

Braving the Wilderness *The Threat of Life*

Mark 4:35-41

March 3, 2024

The entire book contains a grand total of 338 words (I counted them), and yet it describes the nature of fear and the possibility of transformation with stunning clarity. Do you wish your preacher could be so succinct?

I must have asked to hear it at bedtime a thousand times as a child, and I have cherished that same request from my own sons. I'm speaking of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, first published in 1963. Did anyone else request it as a child? Or have that request made of them? Sendak illustrates the terrors of childhood as wild things living in a land created in the imagination of Max, a young boy who is sent to his room for causing mischief of all kinds and tormenting the family dog. Lonely and bored in his room all by himself, Max sails his bed to the land of wild things, where he is greeted by these monsters who roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth and show their terrible claws and roll their terrible eyes. Those wild things personify the angst of childhood. They are symbols for the terrors that plague us. They are fear embodied. Their name is legion. They overwhelm us. Roaring. Gnashing.

Late in his life, in interviews, Sendak repeatedly dismissed the criticism that *Where the Wild Things Are* was too scary for children. He insisted that children innately understand fear and that we grownups do them a disservice when we bubble-wrap their lives or downplay their worries. Fear is real. And so, the wild things are real. But Max, approaching this imaginary land in his imaginary boat, is more than up to the challenge.

His commands of the wild things are unflinching. The words appear in all caps. BE STILL! Before long,

Max is in total control. He is made king of all the wild things. And that's where the plot twist occurs. Being the all-powerful king is an equally unnerving proposition. The boy becomes homesick. We are told that Max wanted, "to be where someone loved him best of all." And so, he musters his courage again, this time to declare that he will go home. Despite the wailing protests of the wild things, he steps into the boat and is soon back in his own room, where the dinner left by his mother, who had not forgotten him, is still hot.

Max encounters many fears. There are the wild things with their terrible teeth and their claws. Then there is the burden of responsibility and the isolation it brings. But most intimidating of all is the fear of returning, of leaving the land of imagination and going back to his own life, his own room, his own supper, in a transformed way. The wild things represent the threat of death, but it is going home a changed boy that represents the threat of life.

Which brings us to this morning's story from Mark's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples are aboard a very real boat when a very real storm approaches. It is no ordinary storm. We know this because Mark—who is usually understated in his language—paints the picture in vivid detail. Waves beat against the boat. Water gushes over the sides. There is roaring and gnashing. The threat of death is real. We should trust the judgment of the fishermen on that.

And then there is Jesus. Fast asleep on a cushion (where did he find that?) in the middle of a tempest. The disciples are angry. *Aren't you concerned? Don't you see the threat of death? Do you even care about us?*

Finally, Jesus wakes up. He chastises the wind for interrupting his nap. And like Max, he commands the sea to, "BE STILL!" He doesn't calm the storm so much as he overpowers it. And here is what happens next. The disciples are filled with fear, more petrified by the power of Jesus to conquer the storm than the storm's power to take their lives. More disturbed by the threat of life than the threat of death.

Translations do us a disservice by rendering the word *awe*. They are filled with *fear*. They are *afraid*. "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him? Who is this?" It is a moment of revelation for the disciples. There is more to this man than an uplifting message of love and harmony. Jesus may be peaceful, but he is not passive. The experience on the raging sea is an encounter with the sacred. Though the storm may be stilled, the hearts of the disciples are still racing. No wonder they are afraid. In fact, it is true of every encounter with God or God's messengers in scripture. Why else would the angels always say, "Do not fear?" When we are in the presence of God, the threat of life is real. It challenges our settled assumptions. It rearranges our carefully set priorities. The storm is no match for the power of transformation in Jesus Christ.

I fear that too often I preach a safe and secure Jesus. I fear that too often I convey faith as a cruise on placid waters. I fear that too often we market ourselves as upright people and the church as a respectable institution. But the call of Jesus moves us beyond tedious respectability to courageous faith. Just consider his ministry. Every time he begins to attract a crowd, Jesus speaks hard truths of inconvenient changes and radical reversals. You want to follow me? Give away everything you own. You want to be my disciple? Humble yourself. Welcome the outcast. Love all people—even, especially, *those* people. Do you want to be blessed? Well, blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the weak. His commitment to his mission is so unwavering that he will not compromise the message for anything. For *anything*. The more extreme his actions become the more uncomfortable

his followers feel. He will not settle for platitudes or easy truths. His message is his life—self-denial, radical acceptance, unconditional forgiveness, humble servanthood. Unpopular strategies for attracting a crowd.

And so, for centuries, faith communities and their eager leaders have tried to correct this unfortunate error on Jesus' part. The strategy is to downplay the sacrifice demanded by the gospel, to replace it with messages of self-centered power seeking—the gospel's plan of success. The strategy is to traffick in the fear of the other, to magnify the threat of death. *Be afraid*. The strategy, having created the condition of terror, is to produce the solution. Pseudo-theologies of superiority. Dehumanizing rhetoric. Exclusion and judgment. Angry voices shouting that divide and demonize. When the threat of death is our driving force, we will cling to a false gospel that worships power and encourages violence.

I understand the impulse. After all, the Church has lost much of its influence. We're drowned out by a cacophony of conflicting voices. We're immobilized by our own weakness and division. We churches suffer often from low self-esteem and high anxiety about the future. What if the numbers keep dropping? What if our children leave the faith behind? How can we survive another year, another decade, another generation?

The problem is that such anxiety creates fertile ground for demagogues who claim the capacity to preserve power. That claim is a lie. The disciples on the boat could not control the raging sea. They could not still the violent wind. Only Jesus could do that. It is past time for us to place our trust in his power.

Now, that path comes with a warning of its own. If you choose to climb aboard the boat, you must be prepared for transformation. It will change your life in ways you could not imagine. This is the depth of meaning that is missing from so many lives—so obsessed with the threat of death we miss the thrilling and threatening possibilities of life.

Listen. If your belief in Jesus leads you to judge and blame others more than examine your own walk of faith, you are missing the point. If our fear justifies words and actions that demonize and dehumanize God's beloved children, we've abandoned the Gospel. If we submit ourselves to ideologies of fear or leaders who demand absolute allegiance, we are on the wrong path. In this tempest-tossed time, we must return to the only One who can command the sea and calm the storm.

The Church will thrive and flourish when we are faithful to the terrifying call of our God. Our mission is not defined by any quest for power, but the call to lives defined by sacrifice and service. Compassion for the suffering. Bearing someone else's burden. Listening as an act of love. Lifting someone else in a time of need and despair.

The greatest risk you will ever take, the most life-changing decision you will ever make, is to step into the boat with Jesus. Here's what will happen. The storms will come. The wind will blow. The sea will rage. And then the fears will return. They will roar their terrible roars and gnash their terrible teeth. They will roll their terrible eyes and show their terrible claws. And then, in the most terrifying moments of all, you will be called beyond your fear and past the storms to a whole new way of life. You will be asked to change, to grow, to trust more than you think you can. And in time, you may come to see that you are no longer living for yourself but for God. You may find courage where once there was fear. You will love, and you will be loved, and you will live with passion and purpose.

So, when the invitation comes, resist the temptation to stay on the shore. As jarring as the journey will be, that's one boat you don't want to miss. Amen.