice.

Conclusion

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 the boundaries that divide. You must not be silent. You must sow hope, love, and justice for all people. Where is your faith?

How the Romans ran their world: social and economic dynamics of disparity



One of the key features of Roman society the diagram seeks to convey is its economic “circulatory system.” The lower class produced nearly all of the goods and services of the empire, but retained very little of that wealth for themselves. Aggressive taxation, an elite-controlled market system that “nickled and dimed” the underclass through rents and tariffs and underpaid them for their produce and/or labor, lending policies that routinely resulted in the foreclosure of peasant land holdings, and institutionalized slavery, all ensured the flow of wealth and resources from the underclass to the elite. The result of this hierarchical economy was that 2-5% of the population controlled about 60-65% of the empire’s resources, leaving 95-98% of the population the difficult task of getting by with the remaining 35-40%. While conditions likely varied among the peasant class, and to a large extent were dependent on the state of the most recent harvest, many lived at or below a subsistence level and suffered high rates of disease and protein deficiency. Cultural anthropologists estimate that the life expectancy of an urban peasant was 27, and a rural peasant 32. Infant mortality rates were about 30%, and half of all children surviving past age one would die before they reached age 16.