

Conversations with chaos (Mark 4:35-41)

The wind and water operate at a guttural level within these fishermen disciples.

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As the disciples drift from one shore to the next, they are shaken by a violent squall and their future looks austere. What put their lives in jeopardy was their affirmation of Jesus' invitation to journey toward unquenchable life—their decision to follow Jesus to a new shore. Peter, Andrew, James, and John—fishermen recruited into Jesus' campaign for uninhibited life—would have been particularly conversant with the Sea of Galilee and its storms, with the deadly potential of no return. Families and friends across Galilee no doubt harbored horror stories of the life-silencing drama of these waters.

In the ancient Near Eastern imagination, water and wind together symbolized chaos and disorder. Chaos shakes the disciples' ship and fills it with water—a scene of shaking and sinking that manifests in an expedition beyond their familiar horizons. Not only is their Gentile destination fraught with uncertainty and hostility, but the journey itself also challenges faith and jeopardizes peace.

The wind and water—the chaos—operate at a guttural level within the disciples. “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying?” I imagine the disciples casting loose articles and extra cargo overboard. Their frantic appeal to Jesus is a petition for him not to calm the sea but to help remove the water weighing down the boat. However, instead of adjusting to chaos, Jesus tranquilizes it.

Life with Jesus is not merely susceptible to the shaking and sinking of chaos; it is an ongoing crash course in conversing with chaos. Genesis 1:1 demonstrates the cosmic possibilities of chaos. God declares light in the midst of the prehistoric dark, chaotic context of the earth. Freedom-fighting people of faith extend the lineage of chaos conversers—people unafraid to stare down socio-political chaos and speak with authority.

Jesus converses with the chaos. The translation “Peace be still” sanitizes his approach. When they wake Jesus up, he demands the winds to shut up—a strong vulgar verb in the Greek! “Wind and waves, muzzle yourselves. Shut up!” Jesus muzzles the wind with the same authoritative language he uses to silence demons. In the Markan imagination, there is no qualitative difference between tortuous spirits and tempestuous storms. Jesus puts a gag order on the winds.

In the heart of chaos, there is a platform for shared growth and social change. Sometimes chaos—however messy, disorienting, and dangerous—furnishes opportunities to see God anew. The disciples have questions about Jesus, and Jesus has questions about them. “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” they ask each other. “Why are you afraid?” he asks them. “Have you still no faith?” Caution and fear make sense in the consuming context of the chaotic. But people of faith wake up and initiate divine discourse with the chaos.

To speak under the threat posed by the waves of nonbeing and the winds of insecurity, we have to exhibit prophetic maladjustment to the chaos around us. Martin Luther King Jr. introduced the concept of maladjustment to the psychology of freedom and the struggle for it. It’s a psychotherapeutic term; it means being unable to cope with the demands of one’s social environment. We need to embody maladjustment to the iniquity of inequity and injustice. We speak to the chaos when we are maladjusted to a hyper-racialized carceral state and its airtight cells of poverty; to executive orders that aim to impose religious tests on immigrants; to the gutting of voting rights and the redrawing of electoral maps so that politicians can choose their voters; to transphobic and homophobic violence.

The world needs Jesus-people to awake from our violent slumber—moral narcolepsy—and speak with the unimpeachable authority of our teacher. While all the world loses its head, we can shut up the forces of chaos if we dare open our mouths and speak.