

Crossing the Sea

by The Rev. Dr. Paul Rader

Mark 4:35-41

If you ever find yourself in Israel, on a tour or vacation, I'd recommend you spend at least one night at Kibbutz Ginossar, just north of Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, known by Israelis as the Lake of Kinneret. (I bought this prayer shawl at the Kibbutz gift shop.) Its hotel is next to the lake, and the dining room has an expansive view of the water. The main attraction there is **Yigal Alon Museum of the Galilee**, which houses a 2,000-year-old Galilee fishing boat uncovered during a drought in the 1980s. It is known as "the Jesus boat."

Eight meters long and 2 ½ meters wide, the wood used in this boat has been dated to somewhere around 40 BC. But scientists believe the boat itself was constructed later, and that it was used for about 100 years before being scuttled, making it roughly contemporary with Jesus. It had a mast and a square sail. It also could be rowed. It had a flat bottom, permitting it to be used close to shore, and it was covered in pitch brought from the Dead Sea. While there is no evidence whatsoever that Jesus ever laid eyes on this specific boat, there is no evidence that he didn't.

There was a commercial fishing industry on the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' day. Josephus estimated that more than 200 boats plied its waters and fish from Palestine were served on tables in Rome! Even today, fishermen bring in an abundance of fish including a type of tilapia, which is marketed to tourists as "St. Peter's Fish."

The town we know today as Nazareth is located approximately 20 kms from the Sea of Galilee. So Jesus did not grow up on the water. But fishermen, fishing, and boats play a prominent role in the telling of his story, particularly in the gospel according to Mark. The first four disciples were fishermen. Jesus called them while walking along the shore. Their homes were in Capernaum, a village on the northern end of the lake.

It is in Capernaum that Jesus teaches in a synagogue and casts an evil spirit out of a man. He heals many, including Peter's mother-in-law. Later, back in Capernaum, Jesus heals the paralytic who was let down through the roof on a litter, by four friends. And it was beside the lake that he saw Levi, the tax collector, and called him to be his disciple. In chapter 3:9, we have the first reference to Jesus and a boat. *Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him.*

Chapter four begins, *on another occasion 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.* This, of course, sets up the New Testament reading for today. The crossing of the sea, or the claming of the storm, or however you describe it, is the first of three "boat" stories in Mark. The other two are found in chapters six and eight.

Lamar Williamson says “the vivid details of this dramatic story help us to feel our way into the text.” (*Mark*, p. 100) It is evening. Jesus has had a full day of teaching, but the crowds will not disperse. The sun is setting and Jesus and the disciples finally decide to sail away. Exhausted, Jesus must have fallen asleep in the stern almost immediately. (Let me tell you: nothing on earth is more restful than the gentle swaying back and forth of a boat rocking on the waves when you are tired.)

Like most of Mark’s miracle stories, this one follows a familiar pattern: there is a setting, a problem, a solution, the point of the story is usually stated somehow, and there is a response to what has just happened. We’ve just described the setting: Jesus and the twelve have pushed away from shore to cross over to the other side. Now there’s the problem to consider. And what a problem!

For years I have wondered about storms coming up quickly on the Sea of Galilee. Does this really happen? Apparently so! In March 1992 a storm sent waves ten feet (3 meters) high crashing into downtown Tiberias causing significant damage. The Sea of Galilee is the lowest freshwater lake on earth at approximately 700 feet (210 m.) below sea level. At its widest points, the lake measures 13 miles (21 km.) from north to south and 7.5 miles (12 km.) from east to west. Cooler air masses from the surrounding mountains collide with the warm air in the lake’s basin. Winds sometimes funnel through the east-west-oriented valleys in the Galilean hill country and rush down the western hillsides of the lake. The most violent storms, however, are caused by winds blowing off the Golan Heights from the east. Because the Sea is shallow, waves are more easily formed than would be the case if it were deeper. This is because the energy of the wind is dissipated by deeper water but is not absorbed or lessened by shallower water.

The setting is the Sea, the problem is the storm. The solution absolutely astonishes the disciples. The disciples woke Jesus from his sleep and demanded, probably screamed, Rabbi, don’t you care if we drown? He quickly got up and rebuked the waves as if he were casting out a demon: Quiet! Be still! And the wind died down and was completely calm.

A *Lectionary Homiletics* article written by Stephen Schuette begins this way: “Turn left and it’s the power of the storm; turn right and it’s the power of Jesus over wind and wave. Either way these disciples have eyes popping and mouths a-gape.” He continues by commenting:

What they wanted, perhaps, was for Jesus to put them back in control of a situation that had grown out of their control. At least that’s what I want in a crisis. I don’t want everything to change; I don’t want the world to shift radically; I just want the specific need addressed, thank you very much. But please don’t upset the whole order of the universe as I know it for that is fraught with a whole new set of anxieties.

Next comes the point of the story: *He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’* Notice the present tense: Jesus is clearly frustrated that the

disciples are overcome by the chaos of the storm and take refuge in their fear. (It is hard to cross any sea, much less a stormy one, when one is afraid.)

Evidently, the disciples were as terrified after the storm as they were during it. Wind and waves may be scary, but they are no scarier than Jesus! And that is the real thrust of the narrative. This particular story has done its work in us not when we say, 'isn't it wonderful that Jesus is the great comforter who gives us peace in the storms of life?' The story has done its work in us when we tremble, awe-struck and exclaim, 'who can this be? Even the winds and the waves obey him!' Jack Kingsbury echoes the same thought when he comments: "The fear gripping the disciples is no sign of reverence for Jesus but is symptomatic of their incomprehension."

Of course this is not a message that we particularly want to hear in our modern therapeutic culture. It's not a message that jibes readily with our obsession with finding peace in an arduous and stressful world. After all, here we are with every conceivable technological appliance at hand. Here we are with every labor-saving, time-saving, effort-reducing gizmo and gadget – and yet we are more stressed out and on edge than ever. The big yearning is for something to help us cope with the strain. And every new age gimmick is targeted at helping people to function more effectively in the storm and to give them peace in their stressed-out lives. We even tailor the Gospel in order to fit this priority and turn Jesus into a big, kind-hearted, uncle figure who is there to soothe us and to help us to manage the storms.

This brings us to something that must be said. It may be hard to say this to those caught in the terror of the storm but it must be said anyway. It is this: God may be mysterious, but God can be trusted. Jesus may be scary but Jesus is never maleficent or malign and therefore while we may have cause to fear, we do not have cause to be afraid of him. There is a distinction here. Some of you, I'm sure are familiar with C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. There is a conversation in it where some of the children in the story are discussing Aslan, the Lion who is the Christ figure. Having just been told that Aslan is a lion, one of the children, Lucy, and Mrs Beaver this question:

'Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.'

'That you will, dearie, and make no mistake', said Mrs Beaver, 'if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly.'

'Then, isn't he safe?' said Lucy.

'Safe?' said Mrs Beaver... 'who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you.'

Mark ended his telling of this story with the question 'Who is this?' confident that even if those first disciples did not know, the church to whom he wrote did. He's the king, I tell

you. He is the storm-stilling Lord. And he's a mystery. But he's good. And he can be trusted. The church knows this—you know this—but sometimes in the storm it forgets.