



Hope Beyond Hope

Mark 4:25-41

Rev. Thomas G. James

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I want to begin this morning with a moment of confession. We're not part of the Roman Catholic Church, and so confession is not something we insist upon, but I find confession to be healthy for the soul.

Here's my confession today: I am a skeptic. I am skeptical about most things.

I *don't* think the earth is flat, and I *do* think we landed on the moon. I'm not a conspiracist, but I am a skeptic.

Google defines skeptic as, "Thomas James." ... sorry, Google defines skeptic as: "a person inclined to question or doubt accepted opinions."

Let me read that again: "a person inclined to question or doubt accepted opinions."

It feels like it is part of my nature to be wary of the popular opinion or the institutional way of doing things. I don't accept the status quo or the suggested way of doing things simply because it is the status quo or the suggested way of doing things. That's not to say that I won't end up doing or accepting something as it was first presented to me, but I'm going to take the long way to get there. Curse the Spirit in me if you wish, but my inclination is to question or doubt the accepted opinion; I'm going to get to the answer for myself before I simply say, "I agree."

Perhaps it is my skeptical nature that makes me really love this passage from the Gospel of Mark.

Our story in Mark today takes place on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had just recently called the twelve to be the disciples, and they were all gathered on the side of the sea where Jesus was teaching a large crowd that had gathered. Jesus, needing more room to address the growing congregation that was coming to hear him teach, got into a boat that was anchored near the shore. From the deck of the boat, he began teaching the multitude in parables.

He taught the crowd only using parables, but verse 34 says he would explain the parables to the disciples in private.

When the evening came ... the sun was quickly setting ... Jesus said to the disciples they should take the boat to the other side of the Sea. Verse 36 indicates that there were other boats present, but we're led to assume that Jesus and the disciples were all on the same boat. It's evening when they set out across the sea. It's either dark out, or almost dark. Electricity wasn't a thing, so there are no floodlights to

guide the way. They probably had little more than the flicker of candlelight in the village on the other side of the Sea to offer a navigating direction. Perhaps the moonlight was bright enough to offer some visibility on the waters.

As they are traversing the sea, “A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.” First, I want to correct my own understanding of this story. I’ve always pictured this as a thunderstorm or a hurricane, but it doesn’t appear to have been raining at all. The natural occurrence, as described by the Greek phrase *lailaps anemos* (lay-laps ah-nay-moss), is that a gale of wind was wreaking havoc on the sea and the boat. The water flooding the boat wasn’t coming down from the sky, it was coming up from the sea below.

Mark’s narrative lets us know that Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the stern. He’s sleeping through the gale force winds on the back of the boat, even as it takes on water.

Now, I need you to know that I appreciate Jesus’ slumber. You can ask almost any clergy person: it’s quite common that we have a Sunday afternoon nap following preaching on Sunday morning. I get Jesus’ exhaustion on a real level. ... Jesus had just finished a marathon sermon, teaching story after story, parable after parable, and he was in need of some holy rest.

As he was sleeping, the disciples were frantic. In fear for their lives, they went and found Jesus asleep on the living room couch and they woke him up.

What happens next is why I say I love this text, speaking as a skeptic. Hold this image in your mind – boats a-rocking, waves a-crashing, winds a-howling, and Jesus a-sleeping. The disciples wake Jesus up, and they ask him a question that exhibits the fullness of *their* skepticism.

They don’t wake him and up and say, “We need your help!” There’s no plea for him to calm the waves. There’s no invitation for him to step in and save them. No ... the disciples don’t actually ask him *for* anything. They wake him up and say, “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

Do you not care if we all die?

There are scholars who would argue with me that the disciples’ question is a plea for help, not simply a skeptical question about Jesus’ intention. And I know some of you have experienced a similar kind of question before with your children. You’ve just finished preparing the kid’s dinner and put the food on the table, and as your child sits down to eat, they ask you, “am I supposed to go thirsty?” ... their sass has made it clear that you forgot to prepare them a drink.

Sass is different that skepticism.

I don’t think the disciples were being sassy. That’s not to say the disciples were never sassy ... but at least in this case, I think they were being skeptical.

The disciples knew what Jesus was capable of. They had already seen Jesus perform miracles of healings. They had just finished listening to Jesus explain the parables to them in private. They had a growing understanding of who Jesus was and what he was capable of. And yet, as it felt like the ship was getting ready to capsize – flooding with water under the heavy winds and crashing waves – the disciples were inclined to question Jesus' *lack* of action. They were skeptical, given their knowledge of what he could do, that he was doing nothing.

I can't help but wonder if the disciples' skepticism around Jesus' inaction is not mirrored in our own concern for what is happening in the world today. Is our hope for what can and should and will be lost because in the midst of our work, it seems that Jesus is lazing around, asleep somewhere else on the ship. Is our hope tied in to visible expressions of what we think should be happening on behalf of the divine, or is our hope secured in something grander ... something far more eternal?

Jesus wakes up as the disciples are verbally repudiating him with their skepticism.

His first course of action is to calm the wind and the water below them. "Peace! Be Still!" he exclaimed. And in a moment's notice, the wind died down and the sea was perfectly quiet.

Now, consider for a moment the immediate reaction of the disciples. Yes, they were skeptical about Jesus' lack of action to save them ... but also, in that moment, Jesus commanded the wind and the seas, and they obeyed. ... I can't help but wonder, is that what the disciples expected to happen? Did the disciples think that Jesus actually had *that* kind of power?

In my mind's eye, the disciples went from one feeling of fear to another ... they first feared for their lives because of the wind and the waves, and now they fear for their lives because this man – Jesus – has *way* more power than they even imagined.

And Jesus, now standing firm on a boat that has stopped rocking, chastises the disciples. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Why are you afraid? ... Honestly friends, I'm not sure which fear Jesus is addressing. Is he addressing the fear they had for their lives amidst the wind and boisterous sea, or is he addressing their fear in *his control* over the wind and sea?

As the story concludes, the disciples were filled with awe, and they said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

The whole story brings to mind an important question as we conclude our worship focus on hope today. Over the past two months, we've talked a lot about what hope is, what hope is not, how we practice hope, and how hope leads us. The question that I want to center as we conclude this morning is, "are we prepared to actually do the work that our hope requires us to do?"

In her book, Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana highlights this story in the Gospel of Mark, offering, "The disciples were afraid, even after the storm subsided, because this is what they came for: a life following

One who could not and would not guarantee smooth sailing; a life spent in service to something greater than themselves.”ⁱ

If the hope that we've been talking about for the past two months is centered around your personal well-being, around your personal wealth, or your personal safety, you will likely wake up one day to find yourself in a hope desert – where the only promises for a future are fading oases. You may find yourself like the disciples, who, in the midst of any stormy season, find themselves questioning whether or not God actually cares for them. “Do you not care if I die?” may become your daily mantra. It's not that we don't think God *can* do something, it's not that we doubt God's capacity ... it's that we don't think God is actively participating in the way we expect God to participate.

So as we think about hope beyond hope, I want to offer a few final thoughts for us to consider about the hope that guides us as a people of faith – a hope that is represented by Christ as an anchor, which holds us securely in the eternal presence of God.

First, such a hope will not be championed by any empire, government, or capitalistic agency. In fact, in general, empires, governments, and capitalistic agencies will actively work against the hope that leads us. When we find that the world around us is pushing back on our desire to see God's will and God's way in fruition, we should not be surprised. This is to be expected when the Gospel, which demands a communal, humanity-wide focus stands up against any entity that focuses on self, or a select group of the whole.

Knowing such a message will not be universally accepted, we would do well to be prepared to move through the pushback – we have to be ready to move through difficult seasons. We have to grit our teeth as we proclaim the love of God, even in the midst of a world that prefers the love of self. We have to hold fast to the promise of the hope that says, even if the world fights us in this work, we know our hope is secure, and that God will lead us through.

It will benefit us in our hope to acknowledge that much of our work is not inspired in and of itself, but is a protest to the systems and policies that exist around us. Just as the world will push back against us because of our hope, our hope will also lead us to push back against the world. Though we can't always put a clear definition on what the future looks like when our hope is fully realized, it's not hard to know when something is wrong, or where current events are clearly not aligned with our hope. We can acknowledge that events like the train derailment and pollution of hazardous waste into local water supplies, and another shooting on another college campus are events that do not align with our hope, for they do not align with the witness of Christ anchored in the presence of God. Such events should spark in us protest; we should actively be working against such events to happen again, because they do not reflect the hope to which we hold.

With so much work to be done, our hope will require perseverance. The world has never fully appreciated the witness of Christ – it's what led Christ to the cross. Even in our churches, the true witness of Christ is rebuked and altered to match preferences for self. The gospel is not, has never been, and will never be about you, your personal salvation, or your isolated well-being. It's no wonder the rest of the world can't handle the Gospel, even our churches have a hard time fully embracing the

forgiving, grace-filled promise of God who claims that our future is only secured by our shared, corporate, and communal well-being – a world in which we gather together to declare the goodness of God for all of creation. Our hope in this promise requires “steadfast effort,” a perseverance that says we can get through this together.

And finally, as a concluding caveat, you should know, this will not be the last time we talk about hope, for this hope is central to our identity as people of faith. As we think about how hope will lead us, we should hold fast to promise, offered in three simple words: our hope is.

Our hope is.

If, like the disciples on that wave-rocked boat, we have any doubt that God is who God says God is, or that God is working in our midst, then we too will be weary and fearful. If we have any doubt that God is capable of commanding the wind and the sea, we too will find ourselves in fear and awe of God’s power. But if we can see Jesus asleep on the sofa and trust that the promise of God is steadfast and true, if we can live in the midst of troubling times and still have faith that Christ is Lord, if we can stand up on shaky ground and believe that Spirit will guide our steps, then we can hold on to the truth that *our hope is*. Our Hope is steadfast. Our Hope is guaranteed. Our Hope is assured. Our Hope is coming to fruition. Our Hope is expansive enough to lead us to that day when we will rejoice as one heavenly body, of every tribe and tongue, without pain or broken-health, without tears or fear of death, without division or animosity toward one another, to praise God for God is good, and our hope is secure.

May this hope guide you and lead you to be engaged in the work, that we won’t have to wait for that heavenly banquet to taste the joy that our hope assures. Go, and may your hope lead you. Amen.

ⁱ All quotes from Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana come from *Hope: A User’s Manual*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2022