

What Kind of Man is This

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Preacher: Jon Watson

[0 : 0 0] Now, if you were an ancient, if you were living in the time of Jesus or in the time of David or Moses or even way earlier, the sea would have terrified you.

Utterly, utterly terrified you. Now, maybe the sea does terrify you, and well, it should, but for thousands of years, the cultural imagination of that ancient Near East associated the sea with the concept of chaos, kind of uncreation or judgment, death, evil, calamity, catastrophe.

All of these unknown, unordered, chaotic things came with the imagery of the sea to the ancient mind. For the ancient mind in this area, they viewed the chief source of evil in the world as kind of an ancient sea dragon, you know, churning below the waters where you can't quite see him.

Different religions and different cultures called this ancient mythological sea creature Rahab or Leviathan or Tiamat. Whatever you name it, it was an essential religious and mythological part of the cultural imagination of Jesus's day.

And many biblical authors poetically and symbolically take up this imagery, and they use it to tell us truths about God. Isaiah does this a lot. Job does this a lot.

[1 : 3 0] Numerous Psalms do it. Jeremiah, and the list goes on. There are many, many allusions to this cultural imagery. And that's why the sea is mentioned at the beginning of our universe's story in the Bible, and at the end in Genesis and Revelation.

Genesis 1 says the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And in creation, God brought order and life out of the wild, chaotic waters of the sea.

And in the first verse of Revelation 21, at the end of our Bibles, it says, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

There was no more cause for terror, no more calamity, no more evil. It's at the beginning and end of our universe's story. So it is not insignificant that Matthew tells us this story about Jesus, 12 terrified men, and the sea.

There are some translations say lake, and some translations say sea. What's that about? I won't get too much into it, but there's a Greek word that means lake specifically, and there's a Greek word that means, that has a broader umbrella of meaning.

[2 : 5 2] That can mean a large, terrifying body of water, essentially. So, for instance, Luke, in his gospel, when he tells this story, he says the lake.

He uses that very specific, narrow Greek word. When Matthew tells us this story, he uses that bigger, broader, more scary word that brings with it all of this imagery.

So Matthew is carefully and intentionally drawing on the cultural, mythological imagination of his people to tell us this story.

Now, we'll come back to that in a little bit. This passage that we're focusing on, verses 23 to 27 of Jesus calming the waves and the wind, it has two question marks in the passage.

If you look at the text, they're pretty clear which ones they are. There are two questions. And we're just going to take both of those questions and look at them one at a time tonight. And we're going to interrogate the questions, as it were, and we're going to ask questions of the questions to help clarify the meaning, to help get at what Matthew was really trying to convey to us.

[4 : 01] So the first question, Jesus asks this question to the disciples. He says, why are you so afraid? So here's the first question that I'd like to ask of the question.

Is this getting confusing yet? The way I want to interrogate this question is this. What were the disciples afraid of? It may seem obvious, but let's explore it. They were afraid of perishing or drowning, as it says in the NIV.

In verse 25, they were afraid of drowning in this body of water. A valid fear, isn't it? You know, with this cultural backdrop, and you're out there in the middle.

Now, the Sea of Galilee, it's still like this today. Because of its geographic kind of shape and location, storms come up very suddenly, and they can be very dramatic storms.

So this isn't a story about, you know, a small lake with a mild wind. This is a story of a storm on the high waters of just a massive proportion.

[5 : 08] So that's reasonable. That's why they're afraid. But here's the next question. Why isn't Jesus afraid? I don't know if you've seen The Princess Bride.

I hope so. It's a just hilarious movie. I love it. In The Princess Bride, one of my favorite scenes is called The Battle of the Wits. And it's when Wesley, who's the good guy, is up against Vizzini, one of the bad guys.

And in this scene, Wesley takes two cups of wine, and he kind of turns his back, and he adds some poison. And then he comes back around and offers the cups to Vizzini to choose which to drink from.

Now, the idea is that Vizzini would use his impressive powers of deduction to discern which cup has the poison and which doesn't. And hilarity ensues. You should go watch that later tonight.

I might. And so Vizzini is confident in his own abilities. He's not afraid at all. And Wesley is confident. He's not afraid at all.

[6 : 13] But it turns out, Wesley had built up an immunity to this poison, and he had added the poison to both cups. So you can see with your powers of deduction how that story ends if you haven't seen it.

Vizzini does not fare well. But they were both fearless in the face of death. Now, what kind of a person is fearless in the face of death?

I would suggest two kinds of people. One, the overconfident fool. Or the master of the situation. Jesus is no fool.

So wasn't the disciples' fear reasonable? After all, they are not the masters of the situation. And, you know, a massive storm suddenly sweeping up on your little boat is nothing to sneeze at.

But Jesus looks at their fear and he says, You of little faith. What do we make of that? So does fear always mean little faith?

[7 : 21] Well, no. There's many healthy things to be afraid of. There are many healthy fears. I'm afraid of poisonous snakes. I think that's very reasonable to be afraid of poisonous snakes.

I'm afraid of spiders and lots of things. Not the little harmless ones. But in Tennessee, we got these black widows and brown recluses. And it's kind of terrifying. Those are healthy fears, I think. Fear does not always mean little faith.

So here's Jesus' point. The disciples knew that Jesus could save them. Look at verse 25. They said, Save us, Lord. They knew that Jesus could save them.

They knew that he was the Lord. That he was able to save them. But they didn't think he would do it. They knew he could. But they didn't think he would.

They did not doubt Jesus' ability. They doubted Jesus' willingness. That's why Jesus said, You of little faith.

[8 : 26] Now, if they'd had no faith, they would have said, Hey, wake up. Do you know anyone who can help us? Little faith said, Wake up.

You can help us, but I'm not really sure that you will. Perhaps great faith would say, Lord, you can save us, and I trust you with it entirely. Great faith doesn't just understand Jesus' power.

Great faith understands Jesus' heart. Do you doubt Jesus' willingness to move toward you with healing and power and rescuing?

This is the man who, just in the last chapter, he reached out and touched the leper. He didn't have to touch him.

Why did Jesus touch the leper? He wanted the leper to know intimately and physically the love of Jesus. He wanted him to know his heart toward him.

[9 : 30] This is the man who healed a Gentile centurion's lowly servant. Now, the centurions are the oppressors of Israel. This is not the good guy in the story of Israel. And Jesus unhesitatingly offered up his healing power for his servant.

Jesus went into Peter's mother-in-law, and he took her fever, and he took her by the hand and lifted her up. And then he spent his energy with this multitudes of people had come to him, demon-oppressed and sick, and he poured out of himself and healed and cast out and restored.

That's who we're dealing with. And do we doubt his willingness to move toward us with power? Jesus' impulse, his inclination, is actually toward compassion and deliverance.

So that means that your weakness, your weakness moves him toward you, not away from you. I wonder if you believe that.

Sometimes I barely do. So, of course, this is a gospel story. So salvation is ultimately something that's being driven at here.

[10 : 44] It begs the question, then, how much faith do we need to be saved? Maybe we are those of little faith.

But here's the good news. You are not saved by the size of your faith. You are saved by the object of your faith. In other words, it's not about how hard you believe.

It's about who you look to in the storm. On a sermon on Exodus 14, I think, Tim Keller pointed out once that when God parted the Red Sea and the Israelites walked through on dry land with these towering, you know, walls of water on either side, there must have been, surely, two kinds of Israelites that day.

Maybe one kind that's looking around going, this is awesome. This is so cool. Look what God did. This is amazing. And maybe the other kind of Israelite was walking through going, I'm going to die any minute now.

This is terrifying. A big faith and a little itty-bitty, just barely dangling faith. Which of those two were saved through the waters?

[12 : 02] Both of them. You're not saved by the size of your faith. You're saved by the object of your faith. Some people, when talking about Jesus' response to the disciples in the boat, some people talk about it like it's a rebuke.

I think maybe in Luke, it may have been framed in that way. But here, I don't think it's actually suggesting rebuke. I don't think Jesus is being stern or harsh with his disciples.

Look at verse 26. He says, You have little faith. Why are you so afraid? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. So Matthew was clear that Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves, but I think he's very gentle with his disciples.

I mean, how many of you have ever rebuked someone from a posture of lying down on a pillow? Do you know what I mean? It says very specifically that he got up after he spoke to the disciples.

And Jesus knows faith is a gift from God. Faith is portioned out to us by God. So I don't think he's belittling their amount of faith.

[13 : 17] I think he's building up their faith. He's strengthening their faith. He's nourishing their faith right now. And he's encouraging them further up, further in.

There's more ground to cover, and it's glorious. Now the story goes on, and after he calms the wind and the waves, it says the disciples marveled.

Marvel is not the language of delight. We take our kids into a sweetie shop. They don't marvel at the candy and the chocolates.

Not too long ago, I took William, my seven-year-old boy. We went up the Salisbury Crags here overlooking City Center in Edinburgh next to Arthur's seat. And I don't do well with heights.

That's another one of those healthy fears that I have. I don't like heights, but I went up to the cliff's edge, and I walked right up to the edge as close as I dared get.

[14 : 22] I think it's 46 meters off the ground. And I looked over, and I looked at the surrounding landscape and at the Firth of Fourth and the castle and all of that, and I caught my breath, and I marveled.

Marvel, to marvel is to be both terrified and overcome with beauty. at the same time. It's the marriage of fear and beauty.

Ah, that's what it is to marvel. That's the emotion the disciples had looking at this. This human man stands up and rebukes the wind and the waves in a dire storm, and it stops, dead calm.

And they're marveling. They marvel at him. Well, so the first question that we examined in this story is, why are you so afraid?

And Jesus asks it to the disciples. Now, the second question is asked of the disciples among themselves. after Jesus calms the wind and the waves, after they marvel, they look at each other and they say, what kind of man is this?

[15 : 37] And that's where Matthew ends the story, which is very brilliant. Matthew is inviting you and I to ask the same question.

he's inviting us to marvel and then to say, what kind of human can do that? Now, if you think about a prophet asleep in a boat during a storm and then the storm is miraculously calmed, you might be thinking about the story of Jonah.

After all, the same shape of this story is the same shape of that story. And so, we ask, what kind of man is this? And if you said, well, maybe he's like Jonah, that would be a very reasonable assumption.

We know that Matthew very carefully wrote and arranged his gospel to link the historical life and miracles of Jesus with the story of God and Israel in the Old Testament.

It's very sophisticated and it's very vivid, so it would be very reasonable for us to assume that Matthew is trying to make us think that Jesus is like Jonah. But actually, Matthew is showing us that Jesus is very different from Jonah.

[16 : 51] In Jonah's story, remember, the frightened sailors call out and they say, hey, Jonah, wake up. Call out to your gods. Maybe they'll give a thought and save us.

And in this story, the disciples say, wake up, Lord, you save us. Do you see the difference? As we read and study our Bibles over the whole of our lives, we'll build the sort of familiarity where we read one story and we think, man, that's a lot like this other story and, you know, this bit looks a lot like that bit or this character does the opposite thing that I would expect him to do based on this other story.

That's a wonderful way to read our Bibles. That's being a good reader of Scripture. It's a great way to engage with the text. We follow those threads and see what sort of tapestries they weave.

Now, if we follow the thread to Jonah and we look long and hard, I think it will lead us to this conclusion that the story of Jesus calming the storm in Matthew is more of an Exodus story than it is a Jonah story.

Now, bear with me. Here's two passages from the Old Testament to help illustrate what I mean. I'll just, I'll read them to you. One's Isaiah 51 verses 9 to 10 and I'm reading from the ESV at this moment because that's what I have.

[18 : 17] It says, Awake, awake. Pause for a moment. Often in the poets of Israel and the prophets of Israel when they were in circumstances at the level of soul distress, right, where their very life of lives was in jeopardy and God was nowhere to be found experientially for them, they used this language poetically of waking God up so that he would act and save.

It's a very common image. Awake, awake. Put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake as in days of old, the generations long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?

There's that sea dragon imagery I was telling you about. And now it's about to become clear. I'm going to read on. But it'll be clear that Isaiah is actually reflecting on the Exodus story. It says, was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the sea dragon?

Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? Now, the next passage, equally short, is Psalm 106, verses 7 to 10.

Again, it's a reflection on Exodus. Exodus. Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works. They did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea at the Red Sea.

[19 : 41] Yet he saved them for his namesake, that he might make known his mighty power. He, God, rebuked the sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert.

So he saved them from the hand of the foe and redeemed them from the power of the enemy. All right, what do these two passages have in common? We'll talk about that before we connect them back in to Matthew. Psalm 106 that I just read and Isaiah 51 have these two things in common.

They're reflections on the Exodus story. In Isaiah, the defeat of Rahab the dragon is the poet's way of describing God's power exerted over the forces of evil and chaos to save his people when he brought them out of Egypt.

He parted the sea. He made a way for the redeemed. And in Psalm 106, the psalmist says that God redeemed his people from the power of their enemy by rebuking the sea.

That's the first thing they have in common, Exodus. The second thing is that they're both about the power of Yahweh to save. Now, remember, Yahweh is the special personal name of God, identifying him as the great I Am, the God of Abraham, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[21 : 00] And when you see in your Old Testament's LORD in all caps, L-O-R-D in capital letters, underneath that English word lies the Hebrew word Yahweh. And Isaiah says explicitly that Yahweh is the one who defeated the dragon.

Psalm 106 is a prayer to Yahweh and says that Yahweh rebuked the sea. Now, whenever the sea is calmed or rebuked or conquered in the Old Testament, which happens many times, it's always at the hand of Yahweh.

Only Yahweh has that power. So Matthew is making a huge claim here. Do you see it? Jesus is not just a prophet like Jonah.

He's not just a prophet mediator like Moses. Jesus is Yahweh. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has become a man, a human.

And he's in the midst of his people to save just as he promised for so many hundreds of years. Jesus is Yahweh and he's come to bring the kingdom of God into our time and our space.

[22 : 11] And at the heart of the kingdom is this powerful reality. God with us. Jonah had to call out to God to calm the storm.

Jesus did not have to call out to God because he is God. Now the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is Yahweh. I'm not making this up. It's very important.

For instance, Isaiah 45, Yahweh says, to me, every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. But in Philippians 2, Paul says that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess.

So Paul takes this Yahweh-centered passage and he makes it Jesus-centered because that's the same thing. One more. Joel 2.32 says, And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh shall be saved.

And in Romans 10, Paul very clearly says that everyone who calls on the name of Jesus shall be saved. There are dozens more examples. I will not belabor the point.

[23 : 13] But this is fundamental to our beliefs as Christians. Jesus is not just merely some good teacher. Jesus is Yahweh himself, the God of the Old Testament right here in our midst.

Society would tame Jesus, but Jesus tames storms. So let's not believe the lie that Jesus is just a great example.

A good example never saved you from anything. Jesus is the only one we can cry out to in a storm. He is the only one who can save because he is God.

So Matthew shows us that Jesus is Yahweh himself by recording this story of Jesus doing what only Yahweh could possibly do. And he does it with the vocabulary and the literary imagination of the Exodus story.

Matthew's pointing us back to Exodus because he wants us to understand something really crucial. Like Israel, we need to be freed. Not freed from Egypt, but freed from the powers of sin and death.

[24 : 29] We need an Exodus. And like Israel, we need a mediator. Someone to stand in the gap between humans and God.

In the Exodus story, they had Moses. And God made a promise one day there will be a better than Moses. Jesus is the better than Moses. We need a man and a God on our side.

We need the God-man, Jesus Christ himself. As a man, he is caught in the storm. Like everybody else. But as God, he has complete and utter control over it.

As mediator, as both a human and Yahweh himself, only Jesus can stand in that gap. And only Jesus can be caught in the storm of death that plagues us all.

He can even be swallowed up by it. And he'll come out the other side with life, eternal, and glory, and the power over death.

[25 : 32] And he takes you along with him. The gospel is our Exodus. Now, when Yahweh was about to lead the people of Israel through the Red Sea, Moses said to the people from Exodus 14, do not be afraid.

Stand firm, and you will see the deliverance of Yahweh that he will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. Yahweh will fight for you, and you need only to be still.

So this is an invitation to all of us. Jesus has fought the battle for you in your place, and the only thing he wants you to bring him is nothing.

We just trust him, and we cry out, Lord, you can save us, knowing that not only can he, but he loves to.

Amen.