

In the 1920's Sinclair Lewis wrote the novel *Elmer Gantry*. Gantry was a law student who left the pursuit of a legal profession to become a self-serving and womanizing evangelist committing fraud at every step to advance his career. He has become a proverb for the worst kind of religious deception. To demand that people put the hope of their eternal destiny on your word, when that word is not true, is despicable. If Jesus' claim to be Lord over all was not true, He could not be more unworthy of our allegiance. Softening this conclusion, many today say that the words and acts about Jesus in the gospels are not really those of Jesus. Since the extravagant claims about His divinity cannot be denied, the charge is that the early church committed the fraud to establish itself as the true religion. However, because the gospels, especially Mark, can be dated so close to the life of Jesus and the eyewitnesses, fabricated legends simply did not have time to develop. Of course one can reject His claims as too exclusive and uncomfortable, but to reject them on the basis that He did not make them has no foundation in the historical record.

What I'm getting at is that Jesus presses you to decide one way or another about Him. Either He is worthy of the claims He makes or He is a despicable and fraudulent Elmer Gantry of the worst order. Because His claims are so absolute, He just does not leave you with any middle ground.

Now Jesus did more than make claims. He healed sick bodies demonstrating His authority over illness. He cast out demons demonstrating His authority over paganism and unseen forces in the world. He forgave sins and spoke as if all sins had been committed against Him. Only, God has the right to do and say such things. And so the charge of Blasphemy was appropriate, if such claims were not true.

Here at the end of Mark 4, Jesus again demonstrated His authority. This time it was over the power of nature. I want to point out three things: First, calming the storm was a claim of divine power. Second, His power is unmanageable. Third, His power was used sacrificially.<sup>1</sup>[1]

### **Jesus Power is the Power of God.**

First, calming the storm demonstrated divine authority or divine power. In the ancient Near Eastern thought, since the sea was so uncontrollable and mysterious, only a god had the power to control it. In ancient creation myth stories, the sea was the symbol of infinite and inexorable power. When I was a child, at wintertime, the department stores sold little glass Christmas snow-domes. We were filled with fascination as we shook them up and tracked the flakes falling ever so slowly to the bottom. In the ancient world most believed that the world was shaped like one of these snow-domes. They believed that the sky was a solid roof or dome with the stars stuck to it like can lights on a ceiling. This sky-dome arched over and enclosed the earth. Everywhere outside of the dome fomented the vast infinite body of chaotic waters. It was filled with terrifying beasts and all sorts of uncontrollable mayhem. After the flood, the prevailing thought was that this dome or sky-canopy had collapsed. And when it did, the chaotic and terrifying waters came rushing through and flooded the earth. Try to imagine how frightening it would have been to wake up each morning wondering whether or not the sky was going to hold the waters back that day. The phrase, "The sky is falling" is based on ancient science. God's promise after the flood, symbolized by the rainbow was that He would never let this happen again. This was critical to the psychological safety of humanity.

---

[1]For a similar outline see Lane, William L. *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. The New international commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich. [u.a.]: Eerdmans, 1999. I have also followed Tim Keller's outline given in his sermons on The Gospel of Mark at Redeemer Presbyterian, Church NY, 2006.

Jesus' demonstration of authority over the waters or the sea was a claim of divinity. In Second Maccabees, which describes the history of Israel between the Old and New Testaments, The wicked Syrian dictator Antiochus Epiphanies, claimed to have the power to calm the waves of the sea. When he did, the rabbis in Palestine pronounced this as "Blasphemous!" It was widely recognized that he was not simply over-reaching. He was claiming divine power. However, only God has authority over the sea and can control its waves. In Mark 4, Jesus is claiming a Divine prerogative. He evokes power that only God has.

*How* Jesus calmed the storm also suggests divinity. Mount Herman (9000 feet above sea level,) is only thirty miles north of the Sea of Galilee, which is 600 ft. below sea level. When the cold air coming off Mt. Herman collides with the warm air rising from the desert sea it can create sudden and violent storms. The disciples, experienced sailors, said, "*We are perishing!*" This was a life and death struggle and they were at the mercy of the perfect storm. What did Jesus do? Unlike the prophets of Baal in the days of Elijah, Jesus did not call on a higher power. He did not get up, roll up his sleeves, and stretch out His hands with some dramatic gesture. He offered no theatrics; there was no drum-roll. In fact, His response is the exact opposite of most miracle ministries I have seen on television. I have never seen a miracle worker do a miracle like this. What did Jesus do? He said two words to the storm. To the wind and the sea He said, "Be silent! Be still!" That was it! To stop gale force winds (50mph), He said, "Be quiet" and "Stop." He spoke to the storm the way a parent speaks to a child: "Sit down and be still." In Greek, it is only two words. When Rebekah wants Ava to be still she does not stage a big dramatic entrance, with drum rolls, and loud music and soft lights. There is no drama. She simply says, "Sit down and be still." This is how one speaks with authority. God created the universe with a few words and Jesus controls it with a few words. Also, notice that it stopped! The wind died down and immediately the sea became smooth as glass. You could see your face in it like a mirror. Jesus used two words because there are two forces to address: first the wind and then the waves. Jesus demonstrates His authority over both. This was a demonstration of Divine power. Who do you know can stop a hurricane or tsunami with two words? Jesus came claiming to bring the kingdom of God to humanity, in His being. Calming the storm with two words validated that claim. And, if He can stop a violent storm at sea with two words, what storm in your life can He not calm? What in your life is too powerful for the One who can stop a hurricane with two words? However, be careful, His power to calm storms is also the power to ordain them. And that means that you have to give up control and acknowledge the Lord of all storms. This leads me to my second point.

## **Jesus Power is Unmanageable**

Second, Jesus Power was not only Divine, it was also UNMANAGEBLE. The storm was raging, the boat was throwing the disciples back and forth, and it was filling up with water. Yet, Jesus was so perfectly calm that He was asleep in the back on a cushion. The disciples could not bail the water out fast enough to keep up with the deluge. They were seconds away from capsizing and certain death. What did they do? They woke Jesus up and said, "Don't you care that we are perishing?" (v.37). Have you ever had a moment like this? You are sinking and everything is going wrong and by all tangible appearances, Jesus is asleep at the wheel or He is just seemingly elsewhere/absent. There are times when the Lord's presence and help could not seem more distant. So, they wake Jesus up and suggest that He does not care about them. Given the circumstances, this seems like a reasonable question. "If you cared for us, you would not be letting us go through this. If you loved us, we would not be facing things like this. This is just not how love works." Typically, we make fun of the disciples' wooden headedness, but not here. We identify with their fear.

Every counselor knows that the first response in 95% of emotional trauma cases is empathetic listening. But instead of validating their fears, Jesus confronts their faith! He does not say, "Dear brothers, I feel your pain." Instead He confronts them with two questions: And the first seems like the most absurd question anyone could ever ask, "Why are you afraid?" One would think that the fear of dying by drowning is a reasonable fear. And then He asked, "Where is your faith?" Paraphrased, "What is the basis of your fear and think about rediscovering your faith." Moreover, Jesus knows that their hearts will never be able to turn to what their minds do not know. And as long as they doubt His love and care for them they will never be at peace when things get difficult. Faith comes from hearing and *the only voice they could hear at that moment was the voice of their*

*own fear* and not the assurance of His love for them. Also, Jesus does not want them to think it is perfectly fine to accuse Him of not loving them or to suggest that He does not care for them. If they do not get past this they will forever be tossed around by the waves of trouble.

Jesus loves them but, as Tim Keller says, “He is as unmanageable as the storm itself.” He will not fit in the formulae you have for your life. Hurricanes have seemingly infinite power. You cannot control them. Jesus is infinitely more powerful than the hurricane and you cannot control that either. One disciple gets his head cut off, another lives into his 90’s. One has the favor of many. Another is overlooked. I have seen the worst parents end with a child who becomes a missionary for the glory of God. I have seen the child of good parents end up as irresponsible and unbelieving. I have seen good men go broke in their business and bad men succeed. The path Jesus ordains for us is as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the storm. But, there is one huge difference. Jesus loves you and the storm does not. And there are only two alternatives. One is that this world is merely the result of a storm, the accidental collision of random molecules and the blind forces of nature, so that when you die you are only going to dust. And when the sun goes out no one will be left to remember anything. And whether you were a cruel or a loving person will make no difference at all. All of life is merely a storm or... There is a Lord of the storms and there is meaning to them. And they are not arbitrary nor random. All the love, purpose, and safety your heart yearns for may be found in Christ. In the Lord Jesus there is all the love and mercy you could ever ask for. But you will lose control. Because to know Him, you have to acknowledge that He is the Lord of the storm. Where is your faith? Your faith must be big enough to include John the Baptist who was thrown into prison and lost his life, as well as Peter who was released from prison and saved—at least for a while. In Christ, we are not at the mercy of the storm. However, He lets things happen to us that we do not understand. He does not do things according to my plans. He does not do things that always make sense to me. But, His unmanageable love for me is filled with love. And when you know that Jesus loves you, the storm does not have to overwhelm you. Until you settle this, you are going to be tossed back and forth by every storm that comes your way. However, if you listen and believe it, you can stand safe and secure even when you are hit by a hurricane. Some of you have been hit by some intimidating storms. God is good, but His power is not manageable by the created being.

### **Lastly, Jesus’ power was used sacrificially.**

What is so remarkable about Jesus compared to others who have power is that He uses His power to help, to serve, to love, and to heal, not to intimidate, destroy, or to serve His own prosperity.

Biblical commentators like Lane, Keller, and others have noted that Mark has deliberately laid this story out using language that matches another storm-story, which was sealed in the minds of Jesus’ Jewish audience. There are at least six comparisons with this event on the Sea of Galilee with the most significant storm-story of the Old Testament. When Jonah was running away from God’s call to preach grace and mercy to Nineveh, God ordained a storm at sea. Notice six comparisons: 1. In both stories, Jonah and Jesus were out in a boat at sea. 2. In both stories Jonah and Jesus were both asleep. 3. Both were overtaken by a life-threatening storm where the lives of the sailors were at risk. 4. In both cases, the sailors came to the sleepers and said they were perishing and they rebuked the sleeper. 5. In both cases there was a miraculous intervention by God and the sea was calmed. 6. And in both stories, the last thing we read is that the sailors in both boats were even more afraid after the storm was stilled than before. There is one critical difference. And that has to do with the way the storms were stilled. Jonah told the sailors that if they were to be saved they must throw him overboard. Jonah was saying, “You can’t be saved unless I perish.” You can live, but only if I die.” And they threw him in. In Mark, Jesus stilled the storm by speaking two words.

Matthew 12 is helpful with this interpretation. Jesus said, “One even greater than Jonah is here.” By identifying Himself with Jonah and as the One who is even greater than Jonah, Jesus was saying that a day was coming when He was going to calm all storms. FOR US. How? On the cross.

Jesus was thrown into the ultimate storm. He was thrown into the waves of sin and death. He was thrown into the only storm that can ultimately sink you and that is... what you owe God because of your wrongdoing. Jesus set His face into the ultimate storm and He lowered his head and went right into it for our sake without flinching and He was demolished ( for a season) and He paid for our sins on the cross. 2[2]

To the measure (cf Mr. 4:21) that you hear, listen, and believe, you will know that He cares. And you will never have to say again, “Lord, don’t you care?” Because you will know that He does. If Jesus Christ did not abandon you in that fiercest of all storms by what possible reason would He abandon you in an infinitesimally lesser storm?

I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry pow’rs of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,  
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?  
“’Tis in this way, the Lord replied,  
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,  
From self, and pride, to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may’st find thy all in Me.”3[3]

Why are you timid? Where is your faith? The Lord Jesus’ power is infinite. His power is also unmanageable. And it is absolutely at the service of your very best, filled with His eternal care. Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?

---

2[2]This quote is taken from a lesson on Mark by Dr. Tim Keller, 2/06 at Redeemer Presbyterian Church NY.

3[3]John Newton, Olney Hymns (London: W. Oliver, 1779).