

**THE CONFIDENCE TRAP 7 – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF MARK
MARK 4:1-35
October 30, 2016**

It's Halloween time, and I am guessing most of you will be going to a haunted house tonight or tomorrow. Anyone? Okay, I probably missed the demographic for who would be going to a haunted house, but I am guessing you have all been to a haunted house at some point in your life. A recent study suggests over 5,000 haunted houses operate during the Halloween season each year in the United States and they take in millions of dollars. For thousands of people to pay millions of dollars, haunted houses must be a relaxing and joyous episode. Right? They must be calming and allow you time to get away from the grind. Right?

As a bit of research, the Niagara Falls based facility, Nightmare Fear Factory, has set up cameras in their haunted house, kind of how Disneyland sets up cameras to snap you right as the roller coaster drops. This company has cameras ready to snap when the scares are big. Check out a few of the experiences here:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/haunted-house-reactions_n_5921790.html

Why would anyone go along voluntarily for such an experience? More than that, why would anyone pay for this type of experience? This leaves us with fast heart rates and elevated stress. It leads to gray hairs and sleepless nights. As humans, shouldn't we be drawn to safety and normalcy? Shouldn't we aspire to calmness and quiet? Shouldn't we avoid anything that makes us look like this? (Picture from slides above)

If you think this stuff is creepy, boy do I have a scary story for you today. Two episodes make up one continuous haunted house for Jesus' disciples. Jesus is going to take them on a wild ride that will leave their hearts pounding and their stress levels maxed out. The question today, of course, is why would the Prince of Peace do this to his disciples? Why would Jesus subject his followers to something that will test their limits and make them cower?

Mark 4:35- 41

This is one complete story. We often separate these two and lessen the impact of each. Jesus had a plan in Mark 4:35. Let us go to the other side. He is purposefully taking them to the other side to the region of the Decapolis. This is red flag fright number one. The Decapolis was a collection of ten loosely affiliated Roman cities. Jesus was leading his disciples over to the unclean pagans. You know how those pagans are going to be, rude, sinful and obnoxious. What if my Jewish peers find out? What about the huge hassle of a ceremonial cleaning if I become unclean?

The Decapolis was thoroughly Roman and thoroughly pagan. This might as well be the modern version of the “wrong side of the tracks.” The Sea of Galilee towards the Mediterranean was largely Jewish, but the entire other side of the sea was Decapolis which was Roman, pagan and immoral. It’s almost like Lake Tahoe with 6-12, north/south being the dividing line. Everything on the California side was Jewish and acceptable. Everything on the Nevada side was Roman and unacceptable. Please do not understand this as anything against Nevadans.

Do not mistake it when Jesus says, “Let’s go to the other side.” This is not a small jaunt. It is a five-mile ride to the other side, which was on the wrong side of the tracks. That’s only just the beginning, time for red fright flag number two. A storm. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains and is 680 feet below sea level. This is a perfect place for a perfect storm, and all of this is happening on the sea. In Jewish culture, the seas were a place of chaos. That is why in Revelation when the new heaven and new earth are formed, it says there will be no sea. The sea was a place of chaos and fear. They didn’t have nice boats with plenty of failsafe devices. They didn’t have life preservers. They weren’t strong swimmers if they swam at all. The sea was a place that could easily take your life. It was probably filled with trepidation and worry.

We think of a day at the ocean or lake as a day of relaxation or fun. We swim and boat for leisure. Two thousand years ago, you went on the sea for travel or work and not much else.

Every time you did, you were taking your life in your own hands, especially in this place where a storm could crop up at anytime. You have to imagine these fishermen following Jesus knew this sea and they knew the signs of a storm. And they knew storms were dangerous, but they went anyway.

So far we have psychological/spiritual fears based upon going to the pagan Roman side of the tracks. We have the physical fears of traveling on the sea, which was a place of chaos and death. And to top it off, we have the physical fears of a storm kicking up that would wreck their boat and with no flotation devices, little swimming ability and no coast guard to save them.

We are just getting started. Jesus calms the storm and rebukes the disciples to have more faith. This is where most sermons end. We speak of the storm as a metaphor for whatever is going on in your life and remind you that Jesus is with you in the storm. That is a fine sermon, but that is not this sermon, because Jesus' point was not to ride out on the sea and test their faith through choppy waves. What did Jesus say, "Let's go to the other side." There is something he wants them to see. More appropriately, there is someone he wants them to see.

Mark 5: 1-5

Verse 1 reminds us that Jesus had a place he wanted to go, "Let's go to the other side," and now we are informed he has landed there. Who is there to greet them? A demon-possessed madman who has been living in the tombs. This is a trifecta of uncleanness. First, this is a pagan man from the wrong side of the tracks. Second, he is demon-possessed which means he is spiritually unclean and seemingly detestable to God. And third, he is dwelling among the tombs. He is hanging out with dead bodies, which besides being creepy, means he is unclean because you weren't supposed to touch dead bodies.

Now imagine the scene, besides all of the uncleanness, the disciples are cold, wet and tired. It's been quite an ordeal to make it through a storm. I am sure they want to breathe a sigh

of relief, and now they see the man that Jesus came to the other side for. He was a mess, he lived among the tombs, he could not be contained, he cut himself and yelled at the top of his lungs. This was a messy situation. Picture this man for a minute. He is enough to make anyone uncomfortable. I am certain he stinks. I am certain he is disheveled if not downright abhorrent. He cuts himself, so he is covered in open and scabbed-over wounds with different levels of infection. He was probably naked. He was hanging out essentially in a graveyard. This is messy and scary. Verse 2 says he immediately meets them, which means he is running towards them screaming. You have to imagine the looks on the disciples' faces. They are already uneasy, unsure of what will happen and a bloody, yelling maniac is running at them from out of the tombs.

Frank McAndrew is a psychology professor, and he wrote an article why haunted houses creep us out. He notes that we have evolved to a place where yelling, screaming and things that pop out and confront us scare us. It's primal, but the tension is cognitive because we know nothing can hurt us. McAndrew writes:

*"Haunted houses give us the creeps not because they pose a clear threat to us, but rather because it is unclear whether or not they represent a threat."*¹

The genius of haunted houses is they skew our interpretation of what to fear. It all gets flipped upside down. Our mind knows one thing but our body knows another. Our common sense knows one thing but our instincts know another. It leaves us confused and wondering what we should really fear.

You have to imagine the disciples in this state. Not knowing what to fear. Feeling completely safe because they are with Jesus, a man who has literally just controlled the weather, so for all intents and purposes, they should not be afraid, but their instincts are telling them otherwise. Their bodies are telling them otherwise. Let's keep reading.

¹ <http://theconversation.com/evolutionary-psychology-explains-why-haunted-houses-creep-us-out-48209>

Mark 5: 6-13

Not only is this man demon-possessed, he has a horde of unclean spirits in him. This is the *Jaws* moment when Roy Scheider says, "You're going to need a bigger boat." It's that scary moment of feeling outmanned, outgunned and thoroughly overwhelmed. The final piece of this frightening tableau is a herd of two thousand pigs grazing on the mountainside. Pigs were filthy animals that truly lived up to the Jewish distinction of being "unclean." You were not to eat or touch pigs. Just so we have a full accounting here, Jesus takes them to the wrong side of the tracks, over the deathly scary sea, a massive storm breaks out, a demon-possessed man with a trifecta of uncleanness comes running at them like a maniac out of the tombs, it turns out he has thousands of unclean spirits and the icing on the cake, thousands of stinky, oinking, unclean swine are lingering nearby.

This is a house of horrors if I have ever seen one. Jesus took them there on purpose. Why? Jesus knows what Frank McAndrew mentions, we are often afraid of the wrong things. Our prejudices and our guts tell us to be afraid of one thing when quite the opposite is true. Jesus is going through the process of rewiring his disciples. He is showing them that they have been fearing the wrong thing all along. Fearing the other side, when he is a messiah for all people. Fearing the storm when he is the messiah who calms it. Fearing messy/broken people when that is exactly who Jesus came for. Fearing the unclean things of this world when Jesus makes all things clean.

The message is simple, you have been afraid of the wrong things all along, and it's not just the disciples who made this mistake. It's a very human thing to do.

Mark 5: 14-16

Notice anything strange. They are afraid when they see him dressed and in his right mind. They had gotten used to the screaming lunatic who hung out in the tombs, but when they see him dressed and in his right mind, they freak out. The same thing happens with the

disciples. I don't know if you noticed it. After the storm is calmed, it says in Mark 4:40-41 that they are afraid after the storm is over.

A major confidence trap that we can all fall into is a certainty of who and what we should be afraid of. Fear is one of the number one motivational factors in our culture. It drives us. If you don't believe me turn on any political ad. If we don't vote for this person, disaster looms. We can start to become confident about who and what we should fear, but the truth of the matter is our fears are usually driven by prejudices and false messaging.

We have misplaced fears about immigrants and people of other places. But we have a messiah, who says, "Go to the other side." We have misplaced fears about people who are seemingly pagan and don't share our moral values, but Jesus takes his followers to a crazed madman who comes running at them out of the tombs. We fear disaster and events we cannot control, but Jesus calms the storm. This whole passage is Jesus confronting our fears. It is a reminder that our wires are crossed. The things we fear, we really shouldn't. The inverse is also true.

Mark 5: 18-20

Jesus heals this man and he sends this man out as a trophy of his grace, back to the pagan lands and back to the Decapolis. I think this is interesting. Jesus is sending out his first disciple into pagan lands. In just a few years, men will be coming back to these foreign lands like Philadelphia and Damascus with more good news about this Jesus Christ. This messy man in the meantime will begin to warm up their hearts with the good news.

While this man is never named, I do think it is quite interesting that Paul was converted in Damascus, which is part of the Decapolis. Only a few years earlier this pagan demon-possessed man is yelling and screaming against Jesus and a few years later this Jewish man named Saul is yelling and screaming against Jesus. While it is never stated, I like to guess that in Acts 9, Saul is blinded by Jesus on the road to Damascus; this is in the area of the Decapolis. Jesus calls on a man named Ananias to visit this crazy man, Saul, and to restore

his vision. Ananias objects, "Jesus, this man is crazy. He is a killer. He is messy." He relents and follows Jesus' orders. I wonder and I am just guessing here, but what if this is the Geresene demoniac, a strong disciple in Damascus. Only one chapter earlier the church had pushed out of Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen. So how is it that there is a disciple in Damascus, this pagan area who knows and follows Jesus. Is it possible that Jesus sent that healed man home and began to shape him for this day when he must act like Jesus and go to the other side by reaching out to the murderous hateful Saul?

I don't know, but stranger things have happened. The name Ananias can be translated "God has been gracious." Maybe this man's name was changed to reflect his own conversion, and now this once crazy, messy man is being sent to reach out to a new crazy, messy man.

We fear what we shouldn't, but we also don't fear what we should. Jesus sets an example here, and he paints a picture for one very good reason. The thing we should most fear is not promoting wholeness. The thing we should fear most is not fixing what we can right in front of us. The opportunity is this, when you are offered a chance to face your fears, to be like Jesus and go to the other side, the ripple effects could be huge. When we love like Jesus loved, wildly, prodigally, wastefully, big things can happen. The status quo is maintained when we fear like everyone else does. When we embrace xenophobia and racism and hateful attitudes, then we will keep getting the same results. When we face our fears, hop in the boat and go to the other side, then the kingdom starts to shift.

It will be stormy. It will be messy, but that's how things change. The question for you today is simple. Where is the other side for you? Put another way, what fears keep you up at night? Now your marching orders are simple, drive right into that fear. Go where you have never gone before to see results you have never seen before. Jesus doesn't soft peddle this process. He's tossing his disciples into the deep end. They get baptized in a storm. They are awakened by a yelling dead man.

Here is the strange thing that holds this whole passage together. Mercy. Fear forces us into flight or fight, and you see that in the world around us. Escape into our cloistered world. Or

confront the people we don't like. But Jesus does something different. He goes right into the storm and he shows mercy to his disciples. He confronts the screaming madman. He doesn't condemn him or run away. He meets him there and shows him mercy. Here's the strangest, most mind-bending aspect of this story, after the demons are removed, they beg for mercy, "Don't send us away. Send us into the swine. Show us mercy." And he does. This is the uncomfortable nature of our wild messiah. Mercy. Unexpected mercy in the face of fear and foes.

A scientific article helps deconstruct the haunted house experience. McAndrew said this experience is unique and attractive because yes, you do get a flood of positive neurotransmitters, dopamine, serotonin, etc., but beyond that, it gives us confidence and makes us connected. It gives us confidence to face our fears and come out on the other side. Additionally, it makes us feel connected. The heightened vitals and sense of camaraderie can reinforce bonds and strengthen friendships. In fact, scientists have actually done studies, and one of the best first dates you can go on is a haunted house. If you want to make someone fall in love with you, all you have to do is get scared together.

The most amazing moment for many is going through the haunted house and coming out on the other side. You see high fives. You see hugs. You see confidence and connection. You see people saying, "That wasn't so bad." Jesus sends us to the other side, and it isn't to torture us or to be dark and macabre. He is rewiring us. He is joining us with one another. Building our confidence. Strengthening our relationships. Growing our mercy quotient. I know you know this, but what is the most used phrase in the Bible? Have no fear. Be not afraid. Do not fear. Hundreds of times in a dozen ways is the same message, do not be afraid.