Storms, Darkness and Christ
Mark 4:35-5:20

I'm sure you've heard the expression, or seen it on a bumper sticker: *You Only Live Once - YOLO*. Or its close cousin: *One Life, Live It*. Or, for the high brow classicists among us, *carpe diem*: *seize the day*. The idea being, life is short, so get out of it everything you want. You only get one shot at life, this life is it, so don't leave any regrets. Don't let anyone or anything stop you living the life you want.

Now of course such a view of life is built off a secular materialist world view and it faces a problem: stuff happens. Circumstances outside our control can spoil our dreams. Worse than that, other people can wreck them. And what are you supposed to do when either of those happen?

Well, we're looking at this passage in Mark's gospel and it deals with just this. Plans upended by external circumstances and a life wrecked by the influence of powerful others.

When Storms Come
And Jesus and his disciples are in a boat on Lake Galilee and, v37, 'A great windstorm arose.' And Lake Galilee, apparently because of its position below sea level and surrounded by mountains, can become what one commentator calls 'a boiling cauldron' when a storm comes down from the mountain. Which is clearly what was happened here, because, v37 again, 'the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.'

Now, we have a little sailing dinghy, and when we first moved here, and I was teaching the girls to sail, I'd get pretty frustrated by the fact that Lac Leman was always so calm and there was never any wind. So one afternoon, when it began to blow I thought, this is my chance to show Naomi, our eldest, what sailing's really like. So we rigged up the boat and launched out into the lake, and the wind was blowing and within about 50m I realised this was not a good idea. Because, sure we were bombing along, but the waves were coming in over the side, and I was struggling to keep the boat upright, and we couldn't bale the water out quick enough. And I was scared.

And so were these guys. Except they were experienced fishermen. And it's night time, so it's dark. And there's no moonlight because there's a storm. And everything's worse when you can't see. And the waves are crashing in and the boat is filling. And unless something changes, this is only going to end one way.

But you don't have to be in a boat to experience that, do you? Origen, the third century theologian, described our existence as, 'this wave tossed life.' And Augustine described those times 'when your heart is taking a battering' like this boat. Your dreams, the way you thought and wanted your life to go, is taking on water. Or someone's hurt you, and as a result, your heart is like this lake: your anger is like a storm inside you. Or maybe temptation is beating against you. And there's something you really want to do, but you don't want to do it. And you feel battered. Or circumstance after circumstance is not going your way, and like the water pouring in over the sides, no sooner have you dealt with one issue, than here comes another.

And, you only live once, according to secular materialism, and here is your life, heading to the bottom. It's no wonder anxiety and depression at that thought add to the storm.

But the crazy thing is, this journey was Jesus' idea: v35, 'he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." So, if you're a Christian, you can be walking in obedience to Jesus, you can be right

where he wants you, doing what he's told you, and find yourself in the middle of a storm, thinking, 'life is not meant to be like this.' And like these disciples, feel overwhelmed.

Meanwhile, what's Jesus doing? Verse 38, 'He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion.' They are bailing water like crazy, desperately fighting to keep this boat afloat, and there he is, asleep, on a cushion. They're desperate and he's… not.

Have you ever experienced being eaten up with anxiety over something, and no-one else seems to get how serious it is? Not even God. And you wonder, God, don't you get it? And yet, he doesn't seem to share our panic, does he? Or your world can be falling apart or, at least, not going the way you hoped. And what do you hear from God? Nothing. Or worse, Jesus, pushing up the zeds.

Verse 38, 'They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"' It's less of a question and more of an accusation, isn't it? It's the god-forsakeness of the sufferer. That feeling that you are facing the worst, and God does not seem to care, that he's given up on you. Because if he did care, surely I'd feel it, but what I feel is forsaken.

And yet, they still go to wake him, don't they? You see, deep down, even though they're accusing him, they know he's the answer. And you do too. If you're a Christian, you can feel overwhelmed and wish you felt his presence, which means you know his presence is what you need. And if you're not yet a Christian, you know this situation is outside your control and you find yourself praying, because you know you need his help.

Okay, but it's not just storms that come.

When Darkness Comes

And when they get across to the other side of the lake, they're met by this man with an unclean spirit. Look how Mark describes him: v3-5: 'He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones.'

Now, if *You Only Live Once* is a motto of our age, the idea that to be truly you you've got to be truly free, is arguably the philosophy of our age. That you don't need to ask permission from anyone to be you.

But look at this man. Because he's the ultimate free man, isn't he? No one can bind him. No one can tell him what to do. No one has him under their thumb. He's not asking permission from anyone. He's free!

But he's not free, is he? No one can chain him and yet he is bound with chains. Our current culture says, don't let anyone restrict you from being you. But this man shows us what unrestrained freedom looks like.

But how did he get there? It's not hard to imagine is it? When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he was offered all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory, if only he would bow down and worship satan. What do you think this man was offered? When he started out down this path that

ended in this graveyard, living among the dead, what was he promised by the stuff he was chasing? Take this job, sleep with that person, stretch yourself financially for this thing, compromise that principle, and you'll have the city at your feet; you'll have the friends, or the status, or the kind of money you're after.

And where does it end? In a life out of control. A life ruled by its passions. A life promised the highlife and now lived among corpses. The American author, Ben Palpant writes, 'people chase pleasure until it is no longer pleasurable.' They chase freedom until it enslaves them.

And as a result, this man is left socially isolated. But I bet he wasn't told that when he set out, was he? He was promised popularity. But now he's aggressive, and unpredictable, and alone. It's one of the tragic outcomes of thinking life consists in living free of the constraints of others. You inevitably become more and more isolated - and the rates of loneliness in our societies just keep rising.

But he's also self-harming, cutting himself with stones. But you don't need a stone, and you don't need to look like this man to do that, do you? You can look much more sophisticated. And you can just overwork, or over drink, or engage in a habit that harms. But the reason you do it is the same reason he's doing it. To bring some peace, some release. To deal with your guilt, or try justify or prove yourself. Because with everything else it brings, darkness brings self-loathing.

But then look how the demons respond when Jesus asks them "What is your name?" Verse 9, 'He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." And a Legion was a Roman army division containing several thousand soldiers. And we don't know how many are afflicting this man. What we do know is they've reduced him to a number. What's your name? Legion. A 1000, or 1800, or whatever. The man no longer has a name, just a number.

But that's all that secularism and scientific materialism can offer you. Because they can never tell you why you matter, why you're nothing more than the sum of atoms that make you up. Why you're nothing more than a meaningless, and ultimately irrelevant statistic in a vast, empty and meaningless universe of numbers. They can never give you a name.

Jesus offers you something far better.

When Christ Comes

When I was a boy, we used to sail out of Bosham Harbour. It's a beautiful village with a church dating back over a thousand years. And Bosham's famous for two reasons. First, it has a carpark, which is covered by seawater when the tide rises. So if you're a local, you know not to park there. If you're a tourist you might not be so lucky. Second, King Canute is buried in the church. And it was at Bosham, most likely in the carpark before it was a carpark, that Canute tried his hand at turning back the waves.

Now, the way the story's normally told, Canute is a proud king who thinks he can control the tide. The reality, it seems, was very different. Because Canute was a Christian, and he'd had enough of his courtiers telling him how wonderful he was. So he ordered them all down to the low water mark, and taking his throne with him, he sat down. And as the tide began to come in, with his courtiers standing around him, he commanded the waves to go back. By the time the tide was up to his

thighs, he got up, turned to his men and said something along the lines of: 'Now, you can see just how powerful I really am.' And walked back up the beach.

Because who can control the sea? Jesus can. And in the midst of the chaos of the storm, the disciples wake him. And Mark tells us, v39, 'He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.' And the 'great windstorm' of v37, has become 'a great calm'.

What must that calm have been like? You might say of someone, 'his silence said everything.' Well, what did this stillness say? The beating wind and the crashing waves said something of the power of nature. What did this calmness say about Jesus' power?

Verses 40: 'He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"' Now, if their question of him was an accusation, his is a rebuke, isn't it? Because the implication is clear: if only your trust of me was deeper, you would not be afraid. But surely, it's natural, even right, to be afraid in the face of physical risk, isn't it? Sure. But, they've heard demons call him the Son of God, he's told them he's the Lord of the Sabbath, and the One stronger than the strong man. So, do they really think he's going to let them drown? What are they thinking?

And as they sit in that boat, in that great calm, Mark tells us, v41, 'They were filled with great fear'. Before, they were just afraid, because they knew what they were dealing with - a life-threatening storm. Now, they're terrified, because they don't know what they're dealing with: v41 again, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

You see, the calm says, he's not just Lord of the Sabbath, he's Lord of the Sea. He's Lord of the Storm. He's the king of wind and waves, of heaven and earth. But who has that kind of power but God? The One with power over the forces of chaos and confusion, of despair and destruction.

And not just in the boat, but in our hearts and lives. The One whose power is greater than any trial or temptation we might face. So why does he not still it sooner? Why does he leave me in the storm while he seems asleep?

Well, Cyril of Alexandria, one of the church fathers, wrote simply: 'Jesus' sleep matures their faith.' That it was by going through the storm and experiencing its full raging power, and only then seeing seeing Jesus still it, once they had given up all other hope, that their knowledge and awe of him grew.

And maybe that's why God is not as quick to change our circumstances as sometimes we would like. Because somethings, like wine and cheese and maybe our faith, mature best by leaving them for a bit. And sometimes it's through storms that we learn, more about ourselves, and what we fear and trust most; and more about him.

And yet, as great a teaching moment as a storm is, Jesus still stills the storm. And he'll do the same for you. In the chaos of your circumstances he's the one who can give you peace. When you're feeling battered by temptation, he's the one who can bring you through. When your heart is struggling with anger, he's the one who can calm it.

You see, right from the earliest commentators, people have seen the similarities between this storm and the prophet Jonah's. Both are in a boat. Both Jonah and Jesus are asleep and awakened by the words, 'don't you care we're all perishing?' And in both the storm is stilled. But with Jonah, the storm's stilled and the sailors' lives are saved by Jonah being thrown into the storm, but not Jesus. So why the similarities up to that point? Because it's telling you one day Jesus will be thrown into the storm. And at the cross, he throws himself into the storm of God's wrath to save, not just these sailors, but all of us. And when you know that he loves you that much, it transforms the way you see trials and temptations. You know that if he loves you like that, he won't abandon you, and if he loves you like that, you won't dishonour him. But it also transforms the way we see the hurts done against us that can make us so angry. Sure others may seek to harm me, but Christ loves me.

But sometimes, you have to awaken Christ in your heart to experience that. You have to turn to him in prayer and ask, plead with him, and as you do it's as if you're waking him. As Augustine said, when your heart is battered 'this is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of those words: "Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?' Because it's as you see him as he really is - his love and his power - that he settles the storm in your heart.

But he'll also restore your humanity.

Jesus steps ashore and, v6: 'When he [the demonised man] saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him.' The man who no one else could tame him, falls before Jesus. Verse 7, 'And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God." Now, how do the demons know who Jesus is? Because they've met him before, when Jesus' power and glory were not veiled in humanity. And they know who he is, and they know what he's capable of, and they fall before him.

But they're legion! They're like one of those armies of thousands of orcs in The Lord of the Rings, evil, malignant and maline. And Jesus steps ashore and they fall down. And then, with a word, he dismisses them. And v15, the locals 'came to Jesus and saw the demon possessed man, the one who had had the legion, *sitting there, clothed and in his right mind*.' An army of evil has been slowly disintegrating this man, and Jesus restores him. He's been running around screaming and now he's sat at Jesus' feet listening. He's been naked and exposed and Jesus clothes him.

Last Saturday morning, we bought a couple of croissants and went and had breakfast under the cherry trees in one of the Lausanne parks, just because the blossoms were so beautiful. But as we sat there, about 20m in front of us, this group of young women set up a metal pole and, wearing nothing but their underwear, hung and danced from this pole. It wasn't quite the breakfast we had in mind. But then, when they came to pack up and were getting changed, they would stand in front of each other to cover each other from public view. It was all slightly bizarre. They'd had no problem being all but naked on the pole, but they clearly didn't want to be totally exposed. Because none of us do. But the powers of darkness and the unrestrained freedom they offer always leave you exposed. And this man needs someone to cover him. And Jesus does it.

But what he needs, we all need. Whether it's our shame or our guilt, we all need someone to cover us. Someone to tell us we're forgiven, we're loved. And at the cross, Christ was stripped naked that we might be clothed. He was exposed, that we might be covered. Clothed with Christ's righteousness. Covered with God's love.

And then Mark tells us, he was in his right mind. You know, people will tell you you're crazy to believe in Christianity, and yet it's Christ who restores our sanity. You see our current culture tells you, to be really free, to be really you, you mustn't let anyone constrain you. But as Tim Keller has said, 'true freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones.' The boundaries within which you can truly flourish. And like this man, you only find those sitting at Jesus' feet - learning to live life the way you were made to live it.

And yet, it's exactly that liberating power of Jesus that provokes these two very different reactions: Verse 17, the locals 'began to beg Jesus to depart from their region', while, v18, 'The man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him.' One begs Jesus to leave, the other begs to be able to stay.

The strange thing is, Jesus does as the people ask, and not as the man. He leaves them, but he doesn't let the man go with him. Why? For two reasons. Firstly, because he won't force himself on them, any more than he will force himself on you. If you're not yet a Christian, like this man, you have to want to be with Jesus. So look at the way he restores this man and decide for youself, is it more crazy to ask him to leave, or want him to stay?

But there's another reason he refuses the man's offer. And that's because this man was not just left exposed, he was left isolated. And so there's one last step in his restoration: v19, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." The world tells you, you need to be you, and you end up increasingly isolated. But Jesus says, it's in denying yourself that you find yourself. It's in loving and serving God and others that you truly thrive, that you'll truly be free. And as you do, you're not just restored to community, you help build it.

So, Jesus tells him to go and tell everyone what the Lord has done for him. And v20, 'He went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.' Let us go and do likewise.