

Dangerous crossings: Mark 4:35-41

"And they took him with them in the boat." Why is Jesus suddenly in the passive role?

by [Katherine Layzer](#) in the [June 16, 2009](#) issue

If you've attended college, you know the kind of dream I'm talking about. It goes something like this: You're a student again on a campus that looks totally unfamiliar, and you're running to get to an exam that started five minutes ago and that you just remembered you forgot to study for. Sorry! Looks like you're not going to graduate.

I used to have that dream fairly often, but lately a different version has taken its place. Now I'm standing at the entrance of a large, unfamiliar church full of people. The organist has begun the first hymn, and I've just realized I'm supposed to have a sermon prepared. Frantically I search through my papers—no sermon. Any minute now, I'm going to have to stand up in front of the congregation in whatever shape I happen to be in and wing it. Whatever I've managed to absorb over the years, whatever gifts of exegesis, interpretation and public speaking I may or may not have acquired, they will have to do. They're all I've got.

"And they took him with them in the boat, *just as he was*." This sentence stops me in my tracks every time I read it. What can Mark possibly mean? What haven't the disciples bothered going back to get or to do? Why is Jesus, the one who announced this journey, suddenly in the passive role? "They took him with them"—like the toddler you buckle into the car seat as you head home to bed. "Shall we put him in his pajamas first? No, let's not wake him."

This sentence makes Jesus the mighty healer, the rebuker of demons and hypocrites, seem suddenly vulnerable, especially when he then falls asleep, exhausted, in the stern of the boat. I picture him crumpled there, his head on his arms, rocked by the waves, with no one but the disciples around him for protection. I'm anything but reassured.

Jesus' ministry is one dangerous crossing after another, starting with his baptism. The moment the waters close over his head, the moment God's rushing Spirit meets and merges with his, his path through the world becomes one of confrontation: confrontation between entrenched interests and the in-breaking kingdom; confrontation between the way things are and the way God means them to be. The unclean spirits don't want their boat rocked. Neither do the authorities. But the Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus. Rocking the boat is what he's come to do.

"Let's go across to the other side," he says, sounding like someone proposing a pleasant evening cruise. But he's talking about the Decapolis: pagan territory and the center of Hellenistic influence on Jewish soil. It's as if he turns to his followers at the end of a long day and says, "I'm beat. Let's go touch base with the Roman occupation," and they set sail straight into a waiting storm.

Those of us who don't share Jesus' zest for direct confrontation can understand why the disciples—fisherfolk, most of them, presumably experienced with storms—seem hopelessly out of their element in this one. It's as if the act of boundary crossing has unleashed the forces of chaos. There's a reason people stay in their own neighborhoods. There's a reason we maintain borders, build fences, equip armies. We're trying to keep the chaos monsters of our own natures from breaking free and battering us to pieces. Most of us don't feel equipped to deal

with monsters, internal or external. The mere thought of them is enough to make us pull a Jonah and take off in the other direction.

But there's Jesus, getting into the boat "just as he is"—no weapons, no gear, nothing up his sleeve, setting a course for confrontation . . . and falling asleep.

What happens when the storm breaks in all its fury? When the disciples rouse him and urge him to panic? He sits up, this tired, vulnerable man, and turns and speaks directly to the wind and the waves. "Peace," he says. "Be still."

He talks to the storm face to face, just as he'll talk to the "legion" of demons waiting for him at Gerasa and negotiate the terms of their withdrawal. Jesus will talk to anyone: members of opposing parties, hostile foreign heads of state, sinners, Samaritans, people who are out to destroy him. Anyone.

Offered a choice between fight or flight, he goes with direct engagement. He speaks to the storm and utters that word of power spoken over the waters from the beginning. He speaks, and the eternal word is present—greater than the wind and the waves, greater than our fear of conflict, greater than our drive for power and dominion, greater than sin, greater than death. His is the word that is able to bring peace where peace seems out of the question.

The good news for hapless disciples like us is that because Jesus is who he is, we're enough too. He takes us just as we are. He doesn't wait for us to be ready. If he did, we'd never set forth. As a seminarian I worked hard to prepare for parish ministry. The more I prepared, the less ready I felt. Finally I just had to get into the boat and trust that Jesus would be there for me when *just as I am* was all I had. So far, I haven't gone under.