

To read this gospel as a front page story in the Jerusalem Post is to reduce faith to magical thinking.

Joan Didion’s husband died suddenly as they were preparing dinner. She needed to spend the first night alone.

Of course she knew John was dead. Of course she had already delivered the definitive news to his brother and to her brother and to her daughter’s husband. The NY Times knew.

The LA Times knew.

Yet, she was in no way prepared to accept the news as final: there was a level on which she *believed* that what happened remained reversible. That is why she needed to be alone.

She needed to be alone so he could come back. That was the beginning of her year of magical thinking.

The Devil, taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, says, “If you are God’s son, jump and the angels will catch you and you will not smash into the rocks of the Kidron Valley.” This would have been a jump of about 450 feet.

The Devil may not have fooled Jesus, but many others have been fooled, believing the laws of nature will be suspended for them if they have enough faith.

Thinking faith will protect you from disease or disaster is a form of magical thinking. The story of Job should have cured us of this kind of thinking.

Matthew 17:20 If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. Read literally, this turns Jesus into Filius Flitwick and the disciples into students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Reading this gospel as metaphor sheds more light on the experience of the early church and, potentially, on the experience of the contemporary church.

From the earliest days of Christianity, the ship has been a symbol of the church. Think Noah's ark, the ark of salvation. Where you are sitting is referred to as the nave, a word that comes from the Latin word for "ship." It is also the origin of the word "Navy."

The little ship threatened by the storm in Mark's story is the church, a church suffering persecution.

From the creation story on, the sea is a symbol of chaos and danger. It represents whatever is a threat to life. In the current moment, you might think of the sea as the pandemic.

How many little ships will make it across to the other side? The Catholic Dioceses of Northern Ireland has experienced a 70% reduction in income. Many rural Anglican Churches cannot afford a priest. The Evangelical Church in this country, fractured by a political crisis on top of the pandemic, is navigating some very rough seas.

The "other side" of the lake represents what is unfamiliar, unknown. For Mark's church this means moving from Jewish roots into the Gentile world. For the contemporary church, what lies on the other side of the pandemic remains to be seen.

It takes great faith to move from the known into the unknown. The great enemy of faith, of a successful voyage, is fear. Fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith.

Doubt keeps faith from being satisfied with anything less than the truth. Doubt saves faith from fantasy, from magical thinking. Doubt keeps faith open to our ever evolving understanding of reality.

Faith saves doubt from despair. Faith and doubt need each other like we need each other.

Mark 4 begins, "He (Jesus) taught them at length in parables."

Mark 4:1-9 Parable of the Sower

Mark 4:10-20 Jesus explains the purpose of parables

Mark 4:21-25 Parable of hiding a lamp under a basket

Mark 4:26-29 Parable of growing seeds

Mark 4:30-34 Parable of the mustard seed

Mark 4:35-41 Parable of calming the storm at sea

These parables reveal the human condition. The key to reading the parable of calming the storm lies in the disciples question:
“Do you not care that we are perishing?”

The final problem of human existence, says Reinhold Niebuhr, is perfectly and finally symbolized in the fact of death. Paul calls death our last enemy.

We, unlike the beasts of the field (insofar as we know), experience death as incongruous. We, insofar as we know, are the only ones who foresee our death and the only ones to suffer anxiety about it.

The incongruous is often funny: the team with the lowest payroll in baseball has a better record than the team with the highest payroll; British cuisine, which according to John Oliver stopped evolving gastronomically around the year 1242, being considered gourmet.

But we don't find the incongruity of death so funny. We try to laugh at it, but “gallows humor” is little more than a vapid attempt to mask our fear.

Reading the calming of the storm at sea as a parable, reveals faith as the final triumph over the incongruity of death;
the final assertion of the meaningfulness of existence.

Faith is the final assertion of the freedom of the human spirit, but also the final acceptance of our weakness. We cannot save ourselves from death.

We must move toward faith or sink into despair in the face of death. Jesus invites the disciples, and us, to believe that the One who brought us into being, who is at the heart of creation and within every human heart, cares!

Ultimately, faith is trusting God cares and will not let us go.

Benediction:

When the storms of life threaten, the stillness of God be yours.

When you feel alone, the company of the saints be yours.

When you fear death, the mysteries of faith be yours
to make you truly alive.

A Prayer by Howard Thurman

Cofounded the first integrated interfaith religious congregation in the US.

In 1953 he became the first black dean at a mostly white American Univ.

Preaching a philosophy of Common Ground, he mentored Martin Luther King, Jr, at
Boston University

Lord, I want to be more holy in my mind.

My thoughts tend ever to be divisive and scattered.

In so many ways, my mind is a house divided;

the conflicts rage up and down all my corridors.

I need wholeness. Oh, that my mind may be stilled by your holy
hush!

Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart.

Here is the citadel of all my desiring,

where my hopes are born and all the deep resolutions of my
spirit take wings.

In this center, my fears are nourished and all my hates are nurtured.

Here my loves are cherished and all the deep hungers of my
spirit are honored without quivering and without shock.

In my heart above all else, let your love and integrity envelop me until
my love is perfected and the last vestige of my
desiring is no longer in conflict with your spirit.