

# **“It May be Hard, but we can Make it to the Other Side!”**

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Date: August 26, 2018

## **Scripture:**

Scripture: Mark 4:35 - 5:21

Later in the day, when evening had come, he says to them, “Let's go across to the other side.” After leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat... Then a great windstorm comes up and the waves begin to pound against the boat, so that the boat suddenly began to fill up. But he was in the stern, asleep on a cushion; and they wake him up and say to him, “Teacher, don't you care that we are going to drown?”

Then he woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Be quiet, shut up!” Then the wind died down and there was a great calm.

He said to them, “Why are you so cowardly? You still don't have faith do you?” And they were completely terrified and said to one another, “Who is this guy, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

And they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he got out of the boat, suddenly a man out of the tombs controlled by an unclean spirit accosted him. This man made his home among the tombs and nobody was able to bind him, not even with a chain... Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran up and knelt before him, and shouting at the top of his voice, he says, “What do you want with me, Jesus, you Son of the Most High God? For God's sake, do not torment me!”

...And Jesus started questioning him, “What's your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he says, “for there are many of us.”

And it kept begging him over and over not to expel them from their territory. Now over there by the mountain a large herd of pigs was feeding. And so they bargained with him: “Send us over to the pigs so we may enter them.”

And so he agreed. And then the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs and the herd, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them, and drowned in the sea.

...Now those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the pigs and reported it. And so those who lived in the area started begging Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

## Sermon:

We hear it all the time that we are a divided country.  
And that we are likely more divided than we have ever been?  
Basic tolerance, let alone an open embrace, of those who are  
different from us, is no longer even expected let alone encouraged.

There are certainly many reasons for this.  
The current demagoguery emanating from many at the top  
of our political class is certainly one primary cause.

But if we look back through history we can certainly come away with  
an impression that there have always been strong nativistic impulses  
in nearly every nation which can sometimes get out of hand.

The human species has always seemed to make distinctions  
between, "us and them," and between who is "in and who is out."  
And though the current voices may seem much louder  
and the language used more offensive, I wonder  
if our divisions go as deep as many would assert?

Perhaps, after decades of some progress, we are feeling disappointed  
and discouraged to learn that we have much further still to go?  
Whether this is temporary or inevitable is beside the point.  
All we can really do in the end is choose our response,  
but how we respond is of course very important.

Fox News commentator Laura Ingraham sums up well, I think,  
the feelings of one side of the divide.  
On August 9, she said the following on her TV show.

*"In some parts of the country, it does seem like the America that we know and love doesn't exist anymore... Massive demographic changes have been foisted upon the American people. And they're changes that none of us ever voted for, and most of us don't like..." "From Virginia to California, we see stark examples of how radically in some ways the country has changed. Now, much of this is related to both illegal and in some cases legal immigration that, of course, progressives love."*

Her assertion (as farm laborers toil on a large screen behind her) is that:

1. Immigrants change America for the worse.
  2. Most Americans don't like that change.
  3. It was a change that happened without Americans' consent.
- And from the context, it's pretty clear that the offended "Americans"  
in those three points are largely white, nonimmigrant  
and folks who seem to think that in some earlier time,  
some type of Golden age existed for people like them in this country.

Not only do they long for it, but they are now convinced that they must do something to take the country back there again.

This morning, in response to this current nativistic wave within our nation, I'm thinking about starting a series that will focus in on a key section of Mark's Gospel.

Chapter 4 verse 35 through chapter 8 verse 13 is considered as Mark's second major narrative section of his gospel. (Myers p. 186)

Jesus is on the move, he literally crosses the "sea" of Galilee at least four (maybe as many as six) times in only four chapters. And this passage of his Gospel is also chocked full of healings and the feedings of massive numbers of people and an exorcism.

With powerful words and images Mark unequivocally articulated the forging of a new order, an alternative kingdom, that Jesus was creating based upon radical inclusivity and compassion. And a message that is still so important for our current situation.

Now the Jews who were living in Palestine during the first century were living in occupied territory.

Jesus had grown up during a period of brutal military occupation by one of there greatest empires of all time, Rome. The wealth of the nation was systematically siphoned off to satiate the desires of Rome.

With ever increasing brutality each successive revolt was suppressed. Socio-economic and geopolitical pressures were immense as the power of the empire tried to replace the worship of the Jew's "One true God" for that of Caesar the "Son of God!"

Over the previous centuries the Jews had enjoyed only a few sporadic years of independence as first Babylon, then Persia, then Greece and now finally Rome had conquered and subdued them.

And yet the belief in a God of justice, love and freedom persisted and so Jewish submission was never complete.

And so the current sense of dislocation and loss by some in our nation, which in so many respects resembles Rome and not Palestine, is a bit difficult for me to sympathize with.

Into this geopolitical milieu sails Jesus and his rag tag band crossing those dangerous waters of hatred, suspicion and division.

But Jesus was filled with a desire to encounter and to engage with those “others” who were culturally and religiously different in order to advance God’s radical new regime.

Jesus is asking us to crawl into his boat as well, put our hand to the oar and to start rowing over similar perilous seas that are also filled with dangers, discouragements, excuses and fears.

But it is a journey to new shores and a radically new way of building communities that miraculously welcomes into it both the oppressed as well as transformed oppressors.

Now Mark is the first writer in all of history to refer to this particular inland body of fresh water as a “sea!”

At a little more than 64 square miles it may be more than 10 times the size of Horsetooth Reservoir but it is still dwarfed by many large lakes.

For instance, the Great Salt Lake is around 2,000 square miles while Lake Ontario, the smallest of the Great Lakes, is well over 7,000 square miles.

Calling it a “sea” of course allows Mark’s to conjure up powerful symbolic images from Hebrew scripture like Noah’s great flood, or Moses’ own traverse of the Red Sea. But Jonah’s boat trip over a real sea, the Mediterranean, seems to fit best.

*But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god... Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps your god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." ...The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation?"*

That storm which threatened to sink Jonah’s ship caught up to him as he was trying to flee away from the mission God had called him to.

God, you may recall, had asked him to bring a message of repentance and reconciliation to Israel’s enemies in the city of Ninivah. And what was his reason for sailing in the opposite direction? Fear for personal safety - sure he could have been arrested, tortured and killed for being a spy.

Maybe it was the fear of failure? Nineveh was a mighty city and the capitol of a great empire so why would they listen to him?

No, not either of those! But finally, near the end of the story, Jonah, in a bit pique and exasperation at God, finally blurts out that his real reason was fear of success.

For he knew that if the city did manage to repent and follow God's way then his merciful God would pardon rather than destroy his enemies. Perhaps there was more than just wind and waves that was thwarting the disciples progress?

Like Jonah, they too were being asked to enter foreign enemy territory. And what's wrong with their side of the lake? It's comfortable, familiar, and besides, our side needs Jesus too!

Yes, launching into the open water of cross cultural experience and dialogue makes us vulnerable and it can be hard work.

But after great struggle and the miraculous intervention of Jesus, they do make it to the other side, disembarking in the region of the Decapolis (or the "Ten towns") villages that had been settled by former Roman soldiers and some Jews who served them.

This explains the presence of so many pigs since they were part of the diet of the many gentiles residing in the area.

But rushing out to greet them is a resident of the region who was demented, tormented and thoroughly unclean. And I must admit, this guy would have scared me too. And we are given so many unusual details (more details than any other exorcism in the Gospels): he could not be bound even with chains, he self-mutilated, he talked loudly to himself, and even howled at the moon.

But this is more than simply a story about Jesus' superiority over spiritual demons or his ability to heal mental illness. Was the man sincere or being sarcastic, when he called Jesus, the "Son of the Most High God!"

In either case he was likely trying to intimidate or pick a fight by using a title only reserved to honor Caesar. And naming someone or something, in that culture, would also indicate who has the most power.

But Jesus joined the fray and compels the demon to identify himself. Now, the term, "Legion" would have meant only one thing in that context, a division of Roman soldiers.

As their superior, Jesus now has power to (and Mark uses a common military term here) "dismiss" them. But they plead to not be sent out of their "territory," another curious term, and so Jesus "dispatches" them into a convenient "herd" of 2,000 pigs, or the same number as some Roman Legions.

The "herd" then, similar to soldiers in a battle, go charging down the hillside, into the lake, and drown.

Now a bit of additional clarification, as a boy I raised pigs and never in my life have I ever heard the term "herd" used for pigs. While it is true that birds of a feather do "flock" together, and horses, Sheep, and cattle do move about in herds, pigs do not. But the Greek word for "herd" used here also can refer to a band of military recruits and reinforces Mark's point.

It seems as if Jesus' little boat ride has now sailed into some really deep rhetorical and geopolitical water!

And the locals understood exactly what Jesus was proposing And, understandably, they asked him to promptly leave town.

Were they simply worried about the economic loss of some pork that they could have sold to the Romans at a premium? Or were they more spooked by the possible repercussions of Jesus' incendiary words and behaviors?

It would have been a standard counter-insurgency policy for Roman armies to destroy multiple, even innocent towns, in the same region in response to a Jewish revolt.

But before they manage to shove off from shore, we do get some good news: the man is healed, brought into a better state of mind, and immediately sent out, without any formal training, to bear witness to the really good news of God's restorative community.

Demons, legions, occupation, militarism, mental illness, and even the nativism of both Roman and Jew alike, is no match for the true "Son of the Most High God!"

But back when they were all still in the middle of that lake and far from shore. Jesus awoke not only to still the storm but to criticize his followers for their lack of faith.

The barriers between us and them “others” whom we may call enemies, Or revile as treacherous, or for whom we feel are underserving of equality, are certainly as numerous and as intimidating as a Roman Legion.

Cultural identity is powerful and dependent upon tight definitions of who is “in” and who is “out,” and who is “us” and who is “them!”

Nations always seem to need enemies, especially in order to justify massive expenditures on weapons or in order to justify taking the natural resources of others or exporting to them our way of life and economy.

The headwinds can certainly be severe and the waves can be overwhelming at times. But we must persevere, putting our hand to the oar and together try to row just a little bit harder.

Our boat at times feels pretty small and too easily swamped, but again, together we start bailing and we keep going. And yes, it does matter who is in the boat with us. Or rather I should say, “It does matter who’s boat we choose to ride in.”

If it is with “The One” who has promised to always be there and if it is “The One” who astonishes us by calming the storms as well as our troubling thoughts and spirits. Then I think we will be okay.

But this is the same “One” who is also calling us out into the unknown,  
sometimes into pretty deep water or onto difficult paths.

But, as the old saying goes,

*“Ships are certainly safer when they are in the harbor.*

*But that ain’t what ships are made for.”*

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