

“The Perfect Storm” | BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE



“THE 2ND DAY OF THE CREATION,” BY M.C. ESCHER, 1925.

Tradition calls it “Mark’s Gospel.” But consider for whom and just when Mark wrote his account of the life of Jesus: Christians living around 70 A.D./C.E., during a war and its aftermath. Mark wrote for Christians whose forty-year-old faith tradition was based on the life of a Jewish man who had been executed by Rome. The followers of this insurrectionist now experienced yet another time of chaos and uncertainty. And Jesus hadn’t returned.

Yet another war threatened to completely wipe out the Jews, including the Jewish Christians. The temple in Jerusalem had been leveled. The refugees were the lucky ones—people just trying to keep what was left of their families together through another day; through another night.

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In this context, Mark writes a gospel—probably the first of its kind. Certainly, this was the first time “Gospel” told the story of a peasant preacher. The word “Gospel” had military overtones. When a runner from the front lines of a battle ran through sympathetic villages shouting “gospell” mothers and wives and children breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps they would see their son or husband or father again, for the runner’s message meant: “Good news! The battle is going our way!”

Mark starts his story of Jesus’ life: “The beginning of the gospel...” Seriously, Mark? How can you say that to hungry refugees, watching the smoke still going up from their burned homes and from their holy place? “Good news”? The battle is going our way? Notice how he begins and then continues his gospel:

¹*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

²*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”*

⁴*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

⁵*And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* ⁶*Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.* ⁷*He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.’* ⁸*I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’*

⁹*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* ¹⁰*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on*

him. ¹¹*And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’*

¹²*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.* ¹³*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

¹⁴*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,* ¹⁵*and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’* (NRSV)

Mark says he is quoting from Isaiah (1:2). But look carefully and you will notice he is actually quoting from Exodus 23:20. Did he not know? Was he not reading carefully, or perhaps not reading at all? Was it all in his memory and he just misquoted? Or was he profoundly aware of Isaiah’s own theological and prophetic reworking of the book of Exodus?

What story from Israel’s past is brought into this introduction to Jesus’ story? Notice the repetition of the word “wilderness.” Notice the Jordan and water images. Notice the number forty, the “crying out” and the people “going out.” Mark sets up his story of Jesus’ life by reminding his readers of another story. Mark’s gospel, clearly, is written as the story of a “New Exodus.”

In this gospel, Jesus will be releasing people from bondage. And it all starts with a voice crying out. Whether the cries are of slaves in Egypt, or the cries of John the Baptist, or those of refugees in Mark’s own day, God hears people’s cries. In this gospel, wherever Jesus goes, people are freed. A man with an unclean spirit enters into the synagogue and Jesus releases him from the demon’s bondage (1:21–28). It is Jesus’ first miracle in Mark, and there are many more to come! A mother-in-law has a fever that keeps her in bed, and Jesus releases her from the bondage of sickness (1:29–31), raises her up in anticipation of the resurrection and she begins “serving” that is, being a disciple (what disciples are to do); in that sense, she is Jesus’ first disciple! All kinds

The Greek

word here

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“experience

anguish,” to

“experience

pain.”

of sick people and demon-possessed people come to Jesus and he releases all of them from bondage to sickness and Satan (1:32–34)! A leper comes to Jesus begging for release from a disease which kept him from family. Making him clean, Jesus restores him to community, releasing him from the bondage of isolation (1:40–45). All this and Mark has just finished chapter one of his Gospel—Good News indeed! The battle is going our way! Mark sees that *Jesus* is the New Exodus!

Mark tells his readers: remember the Exodus! It's happening again! To underscore the point, Mark's first chapter portrays Jesus going into the Jordan River as the children of Israel did after the Exodus as they prepared to enter the promise land. Later in this gospel, a huge multitude in the wilderness will be fed by "bread from heaven." It is "manna" again, only this time, provided by Jesus, with more than enough for sharing. Jesus will also frequently go "up a mountain" like Moses did, teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God that has come.

Mark's gospel presents Jesus' life as an embodiment of the Exodus. People are freed from bondage. People experience salvation. Suddenly the silence is broken. And the broken find their voices:

- Crowds proclaim: "we have never seen anything like this!" (2:12);
- Fishermen ask; "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41);
- A trembling, but healed woman tells Jesus the whole truth of her long illness and her decision to reach out and touch the hem of his robe (5:33);
- A Syrophenician mother responds back: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28);
- Gentiles who witness a miracle exclaim: "He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (7:37);
- A blind man says: "I can see people—they look like trees" (8:24);

- A worried father confesses: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:24);
- A beggar at the side of the road yells out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:47, 48);
- A centurion overseeing Jesus' crucifixion proclaims: "Truly this man was God's son!" (15:39).

The silence is broken. And the broken find their voices. It's good news—the battle is going our way, Mark says to wandering refugees. God hears the cries of the broken.

Reading Mark at the End of 2016

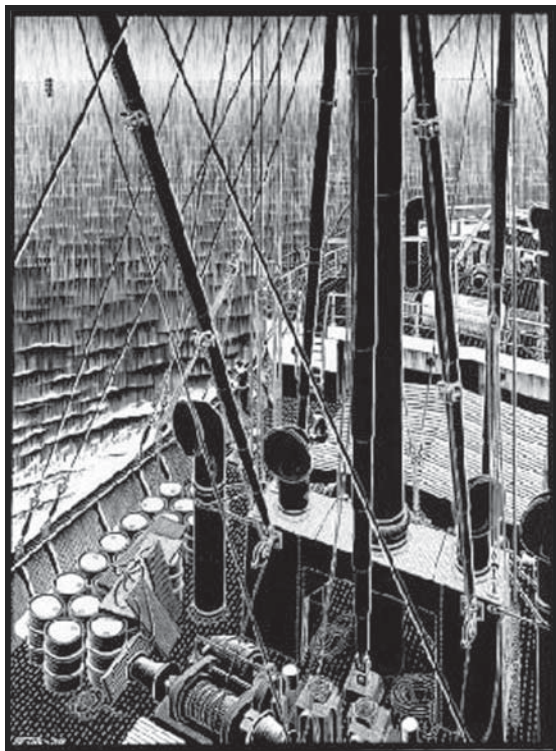
How did we go from this "good news," spoken to the broken refugees of Mark's community, down to a church in 2016 that is trying to silence the broken all over again? To silence women before some of them have even had a chance to break their silence? The events unfolding at Annual Council in October 2016 have been unprecedented in Adventist history.

Those who followed the discussion will know that a document developed in-house by administration at the General Conference headquarters put together a proposal to directly challenge and punish Union Conference constituency decisions in 2012 (affirmed again at the recent 2016 session) to authorize and credential pastors without regard to gender. A supporting position paper was also developed. After widespread protest a modified document was prepared in alarmed haste and then voted last week in Silver Spring, Maryland: 169–122 (58% of the vote).

Last year religion teachers at all Adventist colleges and universities were told to prepare to receive online documents from IBMTE (International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education) that they would be asked to sign should they want to continue teaching in Adventist schools of higher education.

There is much shaking of heads in disbelief at the sharp chasm between those who understand our church's heritage and structure to be

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mission-oriented and committed to the preaching of a present truth, and those who seem to desire a centralized hierarchical power structure of control. Above the din, some sense they hear a cry—is it Ellen White weeping?

For decades, the church has said (even at GC Sessions) that Adventists who love the church and the Bible can—with good conscience—come to differing views on the topic of the equal participation of women in ministry and thus their ordination. Believers therefore need to be patient and flexible with each other. Now, suddenly, those union constituencies who followed their moral convictions born of prayer and Bible study, and who also considered they were properly following policy and processes of the church, are considered rebellious unions. And “rebellious” is one of the kinder descriptions being used.

Perhaps, today, you are feeling overwhelmed by it all. Perhaps you too are not sure where to turn; or perhaps tempted to turn away altogether. It is a stormy time, with rumors in the winds. Chilled hope. Light going out. Perhaps it feels like “the perfect storm.” (If you saw the film, you know it does-

n’t go well for George Clooney and company.) Should one jump ship while one still can?

Recently in a Sabbath sermon reflection on the gathering storm, the senior pastor at La Sierra University Church, Chris Oberg, suggested that “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” She then invited us to respond to these happenings in our church with renewed Bible study. This was good pastoral counsel. Crises should drive us to scripture.

I took up her challenge and spent that Sabbath afternoon and much of Sunday in thoughtful reflection and study. Let me share what Mark had to say to me that Sabbath afternoon. Mark 6:45–52 reads:

⁴⁵Immediately he made (forced, compelled) his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

⁴⁷When evening came, the boat was out in the middle of the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended (wanted) to pass them by. ⁴⁹But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke with them and said to them, ‘Take heart, I AM; do not be afraid.’ ⁵¹Then he rose up into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they themselves were utterly astounded, ⁵²for they did not understand about the loaves, but their heart was hardened.’

This is not the first storm that Mark relates (3:35–41). But it is the first one the disciples encounter without Jesus. Notice that Jesus made (the Greek can mean “forced” or “compelled”) the disciples to get into the boat and head out to the “other” place. This was the “beyond” place—Gentile space: Bethsaida. While this is the first time “Bethsaida” is mentioned in Mark, the Greek word for “other” or “beyond” was used when Jesus went to the land of the Gerasenes—his first sojourn into Gentile territory (5:1). Now Jesus compels his

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M. C. ESCHER - "BOATS" - 1936, WOODCUT

disciples to go to Gentile territory, but without him. He *made* them go, while he heads up the mountain to pray. Like Moses, Jesus goes alone. To be with God. To pray.

Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus had sent the disciples to cast out unclean spirits and they did so while preaching and healing (6:7–13). But that was a ministry among their own people. They visited familiar fishing towns and nearby villages. Why wouldn't Jesus now go with them to this other, strange, Gentile land?

At evening, the disciples are in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and Jesus is alone on the land. It is a starkly described contrast. Even before we know the disciples are in danger, we sense the separation. As pastors, we tell people, when you're going through the difficulties of life—the storms of life—know that Jesus is right there with you. But in this part of this story, Jesus wasn't with them. The language is very clear: Jesus "was alone on the land."

Then Jesus sees their situation. He sees them "straining in anguish, for the wind was

against them" (6:48). In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is described as *seeing* a lot of people. Jesus sees Simon and Andrew (1:16). He sees James and John (1:19). He sees the faith of the four friends bringing the paralytic (2:5). Jesus sees Levi at the tax booth (2:14). He sees the people around him calling them his new family (3:34). Jesus sees the woman who reached out to him (5:32). Jesus sees a crowd looking like sheep without a shepherd (6:34).

After this story of the storm, Jesus also *sees* his disciples as he begins telling him about the crucifixion (8:33). He will see little children being kept from him (10:14). He will see the rich man who will walk away (10:21). He will see his disciples, who had given up so much to follow him (10:23). He will see a scribe who answers wisely (12:34). Jesus *sees* people in the gospel, much like God saw the afflictions of Joseph's descendants in Egypt (Exodus 3:7).

Even though Jesus is not with them, he sees them. He sees them "straining in anguish." The Greek word here can mean "torture" or to "expe-

rience anguish," to "experience pain." It is a word that makes us think of the physical struggle they were going through. Were they finding it difficult to breathe with the water washing over them—in their faces—the intense winds and intense work taking their breath away?

Recently, I had a cycling accident. Everything is fine now, for which I'm very grateful. But that terrible time after I hit the ground (having gone over the handlebars) was a very frightening experience. I couldn't breathe for what seemed the longest time. My entire focus was on breathing. Get the helmet strap off my neck, pull down the high neck on my shirt. Breathe. I needed air. Had my ribs or part of the bike punctured my lungs? No. I had just had the wind knocked out of me. And, though I would spend two days in ICU with a liver laceration, I never needed supplemental oxygen. Since it wasn't a major accident, the injuries all seemed minor once I could breathe again.

What were Jesus' disciples going through, thinking of, during that storm? Was it hard to breathe? That's terrifying. And was the storm a powerful way for Mark to reflect what his first readers, (actually, his first hearers) were going through?

It was "a perfect storm." Jewish rebels had taken the temple mount in Jerusalem, and the Romans had marched to reclaim it—destroying whole villages along the way. And when they came through your village they didn't ask if you were Jewish or Jewish Christian. They didn't ask if you were Jewish or part of a Jewish sect whose leader had been crucified by Rome. You were done. No more breath left in your body. Jews were betraying Jews; Christians betraying Christians. And there was no Jesus in sight.

Followers of Jesus were experiencing the delay of the Advent. Where was Jesus? He said he would return "soon"! The cry from Jesus on the cross was probably echoed a thousand times by his followers: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). My God, my God, why have you forsaken us? Mark's

first hearers would have known the desperation of the disciples rowing against a strong, life-threatening storm—on a sea of terror.

And then Jesus comes to them. At the fourth watch, which was sometime between 3 and 6 am, Jesus comes to them. Jesus comes to them as the light begins to shine in the darkness. He comes walking on the sea!

Echoes of the Exodus come together here in a powerful way. There's already been a miraculous feeding in the wilderness (6:30–44). Manna again for a multitude. Jesus had been up the mountain in prayer (6:46). Jesus had seen the disciples' affliction on the sea, much as God had told Moses that the all-seeing one saw the afflictions of the people in bondage. Now Jesus walks on the sea. It isn't the Red Sea this time, but the Sea of Galilee. And Mark says that Jesus "wanted to pass them by" (6:48). The expression echoes the time when God revealed the divine presence to Moses by "passing by" him. In the Septuagint, "passing by" is code for a divine epiphany! A theophany!

Jesus wanted to "pass them by," that is, he wanted to reveal his divine glory to them. But they were too afraid. Then, with yet another echo of the Exodus, Jesus says, "Take courage, I AM, do not be afraid."

They are frightened. Too frightened. They think they are seeing a ghost. It is a "phantasma" and they cry out in terror. Fear keeps us from a full disclosure of Jesus' identity. But the story also reassures us. Jesus can walk on water—on the chaos of the deep—a deep including death. Death cannot threaten, cannot contain Jesus!

At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus' disciples think they are seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37). Luke notes that they experienced fear and astonishment. But Jesus had conquered death! He was not part of the underworld, or the spirit world of the dead. He was alive! If Jesus has conquered the greatest enemy what storm is there to fear?

One of my friends, Kevin Kakazu, said to me last week about the disturbing events occurring in our church: "it feels like a type of

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Ellen White
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death." Then, with a twinkle in his eye, Kevin continued: "but since when have Christians been afraid of death?"

Jesus said to the disciples drowning in their fear of dying from the storm, unable to catch their breath against the heavy winds, in their terror even of him: "Take heart, I AM, do not be afraid."

Some who read Mark's gospel suggest that the opposite of faith in this story is not doubt, since those two sometimes go together ("I believe, help my unbelief," 9:24). But in this gospel, it is striking that the opposite of faith is fear.² Jesus said: "Do not be afraid."

I wonder if it is because we are afraid, we do horrible things to each other. For example, if you're in Mark's community, you turned people in. If you're in our community, do we become overwhelmed with cynicism? Despair? Anger?

Jesus said: "Take heart, I AM, do not be afraid."

And then Jesus got into the boat. And the wind ceased. But even when Jesus was with them again, they didn't understand. Their heart was hardened. Furthermore, they are no longer heading to the territory for mission Jesus longed for them to begin—connecting with people who had not yet heard the gospel over in Bethsaida.

Instead, their boat lands on another shore. They are back in Jewish territory. Where, instead of spreading the gospel to new lands, they will argue about eating without first properly washing one's hands (7:2), fret about the degree to which one should wash cups and pots and bronze vessels (7:4), discuss clean versus unclean foods (7:19), argue over how to treat the elderly (7:9–13), and debate whether a Syrophenician woman should be allowed any crumbs (7:24–30).

Jesus sits with them in the boat—going back yet again to all those questions, when he really wanted to share the gospel in Bethsaida, with the unchurched.

Even though his mission to Bethsaida is delayed until chapter 8:22, back in the Jewish lands, Jesus will nevertheless bless many people. Sick people are brought to him and he went through market places healing people

(6:55–56). Everyone who touched Jesus was made well (6:56). Jesus does amazing things, even given the failure of the disciples. But their fear delayed Jesus' mission. Fear has its costs—something we must realize in 2016.

I imagine that most of us reading the story just now, placed ourselves with the disciples in the boat. We are in the boat during difficult times. And, even with our failures, Jesus is with us. We are safe.

Now let's re-read the story. But this time let us imagine not ourselves, but our General Conference leaders in the boat. They, too, must have a sense of being battered about in the boat. Perhaps they are fearful of a boat that can't withstand the current storm. Perhaps they fear what will happen if people aren't rowing together. Perhaps they, too, can't breathe and that's frightening. Whatever the cause, they are afraid. And, in the gospel of Mark, fear is the opposite of faith. Fear causes people to do horrible things to each other.

At the beginning of the account, the disciples were sent by Jesus to Bethsaida. They set out and Jesus wasn't with them. Then, when Jesus comes to them on the water, they think it's a ghost. This is one of the most dangerous moments for the disciples. They are labeling divinity as part of the underworld. They are calling the divine one, a ghost. They are accrediting evil as good and good as evil.

A similar thing happened back in Capernaum (in Mark 3) and Jesus used some of the strongest language he ever uses anywhere in the gospels (he calls it an unforgivable sin, an eternal sin, a sin with eternal consequences, 3:28–30). This moment in the boat should cause all of us to pause. It is a very dangerous thing to look at the Spirit of God working and say it is of Satan's realm. When we do that, Jesus cannot reveal his full identity to us. When we do that, we are unable to fulfill the mission Jesus gave us.

Unable to reveal himself to them, Jesus says, "do not be afraid" and gets into the boat. He is Jesus again, not the Spirit of God hovering over the waters at creation. He is Jesus again because

that's what his disciples needed him to be.

But they are no longer headed to Bethsaida. The work of the Gospel is held back. The "I AM" is with them, but they don't understand who he is. They will return to Jewish territories and return to questions about washing one's hands and unclean foods and who gets crumbs. And Mark tells us that it was because their heart (singular) was hardened. Collectively their heart was hardened. This is yet another echo of the Exodus—of Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh was the oppressor of God's people. He was the one who saw himself as the owner of human bodies; the master of his slaves.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, only Pharisees had been referred to as having hardness of heart (3:15). Now the disciples are described in this way. They have become like Pharaoh. The disciples are capable of oppressing their own people even as they move away from their mission to the unchurched back home.

R. Alan Culpepper, in a commentary on Mark's gospel, defines "hardness of heart" using three words or phrases: (1) it is stubbornness; (2) it is the inability to see signs of God's redemptive activity; and, (3) it is opposition to God's redeeming work.³

If the disciples had understood about the loaves, they wouldn't have been afraid. The loaves, that is, the feeding of the 5,000 earlier in this chapter. This act in their own territory foreshadowed the Lord's Supper. If they had understood the loaves, that once again God was in the wilderness feeding miraculous bread to a multitude. If they had understood the loaves, that once again God was freeing people from bondage—a new Exodus in Jesus. If they had understood the loaves, that once again God was walking on water—across the sea, and that this was the same God who had made the sea. If they had understood the loaves, that once again God wanted to "pass by" and reveal God's glory, then they wouldn't have been afraid, and they wouldn't act like Pharaoh.

Because fear causes us to do horrible things to each other. It is fear that makes us miss the

miracles before us. It is fear that makes us miss the theophany of Jesus as God passing by. Fear is the opposite of faith.

Our General Conference leaders are in the boat. We are in the boat. We are all in the same boat. How can we row in the boat together? Jesus is wanting to "pass by" us. How can we respond in such a way that we see the wonder of his divinity? How can we respond in such a way that we are able to embrace the mission that Jesus longs for us to do? How many Bethsaidas are waiting for us? How often will we return to the tired old arguments and debates?

How can we respond in such a way that we will not have hearts that are hard; Pharaoh-like. But instead, understand that the loaves, Jesus' body, is for all—a community of all believers?

We are all in the same boat. How can we live and labor in the boat together? ■

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3. R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 217.

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