

Reflection on the Gospel-12th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

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This Sunday we return to Ordinary Time and to the Gospel of Mark for eighteen of the remaining twenty-five Sundays of Year B. Those who have not yet taken an hour or so to read the Gospel of Mark from beginning to end might consider doing so this week. Too often, we take the Sunday gospel passage out of its context and therefore miss much of its power as sacred story.

Today's gospel story (Mark 4:35-41) looks back to the parables that comprise the first part of the chapter and the crowds that heard them: it is the evening of that same day. This story also looks forward as it marks the beginning of the second major section of Mark's gospel (4:35-8:21), a section that seems to be structured around a number of crossings of the lake, or Sea of Galilee. Jesus' decision to move with his disciples out of familiar territory is deliberate: "Let us go across...." The crossing itself is difficult, as is the challenge that confronts them on the other side of the lake. From the disciples' perspective, the seeming indifference of the sleeping Jesus is even more disturbing than the storm that threatens their safe crossing: "Do you not care...?" Jesus demonstrates that he does indeed care.

In the context of the Markan story, Jesus is like the sower in the parable (4:27-28) who goes to sleep and trusts that the seed will sprout and grow and bear fruit-which it does. Within a first-century Jewish context, Jesus' ability to "rebuke" the storm is a sign of divine power: in the Psalms, for instance, the God of Israel is the one who stills the roaring of the seas (Psalm 65:5) and controls the creatures that inhabit the waters (Psalm 89:9).

Today's first reading insists that God commands the sea and all of its moods. God the Birthing Mother presents Job with a series of rhetorical questions, reminding him and us that, while the sea may be threatening, it is God's new born infant, wrapped in God's swaddling clothes of darkness and cloud.

Against the backdrop of the Hebrew Scriptures, Mark's little story invites us to consider how our species respects or fails to respect and to nurture the fruit of God's womb, the cosmos. This story is not an invitation to be complacent about the extreme weather events on our planet, trusting in God that all will be well. Such events can derive from the movement of tectonic plates. They can also derive from or be exacerbated by excessive carbon emissions. We pollute the atmosphere and make the seas to rise at our peril. Trust in God may involve relinquishing vested interests and engaging the processes that are designed to reverse the effects of human-induced climate change.