

Ordinary #12B (Mark 4:35-41)

Like the stories that come before it, the storm at sea is a parable of reversal.

by [Justo L. González](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue



Waldemar Flaig, *Jesus mit den Jüngern im Sturm*, by 1932.

It has often been noted that there is a close connection between Jesus' parables and his miracles: the miracles illustrate the parables, and the parables help us understand what the miracles mean. In Mark 4, there is a close link between the parables earlier in the chapter and the events of this week's reading. The latter take place "on that day," with Jesus and his disciples in "the boat"—meaning the same day and the same boat from which he delivered the parable of the sower.

Last week's parable of the growing seed is one of many parables of absence. The sower leaves the seed and goes away "to sleep and rise day and night." He does not intervene again until the proper time, "when the grain is ripe." In this week's story,

Jesus acts out what he said in the parable. He has sown in the disciples the seed of faith. Now he takes a boat with them and, as in the parable, goes to sleep. His sleep, like the sower's, is a sign of trust.

While Jesus sleeps and trusts, a storm breaks out, and the disciples fret and panic. This is quite a normal reaction, as any of us who have found ourselves in peril know. This is what we do even in less dramatic cases, as when something that is to occur the next day keeps us awake all night. We know there is not much we can do about it in the middle of the night, and yet we fret. We find it difficult to be like that sower who simply goes to sleep while he waits for the seed to grow, or the master who sleeps in the middle of the storm. We want to solve it—and we want God to solve it—right now.

While the disciples struggle to keep the boat afloat, their master sleeps. This seems to make their situation even more desperate. Apparently he has forgotten about them, is paying no attention to the storm, and does not care whether the boat sinks or floats. Talk about absence! This is far worse than the bridegroom who is late.

Finally they wake him up. The absent master is now with them. He rebukes the wind and orders the sea to be still, and the storm abates. But if a moment before they were awed by the storm, now they are even more awed, asking who is this one whom even the wind and the sea obey.

If we read this with the earlier parables in mind, we begin to see connections. The mustard seed, the smallest and the least remarkable of seeds, becomes a large bush that can even give shelter to the birds. This is a parable of reversal, of that new order which Jesus calls the reign of God, where the least will be great and the first shall be last. In a way the story of the storm at sea is a story of reversal as well. At the beginning of chapter 4, in order to be heard by the large crowd Jesus has to get into a boat, apparently so his voice will carry. Now, in the same boat, the same day, the voice of Jesus is powerful enough to silence the wind and calm the sea. The text does not actually say that his voice is particularly loud. But it certainly is powerful!

The mustard seed has become a large bush. The voice that had difficulty making itself heard now has the power to calm the fury of the elements.

But then the same voice that rebuked the wind and calmed the sea addresses the disciples: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" This sounds like an unfair criticism. Most of us, finding ourselves in similar circumstances, would fear just as

the disciples did—no matter how much faith we have. It probably takes much less than a storm at sea to make us afraid. We fear failure, loneliness, disease, death. We fear fear.

So Jesus' words to his disciples—"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"—also address us. They do not even need the dire circumstances of this story to speak to us. Even in some of the smallest actions and the most common situations of daily life, we are afraid. We wonder what will happen. Whatever the problem might be, we are convinced that we must solve it now. We cannot wait for the seed to mature. We cry urgently to a God who seems to be asleep. God is absent, and the boat is about to sink. We cannot wait to see the seed bear fruit, and the sower simply lets it be.

It is at this point that faith is most needed. The disciples do not need faith after seeing the miracle. They need it while the ship is floundering. We tend to think that miracles produce faith, or that they are God's response to great faith. Either may sometimes be the case. But true faith leads to trust even when there is no miracle. Could it be that sometimes we are given miracles because otherwise our weak faith would not trust?