



“Expectations – Release”

Mark 4:35–5:20

Who is this man? The right question then and even now.

Will we come to the right answer?

This week, we turn to the Sea of Galilee, as we continue to follow Jesus on his road to confrontation and cross. The Sea of Galilee is 600 feet below sea level and is surrounded by stark, rocky and often steep slopes. In contrast, the Mt.

of the Beatitudes on the northwestern shore is green and lush.

A Sudden Storm

Jesus has taken some of his disciples on a voyage across the Sea of Galilee, headed for the Gentile lands on the eastern shore. The voyage will take a while, so, not surprisingly, Jesus decides to nap and soon falls asleep. Because of the dramatic topography,¹ sudden and violent storms are common on the Sea of Galilee and such a storm quickly engulfs the small craft. The disciples see the boat filling with water and they frantically rush to awaken Jesus, fearing that they may die in the storm. Jesus wakes up, rebukes the storm, and calm returns to the sea. Jesus is disturbed by his disciples’ fear, asking them “Why are you afraid, you people of weak faith?” He knows that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. The disciples were afraid of the storm, but now they are even more afraid! After all, they had just witnessed a power greater than the storm. What did they just witness? “What kind of person is this?” they ask. Who is this man that even storms obey?

One of the most common questions I am asked is, “Why do the disciples have so much trouble seeing who Jesus is? . . . why don’t they “get it?” There is no fully satisfying answer. They lost confidence in Jesus and panicked. They were overcome by anxiety because in their own minds and hearts, they were following someone they still saw as no more than a wise, and very human, teacher. So, it shouldn’t surprise us that the disciples seemed to be more frightened by Jesus’ command of the sea than they were by the storm itself. After all, who could really do such a thing? Even though ancient people ascribed command of the elements to kings and wise men, in all the ancient Roman, Greek, and Jewish traditions there is no mention of someone who actually did it. But Jesus did. The disciples saw it for themselves.

Further, the Jews were desert people, not seafarers. As R. Alan Culpepper notes, in the Old Testament the sea was a place of danger. He writes, “Thus, declarations of God’s power over the sea, which often recalled the Exodus, were acclamations of God’s power to preserve and protect. . . By stilling the wind and the waves by his word of command, therefore, Jesus does what, in the Old Testament, God alone could do. The story is an epiphany, a manifestation of Jesus’ divine power and identity.”

I could go on and on with this. But often, the problem is that we say these things about God—about Jesus—we tell the stories, we recite the right words, but deep down—deep, deep down—we don’t really embrace what we say and profess. The disciples in these stories are struggling to understand the identity of Jesus. But we know the full revelation of Jesus. We know the cross. We know the empty tomb. We don’t have to guess. We know – or at least we should.

¹ The Jordan River connects the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. All three form a river valley which follows a fault line where two tectonic plates meet—which accounts for all three being below sea level

Jesus and the darkness

What monsters do you wrestle with in your life? Monsters that threaten to overwhelm you and often seem to have defeated you already? Addiction, depression, debt, job loss, a failing marriage—all these can drive us to despair. They can make it seem as if there is no hope, no way out. Nothing but darkness.

If you have never lived in such overpowering darkness, then you are blessed indeed. Those of us who have walked the path called *No Hope*, know something of the hopelessness Jesus meets as he arrives on the eastern shore.

After stepping out of the boat, Jesus is thrust into the heart of darkness. The setting of the story says much:

- Jesus travels to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is an area populated by Gentiles, not Jews. In Jesus' day, Jews didn't mix easily with Gentiles, most even refusing to eat with them.
- Pigs figure in the story. These animals would have set any Jew's hair on end, making it very clear that Jesus had crossed over to the "other side."
- There is a graveyard of sorts, an area where tombs are found among the caves. Jews would be ritually unclean if they even touched a dead body. If the first two items hadn't put off any self-respecting Jew, this would have driven them over the edge.
- Then there is the demon...enough said.
- Finally, we have the pointed reference to Rome, the oppressor of the Jews. The demons refer to themselves as "Legion," the largest standing unit in the Roman army, consisting of nearly 6,000 fighting men.

The whole story screams Unclean, Gentile, Other...and then we come to the mad man himself. He lives among the tombs in the caves. He has so lost himself that he cannot be restrained anymore. Even chains can't hold him. Day and night he roams the hills, screaming and shrieking, hurting himself and threatening all.

Surely this is a man who is beyond hope, living every day in misery and isolation. What hope could anyone offer him? What promises of help could possibly be kept?

The Healer

When the madman sees Jesus he runs directly to him, falling on his knees and shouting, "What do you want with me?" It becomes clear that the man is not speaking for himself; rather, it is the demon possessing the man who addresses Jesus. "What do you want with me," the demon shrieks.

As with the man in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21-27), Jesus orders the demon to go, to leave this man. But Jesus also asks the demon his name. The reply is "Legion," which is probably a pointed reference to Rome. The demon then begs Jesus not to send them away...so, in a moment of profound irony, Jesus allows the demon to go to a nearby herd of pigs. When the pigs find themselves in the demonic embrace, they run headlong into the Sea of Galilee, all 2,000 of them. Imagine how this story would have been received by Mark's Jewish readers – demons and pigs all going to the watery depths. Many would have said they deserved each other.

And the man—he is healed? Can it be true? After so long in misery and pain and loneliness? Yes, it is true and when the residents of the area come, they see it for themselves. The man is just sitting there, dressed, and in his right mind. And as the people hear the story, they grow fearful. Who has the power to accomplish such things? Who can drive out demons? Who can order them into animals that then fling themselves off a cliff? How could this be true?

Sadly, their response to the loss of their pigs (a lot of wealth!) and to what they can't understand is all too typical – they ask Jesus to leave their region, to go home and take all these strange doings with him. So, he got into the boat to leave.

As Jesus prepares to leave, the man asks if he can go with him. But Jesus asks the healed man to stay, to go home and tell people how much the Lord had done for him, how the Lord had mercy on him.

And the man did as Jesus told him, going into the region called the Decapolis—The Ten Cities—and proclaiming the Good News. The Decapolis was an area largely on the eastern side of the Jordan River, comprised of cities very Greek in politics, religion, and culture. In other words, Jesus sent the man to proclaim the news about Jesus to the Gentiles. Thus, in a way, this man, whose name has been lost to us, was the first apostle to the Gentiles. God’s promise that the entire world would be blessed through the family of Abraham was being kept in and through Jesus...and now this unnamed man.

So Jesus pressed onward, drawing ever closer to another encounter with the legions of Rome, a cross and an execution squad awaiting him in Jerusalem.

Daily Bible Readings *More stories on and around the Sea of Galilee*

Monday	Mark 3:7-12	Crowds come to hear Jesus on the shoreline.
Tuesday	Mark 6:45-52	Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee.
Wednesday	Matthew 5-7	The Sermon on the Mount. The Mt. of the Beatitudes is on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee.
Thursday	Matthew 13:1-23	Jesus gets into a boat and preaches to the people.
Friday	John 6:1-15	Jesus crosses to another shore and feeds thousands.
Saturday	John 6:22-29	Jesus crosses back over to escape the crowds (walking on water enroute!) and then teaches about the bread of heaven.