

Commentary Resource
Matthew 8:23-34
The New American Commentary
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(a) *Stilling the Storm: Response to Disaster (8:23–27)*

²³ Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴ Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵ The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

²⁶ He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

8:23–25 Verse 23 resumes the story line of v. 18. The words “disciples” and “followed” link back with v. 21 and vv. 19 and 22, respectively. The two dialogues with the would-be disciples and the stilling of the storm narrative belong together. True disciples do model appropriate detachment from home and family, which in this case involves physical separation for a time. As commonly happened, a sudden squall arises on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew, however, calls the storm a *seismos* (literally, earthquake), a term used for apocalyptic upheavals (cf. 24:7; 27:54; 28:2), often with preternatural overtones. This seems to be no ordinary storm but one in which Satan is attacking. The boat is in danger of being swamped, and lives are at risk. Amazingly, Jesus remains so calm that he continues to sleep. The disciples rouse him and beg for help. “Save” and perish (“drown”) refer first of all to the disciples’ physical lives, but by Matthew’s time they have become the standard terms for spiritual salvation and destruction. Matthew may well intend a double entendre here.³⁸

8:26 Despite their acknowledgment of dependence on him and use of the address “Lord” (v. 25, a positive title for Jesus throughout Matthew), Jesus rebukes their “little faith.” Matthew places Jesus’ rebuke before the miracle, while Mark reverses the sequence (Mark 4:40). Yet even though Matthew’s narrative reads more naturally, it is hard to believe that he is trying to present the disciples in a more positive light.³⁹ “Little faith” simply stresses their lack of faith; it scarcely improves on Mark’s “no faith.”⁴⁰ The “rebuke” of the elements employs the same term (*epitimaō*) used elsewhere in exorcism stories (Mark 1:25; 9:25; Luke 4:41). Jesus demonstrates power over the destructive forces of nature, which remain under the devil’s sway. As with his healings, Jesus’ “cure” takes effect immediately.

8:27 Astoundingly, Jesus has demonstrated the identical sovereignty over wind and waves attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament (cf. Jonah 1–2; Pss 104:7; 107:23–32).⁴¹ Such power can do far more than just heal sickness. Miracles over “nature” remain much rarer in Jewish and Christian history. Quite understandably, the disciples wonder aloud about the identity of the man, bringing the narrative to its Christological climax. Jesus’ nature miracles in general (and rescue miracles in particular)⁴² should lead

³⁸ Cf. F. W. Beare (*The Gospel according to Matthew* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981], 215), who notes that “Lord, save” may have been a liturgical form in Matthew’s church like the later “Lord, have mercy” (*Kyrie eleison*).

³⁹ As often held since the seminal study of G. Bornkamm, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew,” in Bornkamm, Barth, and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, 52–57.

⁴⁰ Cf. further Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 115–16.

⁴¹ Cf. P. J. Achtemeier, “Person and Deed: Jesus and the Storm-Tossed Sea,” *Int* 16 (1962): 169–76.

⁴² For a form-critical classification of Jesus’ miracles, see esp. G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

men and women to worship.⁴³ The disciples' fear (Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25), which could imply terror and/or awe, is entirely compatible with their amazement here.

Contemporary applications of this miracle almost universally “demythologize” the narrative (deriving a naturalistic lesson from a supernatural event), so that it becomes a lesson about Jesus “stilling the storms” of our lives. Matthew did not likely have such an application in mind. There are implications for discipleship here, to be sure; we must turn to Jesus as the one to trust in all circumstances of life. But the focus of this passage remains squarely Christological—on who Christ is, not on what he will do for us.⁴⁴ One who has this kind of power can be no less than God himself, worthy of worship, irrespective of when and how he chooses to use that power in our lives. Sometimes he leaves storms unstilled for good and godly ends (cf. 2 Cor 12:7–8).

(b) Exorcising the Gadarene Demoniac: Response to Demons (8:28–9:1)

²⁸ When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. ²⁹ “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

³⁰ Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. ³¹ The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.”

³² He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.

³³ Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. ³⁴ Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

¹ Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town.

8:28–29 Jesus and company arrive on the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Gadara was the name of a city substantially inland, as well as of the province whose boundary abutted the lake. Mark and Luke speak instead of Gerasa, a different city in the same province. Probably the town in view was Khersa, close to the shore. The various renderings and subsequent textual variants then resulted from confusion by later Greek translators and copyists.⁴⁵ Here Matthew offers his first full-length narrative illustrating Jesus' ministry of exorcism, already summarized in 4:24 and 8:16. As in both those verses, and consistently in antiquity, demon possession is distinguished from illness in general though sometimes seen as the cause of a particular malaise. *Demonization* (a more literal rendering of *daimonizomenos*) involves the indwelling of unseen evil spirits in a way that prevents an individual from fully controlling his or her own actions (see comments under 4:23–25). Exorcists abounded in ancient Judaism and Greco-Roman religions; but Jesus displayed a unique directness, immediacy, and effectiveness.⁴⁶

Only Matthew speaks of two demoniacs, but he does not thereby contradict Mark and Luke. Neither of the other Evangelists refers to “only” one. Perhaps one of the two dominated the conversation. But Matthew elsewhere includes two characters, where parallel accounts have one (9:27; 20:30); so he may

⁴³ See esp. C. L. Blomberg, “The Miracles as Parables,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, ed. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 340–42.

⁴⁴ See esp. P. F. Feiler, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew: A Response to Günther Bornkamm,” *JETS* 26 (1983): 399–406.

⁴⁵ See Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 149–50, and the literature there cited, for more detailed explanation. There is no contradiction here.

⁴⁶ On parallels and differences between Jesus' exorcisms and those of others, see esp. G. Twelftree, “Εἰ δὲ ... ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαμόνια ...,” in *Gospel Perspectives* 6:361–400.

be uniquely concerned to follow the principle of Deut 19:15, that a testimony be confirmed by two or three witnesses.

The tombs (more properly “burial caves,” GNB) epitomized uncleanness, forming an appropriate abode for the devils. Satan regularly dwells in that which is most profane. The violence of the demoniacs kept them from the rest of civilization. Mark 5:5 shows that their violence threatened themselves as well. Their cry, “What do you want with us?” employs an idiom that might better be translated “What have you to do with us?” or perhaps even “Don’t bother us!”⁴⁷ Like Satan at Jesus’ temptation, they acknowledge him as Son of God and recognize their eventual doom, but they nevertheless use his name in an attempt to ward him off (cf. Mark 5:7, which reads literally, “I adjure you by God,” and 5:9, in which Jesus himself demands to know their name as part of the process of gaining mastery over them). In other words, the demons are not concerned to confess Jesus’ identity but are trying to use his name to exorcise him. When they fail, Jesus in turn casts them out. To the demons his arrival seems premature; Judgment Day has not come. They overlook the “already” of the “already-not yet” equation. The end times were breaking into human history with Jesus’ exorcisms, demonstrating the inauguration of God’s kingdom (cf. 12:28), even if he still granted the demons limited freedom for a time.

8:30–31 When the demons recognize that Jesus will cast them out (“if you drive us out” is a first-class condition almost equivalent to *when you drive us out*) but will delay their total destruction, they request a new home. Swine, like tombs, defiled Jews but afforded appropriate refuge for evil spirits.

8:32 Jesus accedes to the demons’ request. “Go!” is more literally, *You may go*, granting permission. Against many interpretations, it seems that the pigs’ drowning surprises neither Jesus nor the demons. They continue their destructive activity by throwing the swine off the rocky cliffs on the eastern shores of Galilee. Nothing else in the Bible suggests that angels or demons can die, so Matthew must mean only that “the whole herd” of pigs perished.⁴⁸ Jesus permits the demons to continue to live, but they may no longer torment these particular men.⁴⁹ The destruction of the herd of swine also convinces those men of the decisiveness of their liberation.

Readers concerned about the destruction of animal life and the loss of the farmers’ livelihood exhibit a contemporary sentimentality not shared by a Jewish audience who knew these pig farmers should not have been raising animals whose meat was forbidden to eat.⁵⁰ Human sanity and salvation, moreover, must always take priority over financial prosperity.

8:33–34 The farmers naturally spread the word about what has happened and, like the nearby townsfolk, are distressed. The meeting in v. 34 provides closure with v. 28 and rounds out the story. Jesus should have been welcomed, but the Gadarenes dwell only on the loss of their pigs and fear the power that could vanquish Satan so dramatically. The Christological question is again posed starkly, but these people are unwilling to face it. A man with Jesus’ power must be divine and holy, but sinful humans recoil in the presence of holiness because it points out their own shortcomings all the more glaringly.⁵¹

⁴⁷ See R. G. Bratcher, *A Translator’s Guide to the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: UBS, 1981), 94.

⁴⁸ The grammar seems to suggest otherwise, since “herd” is singular but “died” is plural (as if the “demons” were the subject of the verb). More likely, Matthew is thinking of the herd as a collection of individual animals that died (Carson, “Matthew,” 219).

⁴⁹ See Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 177.

⁵⁰ Beare (*Matthew*, 219) notes that a typical Jewish audience would not have seen this as a calamity but as an occasion for merriment.

⁵¹ Cf. A. Plummer (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* [London: E. Stock, 1909], 134): “Fear in the presence of the supernatural is common in man; and dislike of the presence of great holiness is specially natural in those who know that their own lives are quite out of harmony with heaven.”

¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 149–153.