

Kingdom Dynamics: God on Mute

Mark 4:35-41

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Almost 8 years ago Nikki and I were in Children's Hospital with one of our twins – Jaxon. His heart was beating over 300 beats a minute. He was bleeding out of his bowels. He couldn't eat. I was scared. And I was angry.

Have you ever found yourself in a spot like that? Has life ever gone totally another direction than you planned and caught you off guard? Maybe you are there now. And if you are how are you supposed to trust a God who stands by while all hell breaks loose?

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Today we are looking at a well known and loved passage of scripture with a hundred layers of depth to it. There's a Sunday school layer with some warm fuzzy feelings. It's a story full of pillows and a powerful Jesus who takes care of His friends. But below this is a very adult story with a challenging message for everyone who has ever wondered how a God like Jesus could possibly be worthy of our trust.

So go ahead and grab your Bible if you've got one handy and open to Mark 4. We are going to pick it up in verse 35 today. Would you stand with me as we invite God to speak to us through His word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 4:35-41]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

So we are in a new section of Mark right now and a new series. And in this series we are looking at the dynamics of the kingdom that began breaking into the world at Jesus' arrival and are still advancing today. The kingdom is central to everything Jesus was passionate about. In fact He summed up His gospel or His message of good news with the words God's kingdom has come near – that means it's a right now kingdom as well as an eternal kingdom – and we can be part of it by repenting and believing.

And in chapters 4 and 5 Jesus starts really unpacking what life in this kingdom looks like. And this story – the famous story of Jesus calming the storm – sits at the center of this section and gives us some incredible insight into the uncomfortable power of Jesus' kingdom.

Here we learn that Jesus' power is real, it's infinite, and it's unmanageable. But all of this is part of the good news we need to hear in order to be able to trust Him while He allows us to experience the storms of life.¹

So the first thing we see in this passage is that Jesus' power is real.

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/lord-of-the-storm-5499/> (Accessed April 22, 2021)

Now people who initially come across this story in contexts other than Sunday school might be likely to think it is mythological. After all nobody talks to storms and gets results. But when you sit down and start studying this passage there are all sorts of details in it that lead in another direction.

So the story begins with us learning that it's evening. And Jesus gets in a boat "just as He was" – that's verse 36. And this is a reference to the context of the chapter which began with Jesus teaching beside the Sea of Galilee with people pressing in around Him so much that He got in a boat to teach from there. And now He's taught all day and He's going to go to the other side for the night.

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Verse 36 also tells us that when they set out there were a bunch of boats going together. And then we learn that Jesus falls asleep in the boat on a pillow at the stern.

Now why does Mark give us all these details most of which don't drive the story forward? It turns out it's incredibly significant, though Mark had no idea at the time. He simply recorded what the eyewitnesses told him.

Here's the point, when people wrote fiction or mythology in ancient times, they didn't write with the details we write with today they only did this with history.

Now fiction today is full of little details that are used to capture our imagination and bring us into the story. But the genre of fiction didn't exist until the 12th century with the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Before this there was fiction and mythology but it was poetry and epic tale.

So for example, there is a story in Greek Mythology about how humans learned to wield the power of fire. And it goes like this:

Zeus gave gifts to all the gods, but he didn't care much for humans. But there was this Titan, or demi-god named Prometheus, who loved people and felt sorry for them. So he climbed Mount Olympus and stole fire from the gods, put it in a hollow reed and gifted it to the humans.

As you can imagine Zeus was angry when he heard about this. So he took Prometheus to a high mountain and chained him to a rock. And every day, Zeus sent an eagle to eat Prometheus' liver. And so for thirty years Prometheus was there regrowing his liver and feeding the eagle until Hercules released him from his torment.²

Now that's great, but when you read these kinds of stories there are a few things missing. You never learn what color shirt Zeus was wearing. You don't hear about the wind rustling in the trees on Olympus or the views from the rock Prometheus was chained to. And we don't have those details because they aren't part of the story. People didn't write details like this into mythology in ancient days.

² <https://greektraveltellers.com/blog/30-of-the-most-famous-tales-from-greek-mythology> (Accessed April 19, 2021)

But Mark's story is full of these details. And the reason they are there isn't because Mark somehow figured out how to write 21st century fiction but then the art was lost for 2 millennia – that's not possible. It's because he's simply recording the account from the people who were there.

Now here's why this is essential. If Jesus' story is mythology then He doesn't have any real power to help you through your storms. You might get a little boost from positive thinking but that's it.

But that all changes if Jesus actually existed and did the stuff the Bible records. If Jesus actually calms storms and literally rises from the dead then He has real power. And His power has implications for your life.

And this story in Mark leads us to the second conclusion. Mark didn't invent 21st century fiction. That couldn't have happened, and so what we have here isn't fiction it's history. And this means Jesus has real power so you can trust Him in the middle of your storm. Jesus has real power.

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The second thing we see here is that Jesus' power isn't just real, it's infinite. So in verse 41 the disciples look at each other and ask

"Who is this man?... Even the wind and waves obey Him!" (Mark 4:41)

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I had the privilege to be at the Sea of Galilee a couple years ago. And I was struck by how different everything was from how I imagined. There's a strange beauty there that's hard to put your finger on. Everything about it is unique including its topography.

So the Sea of Galilee sits 700 feet below sea level making it the lowest fresh water lake on earth. But only thirty miles north Mt Hermon towers 9200 feet high. So there is a 10,000 foot elevation difference within a small area.

And this means the warm air from the valley is constantly clashing with the cool air of the mountain so weather can change quickly. But of course Peter, James and John knew this. They had grown up fishing on Galilee.

But as the storm grows it begins to exceed their experience. And pretty soon they are shaking Jesus awake.

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And Jesus stands up and tells the storm "Quiet! Be still!" Now this is a very strange thing to say to a storm. He reprimands it like you reprimand a child. "Sit down and be quiet."

And unlike often happens with the noisy children at my house the storm listens. Actually Mark is the master of the immediate. He's very conscious of how quickly things happen and often makes note of it. He is always saying "immediately" or "suddenly" the next thing happened.

And so here the whole miracle is contained in a single, matter of fact verse.

When Jesus woke up, He rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. (Mark 4:39)

Now notice it wasn't just the wind that stopped, the water went calm. And this would have been eery. Anyone who has stood on the edge of a lake knows that when the wind stops the waves go on for a bit. But not here. Now we have a great calm. Or in Greek a mega calm.

This is the kind of calm where the sea is glass and you aren't sailing anymore, you're paddling.

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It's is a miracle. But it's not just a miracle for miracles sake. Everything Jesus does is intentional and planned. So when He went to sleep in the boat it was for this purpose. And the purpose was to show His disciples that He has infinite power.

In ancient culture the sea was the embodiment of chaos and evil. So when God creates the world, the face of the deep is covered in darkness and empty. And then God speaks and creates. But aside from God the sea reigns supreme. So in Job the deep is home of Leviathan the sea monster. And this was the experience of ancient people. Every venture onto the water came with the risk you weren't coming home. No one controls the sea.

No one until Jesus stands up and speaks. And the way this all happens is no accident.

So did you notice that Jesus doesn't call on a higher power. Usually healers invoke the name of someone or chant something to entice a greater power to act. Jesus doesn't do any of that – He doesn't even pray. He just speaks and the sea responds. And that's because Jesus doesn't have power. His word is the power of God. He's infinite power. Jesus is Lord of the storm.

And of course this is what we need to know when we find ourselves in life's storms. As chaotic and out of control as life gets there is One whose words have power beyond even the greatest chaos we can know.

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But this is where the warm fuzzy part of this passage ends and we hit something rocky. Jesus has real power. He has infinite power. But His power is also completely unmanageable.

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So Mark writes a bit of humor into this incredibly serious text. Nobody was laughing 2000 years ago, but when we read it we can laugh. And that's because when the storm gets away on the disciples there are scared. But after the storm is calmed their fear gets worse.

So verse 37 tells us that a furious squall came up. That's the word for the worst storm you can have. It's a tornado or a hurricane. And Mark says: "the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped." And this is when they wake up Jesus.

Which is kind of classic right? I mean this is me "I can handle this. I've got it. It's fine. I'm going to be fine. Ummm.... I'm not fine. I'm going to die! Jesus, how come You aren't helping me?!" Have you been there?

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But let's play this back a bit. Climb into the boat with the disciples. So maybe you love the water, you grew up on a boat, so you're up at the mast with Peter. Or maybe you're a land lover. You might like sushi but fishing means worms and hooks, so you are sitting in the white-collar section with me and Matthew the tax collector.

Either way it's evening and Jesus goes to sleep before the storm starts. And time passes. And I imagine at first everyone is fine. But as the wind starts picking up the white-collar section of the boat starts getting nervous and looking behind the seat back tables for those fancy bags. You know the kind.

But while this is going on in one section there's another section of the boat that's laughing. Peter, James and John aren't nervous, they've got this. They are probably telling Matthew to go take a nap next to Jesus and get out of their way so they can do what needs to be done.

That's how it starts, but then there is this progression until at some point the joking stops and it's just work. Orders are being yelled. "Grab that ore!" "Throw me the bailer." "Tie that down."

And then at some point even the fishermen are thinking "This isn't going to work. We're not going to make it. We're going to die here."

And by the time cocky Peter has gone to get Jesus fear and adrenaline has turned to anger and he yells: "Don't you care if we drown?" It's not a question. It's a retort. It's what you yell when something bad is happening and you need someone to blame.

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And I think everyone who has ever tried to live a life of faith for any period of time has been here. And some of you are here right now. You are trying to live and it feels like God is sleeping. You're praying, and desperately, but if God is speaking at all He's forgotten to take Himself off mute and the Zoom call is silent.

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So what goes through your mind when God's on mute? How does your faith fair when Jesus is sleeping in your hour of greatest need?

Do you ask like the disciples "Don't You care? If You loved me I wouldn't be going through this. If You loved me You'd be stopping this storm." Have you prayed those prayers? I sure did in Children's Hospital. It felt like Jesus was sleeping.

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So how does Jesus respond when you wake Him up? Of course He's not sleeping but it feels that way. What does He do? How does He respond?

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Well in verse 39 Jesus calms the storm, He rebukes it. But then He turns around. And He doesn't say "Wow. Sorry about that. I was really tired." And He doesn't say "I know how you feel. That was close." What we get is verse 40:

Then He asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40)

Jesus rebukes the wind, the waves and His disciples. "Why are you afraid?"

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Now sometimes when I read the Gospels and I see the disciples bumbling along and getting Jesus wrong I get self-righteous. "You stupid disciples. Can't you see what's going on. Can't you see what Jesus is doing?" I don't know about you, but I don't feel that way here. Here I'm more with the disciples than I am with Jesus.

What do you mean "Why are we afraid? If you loved us You wouldn't be letting us go through this! You don't love us Jesus. This isn't love!" Right?

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But Jesus says "You're wrong. I do love you. And I do allow the people I love to go through storms. You had no right to panic."

And as that penny drops the progression from fear to terror plays out. And here's why. Jesus is way more unmanageable than the storm. The storm was going to kill them but now they are stuck in a boat with God in the calm and they want to tear their skin off to get away.

The storm has huge power. You can't control it. But you can build your skills and manage it at lower intensities. Of course at its greatest intensity it always wins. But Jesus has a different kind of power. His power is infinite. He wields the creative power of God and He has no reigns we can manage or manipulate. He gives and takes away.

So if both powers can kill what's the difference? The difference is the storm doesn't love you.

You see if you don't trust in Jesus you are at the mercy of the storm. It's always storming in this life and nature will wear you down and win. No one escapes tragedy and death forever.

But the alternative isn't a fuzzy warm life with Jesus. Anyone who promises you that is lying. Even though Jesus has infinite power we don't control Him. He doesn't work for us. We can't conjure His power. He's totally unmanageable.

And Jesus doesn't apologize for this. He doesn't apologize for not working with our plans. He doesn't apologize for bringing storms our way. He's unmanageable. But He loves us. It's like Mr. Beaver tells Lucy in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. "Of course He's not safe. But He's good."

Jesus says “I’m God. I’ve got the power to do anything. I can calm any chaos, but I’ve got plans you don’t know about and I will not explain Myself to you. Your comfort is not My highest priority. I am working everything out for My glory. But I’ve made this place so My glory and your good align. All you need to know is that I love you.

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Now here’s something significant – not something comfortable but significant. When we get angry at God for letting us go through storms there is some ironic faith here. You see, if we have a God great enough that we can be mad at Him because He doesn’t stop our suffering. Then we also have a God that is great enough that we can trust Him even when He doesn’t stop our suffering.

If He loves us, and is big enough to stop the storm, but doesn’t, then He’s big enough to trust even in the storm. And He does love you. This is where Jesus calls us today.

Friends, there is a lot of stuff going on in our world right now that we don’t have any control over. There are a lot of things we would do differently if we were in God’s shoes. The lockdown wouldn’t apply to us. COVID wouldn’t make us sick. Christians wouldn’t get old and frail. The church would be full instead of empty. I wouldn’t go through storms. And because none of this happens Jesus looks to me like He’s sleeping, but He’s in complete control.

So what are you facing today where you feel you need Jesus to wake up and start answering your prayers? Where is there water breaking over the gunnels of your life? Where does it look like chaos is reigning?

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Jesus says “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” Literally this could be translated “Where is your faith?” Where did you put it? Haven’t I shown you that I’m good? Trust Me. Even while I allow bad things to happen know that I love you and I’m in control.

And My power is real. It’s infinite. I can calm any storm. I’ve done it all before. And I love you. But I’m God, not you. I will not be managed. I will not answer to you. I don’t have to. So stop freaking out and trust Me. Put your head down on My pillow with Matthew and go to sleep.”

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What stands out to you from the sermon?
- 2) Why do you think Jesus allows us to encounter storms instead of delivering us from them?
- 3) Do you have more trouble maintaining your faith in difficult times or easy times? Why do you think this is?
- 4) Share a story about a time it felt like God was on “mute”. How did you handle it?
- 5) Dan said: “If Jesus loves us and is big enough to stop the storm even though He doesn’t, then He’s big enough to trust even in the storm.” How does this hit you?