

Storm system: Mark 4:35-41; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

by [Michael A. King](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

I struggle to make peace with Jesus ordering the sea into peace. If we were to stumble across a time traveler's videotape and find that it all happened just as Mark reports, I'd still be troubled. Because this isn't the way the world works. People don't go around saying, "Peace! Be still!" to the wind and the waves, and find that the wind and the waves obey. And I don't like the "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" business. Of course Jesus' disciples are afraid! When the tsunami hit Asia, weren't those caught in that wall of water right to be afraid? Should they have expected Jesus to rebuke the tsunami?

That just isn't how things work, and surely that wasn't how things worked back then either. So I wince when Jesus rebukes the disciples' fear. If I'd been one of the disciples, I'd not have been sure Jesus would save me any more than I'm sure he'll save me if the flooded Perkiomen Creek sweeps my car away. I flinch at stories of people killed when tornadoes are tearing off the church roof or hurricanes are flooding their houses—even as they pray for Jesus to rebuke once more the wind and the waves. He doesn't. They die. Why shouldn't they have been afraid?

So is this passage a story that didn't quite happen? Was an overeager writer showing how powerful Jesus is by cobbling various little events into one dramatic miracle? Or did a sudden calm come after the boat had nearly capsized, and as the disciples began to tell the story, they decided that it was Jesus who stilled the waters? Or would a video camera, had it been available back then, have recorded the miracle that Mark—apparently determined to highlight Jesus' lordship over nature—tells about?

If I knew the answer, I'd share it. But then one more train of thought: Just as I was swamped in the raging Galilee and the issues it raises, I ran across Scott Stossel's review of *Stumbling on Happiness*, a book by Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard professor of psychology who studies happiness (*New York Times*, May 7). According to Stossel, Gilbert contends that "because of logic-processing errors our brains tend to make, we don't want the things that would make us happy and the things that we want (more money, say, or a bigger house or a fancier car) won't make us happy." Stossel

writes:

Gilbert argues that what he calls the “psychological immune system” kicks into gear in response to big negative events (the death of a spouse, the loss of a job) but not in response to small negative events (your car breaking down). Which means that our day-to-day happiness may be predicated more strongly on little events than on big ones. On its face, this sounds preposterous, but Gilbert cites study after study suggesting that it’s true.

My seminary education didn’t include doing exegesis through the lens of happiness research. Still, for me Jesus and the storm connect with Gilbert. His observations remind me of what I’ve witnessed so often when offering pastoral support to people facing minor, drip-drip troubles versus the great crises that bring larger energies into play.

What happens, I hear Gilbert suggesting, is that the daily dribbles of woe wear you down. Warily you slog on. Then when you think things can’t get worse—you’re grappling with insurance hassles caused by your daughter’s car crash just as an article you’re writing is behind schedule—you see that the water tank pressure gauge is leaking. No inspiration there. Just teeth to grit.

But energy surges when the real storms rage! I remember a dear faithful widow telling me, just after her husband died following years of stroke-weakened living, that everyone had long asked her how she could keep going. She said that before living through his stroke, the years of caring for him and those final months of never knowing whether tomorrow he would be alive or dead, she too would have said that she could not endure such an experience. But once the time came, there also came resources—from “beyond,” as she experienced it through her Christian faith—and she had strength enough to sail in peace even across that sea of troubles. I witnessed this miracle.

Cognitive science proves nothing about what happened or didn’t in that threatened boat. But Gilbert at least gives my tortured Western mind a doorway through which to glimpse renewed power in the story. Could it be that the peace-be-still of Jesus is like the power from beyond that we experience when life’s ultimate storms befall us? Could it be that what Jesus wished for his disciples to understand—both then and

now—was that he was and is the channel to such power?

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul seems to teach something like this. Amid an almost endless list of hardships, calamities, beatings and persecutions, he celebrates the power of God. There turns out to be a kind of spiritual immune system for someone enduring storms for Christ, a system that turns “having nothing” into “possessing everything.”

None of this tells us precisely what level of power was released in Galilee and whether, amid God’s mysteries, Jesus actually could command a spiritual immune system powerful enough to still actual wind and waves. But Gilbert helps me suspect anew that the power of the psychological immune system we spy through the lens of cognitive science may be only the first level of what we may glimpse if we open ourselves to the resources that Mark and Paul tell us come from beyond.