

Mark 4:35-5:20

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] We live in a world where fear and terror are talked about often and where circumstances require it.

! So in Ealing we're pretty far removed from fear-inducing acts of terror.! But there are many people in our world that live with a fear that we don't understand.

And yet even here in glorious suburbia in Ealing, some people fear. Some people fear an uncertain future. Some people fear their secret being discovered.

Some may fear a bullying colleague or a boss. You're either an abusive partner or friend. Some may fear having to live with choices they know they regret.

Some may fear ill health or death or the dark days that come with mental illness. Some may fear the end of a fragile relationship or the continuation of a fragile relationship.

[1 : 01] Some may fear financial losses. Some may fear loneliness. Perhaps you're one of the lucky ones who's here this afternoon and you've got such thoughts running through your head or weighing down your heart.

Perhaps this particular Tuesday you feel fearless. And if that is so, well that is God's gracious blessing. But it may not always be so. Because there's much fear in many hearts and there are many possibilities of fear in this broken world.

And we don't know what tomorrow will bring, do we? We don't know what this afternoon will bring.

And as we're done in mind, I want to reflect on these two stories. Two back-to-back stories of fearful people. And they show you what Jesus can do with your fear.

But they also introduce us to a surprising fear that we may not have thought much about. And I want to start by looking at the story of Jesus and the storm. Mark, the Gospel writer, was not an eyewitness of these events.

He wasn't there. But there's lots of evidence in the story that he tells that he received the information from an eyewitness. Almost certainly one of the disciples who was with Jesus on the boat.

[2 : 09] And the story is told from the perspective of Jesus' disciples. And the text leaves us in no doubt that they were very afraid. It was the end of a long day crossing the lake.

They crossed the lake in a boat from one side to go to the other. And they were very tired. Jesus fell asleep in the steering of the boat. And that's where the storm hit. And on the water, it is a very scary place to be in a big storm.

And this is a furious one. Waves are crashing over the boat. It seems as if they might sink. And understandably, the disciples feared for their lives. But instinctively, one or some of them knew that Jesus would help.

The only problem was he was asleep. Seemingly oblivious. Seemingly exhausted. Seemingly. So indignantly. Let's try and get that out. Indignantly.

The disciples wake him up. And their question is there in verse 38. Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

[3 : 13] It is a remarkable question. And an ironic question. From Jesus' perspective, the disciples were perishing, weren't they? Long before the storm blew up.

And the whole reason Jesus had come was to rescue them. The whole reason why Jesus had come to this earth was because he cared deeply about perishing people. People staring down the barrel of death.

Not just the child disciples, but all of us. And it's an understandably instinctive question, of course. But it is nonetheless very insulting to Jesus, isn't it?

The question, do you care? Jesus has demonstrated time and time again, is compassionate. Love, time and time again. And Mark has no record, does he, of Jesus even answering the question. Jesus doesn't answer the question. And instead, Jesus responds by acting. And this encounter with Jesus, it gets more bizarre by the second. He stands up and instead of talking to the disciples, he talks to the wind.

[4 : 17] And he talks to the waves. And astonishingly, they, inanimate creation, seems to listen. Just by speaking, Jesus overcomes the powerful forces of nature.

And it seems to be, doesn't it, absolutely effortless. He awoke. And rebuked the wind and said to the sea, peace be still. The wind ceased. It was very calm.

While the disciples have been fearing for their lives, Jesus calmly sleeps in the boat. And now, as it were, Jesus' calmness is transferred to the lake. His tranquility is now matched by the tranquility of the wind and the waves.

And in this remarkable moment, Jesus demonstrates for us that he is not subservient to the forces of nature as we are. Instead, he commands them. And any good Jew would have known in Jesus' day, that is the sort of thing that only God can do.

It was magic. It wasn't coincidence. It was the power of God. And it was the power of God bent towards people's needs. And in that stunning moment, as Jesus spoke to the storm, the disciples slides.

[5 : 28] And saved. And no doubt the lives of the people in the other boats that were around them as well. It is power beyond description. And yet it's mercy and love. And it's only after Jesus acts that he speaks.

And so having rebuked the wind, verse 40, he rebukes them. And he says to them, why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? Now, of course, Jesus knew that they were afraid.

The storm is legitimately verified. But he's trying to get them, isn't he, to tease out what do they know about him.

Because this isn't Jesus' first miracle. And no, they've already seen him do many astounding things. They've witnessed his unique blend of compassion and power many times before. They've seen enough already.

To entrust him. To trust him in those moments rather than question him or accuse him of not caring. And he longs that they trust him more. That's what faith is. Faith is not hoping against hope.

[6 : 26] It's not blindly following someone despite the evidence. Instead, faith is trusting someone based on the evidence. And Jesus is reminding them, you've already been given lots of reasons for faith.

So once again, Mark has no record of the disciples engaging with Jesus' question. No one answers questions in Mark 4 and 5. Instead, he just tells us how they felt. And what they said to each other, and this makes two perfect sentences, verse 41.

And they were filled with great fear. And said to one another, who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? They were filled with great fear. It's really interesting, isn't it? Normally when someone is scared of something, and then that danger is removed, they're no longer afraid.

But the opposite has happened here. That which the disciples feared, the storm, has been removed. But they're now more afraid than they were before. The first fear is given way to a new fear.

And I don't think there's any other way of reading it. They were now afraid of Jesus. And when you think about it, they've realised that they were in the presence of someone much more powerful than the storm which scared them a few moments earlier.

[7 : 45] If Jesus has done this, what can't he do? If the power of the wind and the waves was terrifying, how much more terrifying is someone who can command the forces of the wind and the waves? And I guess the question in verse 41 is the question that Mark is suggesting that you and I should be asking too.

Who is this? And with that question ringing in our ears, Mark moves on immediately to tell us when they got to the other side of the lake. Verse chapter 5.

They arrive in a community. They arrive in a community that's been traumatised by a man full of evil spirits. That is something very strange to our ears.

I don't think it's so strange in other parts of the world. Even today, there's parts of the world where I don't think it's uncommon. It's certainly not uncommon in the time of Jesus.

He's already told us of three other encounters with evil spirits. But what is striking is that this whole community is held hostage by this poor oppressed man.

[8 : 55] And they've tried everything. They've isolated him. I told you he lived in a local graveyard. They've tried chaining him up. But he kept breaking the chains. And so his cries formed the backdrop to their existence.

Listen to the very tragic note in verse 5. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. Every human attempt to restrain him or to contain him it fails.

Certainly no one had a clue how to relieve this man's suffering. And Mark tells us, doesn't he, verse 4, can you see that right at the end? It says, no one had the strength to subdue him.

No one had the strength to subdue him. Really? Given what we've just seen in Mark 4, that's overstating the case of it, isn't it? And I would want to suggest this is part of the genius of Mark as a storyteller.

Because it's into this situation that Jesus suddenly walks onto the stage. And this encounter with Jesus, well I think it's even more bizarre than the end of Mark 4. The first thing we're told is that the man with the evil spirit runs to Jesus as soon as he saw him.

[10 : 07] And Jesus commands the evil spirit to come out of the man. And he responds by shouting at the top of his voice. Can you see it in verse 7? What do you have to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God?

I adjure you by God, do not torment me. He's basically saying, why have you come to me? Promise you won't hurt me. Notice a couple of things. He recognises Jesus' authority instantly.

He knows him. He says, you are the son of the most high God. And he's afraid. And so Jesus engages in the conversation. And it's such an interesting story that we're never quite sure who Jesus is talking to.

Is he talking to he or they? Is he talking to the man or to the evil spirit or to the multiple demons at the same time? And so you can see that in verses 9 and 10.

There's a mingling of singular and plural pronouns. So this man's body has been occupied by many evil spirits. And that's why he calls himself Legion. A legion in the Roman army was 5,000 soldiers.

[11 : 13] And in any event, the evil spirits, they know the game is up. So they strangely plead for some kind of mercy by asking Jesus to send them into the nearby pigs.

And Jesus allows that request. The demons enter the herd of pigs who run down the hill and they plummet into the lake where they drown. It is weird. And I don't think anybody knows why it happened this way.

They'll commonly spend endless amounts of time on it. Maybe it was a highly visible departure of the spirits. That was what was necessary for the bystander to be convinced that all was well now. Maybe it was done to demonstrate how many demons there had been torturing this man. Maybe it was something about the way that demons work.

That means this was the only way to protect others from a similar fate happening to them. I don't know. But what we should take from this is, there's no doubt, is it, that the demons are subject to the authority of Jesus.

[12 : 17] And that's not exactly what we're told. So remember chapter 4 with the forces of nature. Jesus is not subservient to the forces of evil. But he is in command of them. And do you notice how effortless it is for Jesus?

It's not Jesus like Harry Potter standing with a wand, furiously waving around, hoping that his spell is stronger than the other's spell. Nor does Jesus walk away from this episode like Frodo walks away at the end of the Lord of the Rings, battle scarred and indelibly marked.

No, Jesus simply speaks and evil flees. He's utterly unharmed by the encounter. He doesn't raise a sweat. He has an authority in these moments that is almost impossible to describe.

And do you remember what Mark had said in verse 5? No one had the strength to subdue him. Really? But it turns out, no one but Jesus.

And Jesus was strong enough and then so. And the result is really, the same as the storm, it's over so quickly and it's quickly calm. And the tranquility of Jesus himself is now matched by the tranquility of the oppressed man.

[13 : 28] Look at chapter 5 and verse 15. They came to Jesus and they saw the depressed man, saw the demon possessed man, the one who had the legion, sitting there clothed and in his right

mind.

But that isn't the only parallel between this and the story before. Jesus has come with power and completely transformed the situation. There's a new peace, but not all the people react here just as the disciples did at the end of chapter 4.

Look at verse 15 at the end. Verse 17, they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region.

And they are afraid. At the end of verse 15, they are afraid. Their first fear of the man has been overcome with a new fear. And they are in the presence of someone who had complete command over that which had terrorised them.

But now they found a new fear. And in the face of this raw power, they are quivering in their sandals so much that they want Jesus to leave.

[14:38] And that is the saddest thing in the whole story. Because Jesus granted their request and he left them. And it reminds us, isn't it, that sometimes the worst possible thing is for the Lord to actually grant our prayers sometimes.

Isn't it brilliant that God has not answered some of your prayers in the way that you wanted him to? I remember when I was 14 asking that I would marry a certain girl and I am very, very grateful the Lord said no to that.

But actually it's got a really serious point, isn't it? That it's such a dangerous thing to tell Jesus to go away. It's such a dangerous thing to see the power of the gospel and say I don't want it because Jesus may give you what you want.

The man wants to go with Jesus but Jesus wouldn't let him. And Jesus tells him to stay behind and testify to his community of what he'd experienced. And if the community didn't want Jesus, Jesus leaves this liberated man as a signpost to his power and compassion.

And I call this talk the terrifying Jesus because I think that is the key observation that links these two stories. In both cases, at the start the people are afraid but their initial fear gives way to a greater fear at the end.

[15:59] And I think the point Mark is making is that whilst fear is not all that we should feel about Jesus, there's something that's eminently sensible about responding to Jesus in this way.

So let me conclude with three things that happen when people are fearful of Jesus. If somebody has become fearful of Jesus, it's a sure sign that they're seeing him for who he is.

Because if you fear him, it will mean that you've begun to grasp how powerful he really is and how effortless it is when he exercises his power and with what authority he can change things.

And so often people think of Jesus as a really lovely guy who's pretty harmless, the kind of guy who you can bring home to your mother. He says great things, he did great things, and of course he did. He was kind to people.

They think of him as a great example who lived a life of love and taught others to love, and that's certainly true. But so many people fail to take notice that Jesus actually offended people, and he provoked people to anger, the kind of anger that led people to want to kill him.

[17:09] And he did things that were genuinely terrifying. And I want to suggest to you that it's not until you find Jesus unsettling that you're really coming to terms with actually who he is. And the fear of God is actually a very good indication that you're beginning to grasp who Jesus is.

Secondly, what flows out of that is a growing appreciation of Jesus' power. Once you begin to see how effortlessly Jesus exercises his power, and how great is his power, then a whole world of possibility opens up to you.

Paragraphs like this are not just meant to provoke us, they are meant to stimulate our imagination. Jesus can calm a storm. He can liberate a man from demons.

What can't he do? What can't he do? What other dangers might there be that Jesus can overcome? And what other situations where humans have exhausted themselves, and Jesus offers an effortless solution? In the face of what other fears could Jesus draw alongside you with compassion and strength and change things like that?

[18:20] And of course, these questions, they're the very questions that Mark wants you to answer. He writes his gospel to stimulate us. And moments like these point us forward to what will come later.

They lay a crucial foundation for our understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is revealed here not to be subservient to the forces of nature, but he's in command of all things.

And so it's possible that he could even stare down the face of death. And Jesus is revealed here not to be subservient to the powers of evil.

But he's in command of them. And so it's possible, isn't it, that he could even take on his shoulders the sin of his people and vanquish them. These verses stretch our imaginations in the direction of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

And they lead us to believe that the crucifixion wasn't just a mere crucifixion, like it was for the criminals on either side. There was something happening on that day that was not visible to human eye.

[19 : 28] There was something happening on that day when Christ laid down his life of cosmic proportion. Something that would change the world forever. And these verses help us to imagine that his death was not a defeat, but the moment of perfect victory.

And the unlikely story that began to unfold that first Sunday after Jesus died could be true. That Jesus has the power to speak stillness to the storm.

And if you've got power to command a legion of evil spirits, and they do exactly what you tell them, then perhaps Jesus has got the power to overcome everything, even sin and death. And so these narratives breathe life and truth and hope into your soul.

And there's a third thing that happens when people are fearful of Jesus. They start to enjoy his peace. Jesus teaches us that he can handle anything and everything.

Jesus is teaching us here that he can be trusted. And he teaches us that we find rest in him. And so our fear of him is transformed into peace. And that, these were the first two sermons I ever preached.

[20 : 37] I preached the first time on Mark 4, 35-41, and it lasted about 18 minutes. And by the end of it, it was awful. And then I preached equally badly on the start of chapter 5. And I've known these passages as long as I can remember.

And I saw something in preparation this week that really caught my attention. That in the midst of the fright and the chaos and the conflict and the anxiety, there's loads of colour in these passages. But actually, Jesus fills the space of this narrative with a stunning calm. I don't know whether you saw that. There's a storm raging, but he's asleep. They wake him up in a flap.

But he does nothing. He stands up and he speaks. And the storm is stilled. And on the other side, he gets off the boat and there's an army of demons. And Jesus simply speaks to them.

And casts evil aside. So the man who is tormented is seen sitting, closed, and in his right mind. He speaks and moves with perfect tranquility.

[21 : 39] And you see that peace kind of overflow out of him into the lives of everyone he touches. There is a calm that accompanies Jesus. And that's no less true today.

And so these verses function as an invitation to you and I that you would not just see Jesus as he is. You would not just believe that Jesus can overcome anything and everything.

But you'd come to him and trust him and enjoy his peace. And that tooth thrusts us forward, doesn't it, to the end of Mark's Gospel, to the crucifixion, where you see this purposeful resolve of Jesus to win peace for sinners.

And Jesus' resurrection opens up the possibility of you and I receiving that peace from him. Even now is he still alive today. And so any who come to him recognising their need of forgiveness and their need to be liberated from evil and their need of his power and they will find that Jesus is only too glad.

In fact, he is delighted to give them his peace. And my prayer will be that that will be your experience today as it is mine. He awoke and he rebuked the wind and he said to the sea, Peace, be still.

[23 : 01] And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had the legion sitting there, closed and in his right mind.

And they were afraid.