The Gospel authors chose their stories carefully and for a purpose. They had such amazing material to choose from. John tells us that Jesus did many other miracles besides the ones John recorded. In fact, “If every one of them were written down,” he said, “I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). So when we come to a section like our Scripture text today we should ask why the author has chosen these particular stories and why he has put them in the order he has, for they are not chronological, as we can tell from comparing Matthew to the other Gospels.

I think Matthew is communicating to us one fundamental truth in Matthew 8:23-9:8, and that is that Jesus is Lord over everything. The first story makes it clear that He is Lord over nature, the second that He is Lord over supernature (or the supernatural), and the third that He is Lord over human nature, in that He has the power to forgive sin. Therefore, He should be worshiped as what He is in fact–God incarnate.

**Jesus demonstrates He is Lord over nature.** (23-26)

Matthew 8:23-26:

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

> 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.

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

The key elements in this story are simply the Creation, the Creatures, and the Creator.

**The creation.** The lake where this event takes place is the Lake of Genessaret, also called the Sea of Galilee. Just 8 miles wide and 13 miles long, it sits 700' below sea level, surrounded by deeply-ravined tablelands, beyond which the mountains rise abruptly thousands of feet above the lake. At certain times of the year the eastern winds cause storm clouds to gather quickly, bringing gale-force winds up to 60 miles an hour. The ravines act like funnels to draw cold winds from the mountains. This kind of storm is unusually fierce. The Greek term translated “furious storm” is *seismos*, from which we get our English term seismograph, an instrument which measures earthquakes. We’re talking here about a seaquake.

**The creatures.** The disciples are grown men, seasoned professional fishermen, but
scared spitless. This, friends, is proof of the fierceness of the storm. Their S.O.S. is relayed by Matthew as a desperate imperative, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” Their faith is virtually nonexistent, but at least they know where to go for help.

**The Creator.** Jesus is the very Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, described as follows in Col. 1:16,17: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” But the disciples don’t know this yet. And besides, He’s sleeping (incidentally, this is the only time in the Bible that we find Him asleep).

Why is He sleeping? Not just because He’s exhausted, which He is, due to a strenuous time of ministry, but because He has a deep and abiding faith in God. He can sleep well because His Father in Heaven is wide awake. And if Jesus can sleep during a storm, so can we. We can rest in the knowledge that God loves us and we are immortal until our work on earth is done. If we know Jesus as personal Savior and are trusting Him on a daily basis, there is no necessity for our lives to be in turmoil and chaos.

Jesus responds to his disciples’ call for help by expressing disappointment more than anger: “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” In other words, “After all I’ve shown you and taught you, do you still not believe?” I wonder how many times I could be asked the same question. God has rescued me from difficult and dangerous situations many times in my life, yet when I face a new crisis there is always the tendency to fret, and occasionally even freak out.

But Jesus’ concern for His disciples is greater than His disappointment in them. It says, “Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves.” The term for rebuking the wind in the original is the same term used in the NT when Jesus rebukes evil spirits. Several commentators have suggested that the powers of Satan may have been behind this particular storm. After all, if this boat goes down with Jesus on it, God’s whole plan of salvation would be frustrated. Furthermore, the Lord and His disciples are sailing toward the eastern shore of the lake for a ministry that Satan certainly does not want to see take place, as we will see in a few moments.

In Mark’s account Jesus actually speaks to the sea, “Peace, be still.” Phillips translates it, “Hush now. Be still!” It’s as though He is speaking to a pack of dogs, “Back to your kennels and stay there!” Amazingly, the winds obey, and even the waves cease. Then it says, “The storm subsided, and all was calm.” I have spent a good deal of time on Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas ever since my parents retired there nearly 30 years ago. I have seen the wind pick up very fast and subside very quickly, but I have never seen the waves stop suddenly. That just doesn’t happen; it takes time for waves to subside even after the wind stops. But when Jesus says, “Hush now,” all is completely calm immediately.

**The response to this first miracle: amazement.** The disciples ask, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” Their response combines wonder and fear. The wonder comes from the stupendous nature of the miracle. The fear comes from the natural
reaction when a sinner realizes he is in the presence of an omnipotent God. I suppose they are thinking, “If He’s that powerful, what will He do to someone like me?”

There’s something very significant here in the disciples’ reaction to Jesus. It often happens that those most closely associated with a famous person are far less enthusiastic about him than are strangers. They see him as he really is, not as his press clippings portray him. But when Jesus is the center of attention, it’s different. The closer the association, the greater the admiration and amazement.

We used to sing a song back in the 50’s:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{With Christ in the vessel,} \\
&\text{I can smile at the storm.}
\end{align*}
\]

And another one all of you are familiar goes like this,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,} \\
&\text{When sorrows like sea billows roll--} \\
&\text{Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,} \\
&\text{It is well, it is well with my soul.}
\end{align*}
\]

This passage, of course, is not teaching that storms cannot arise in a Christian’s life. What it is teaching, I think, is that your boat can’t go down if Jesus is on board. So relax a little. In light of the recent tragedy in Greensburg, to say nothing of the wild fires and floods our nation has recently experienced, I want to read a paragraph by David Gooding:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Within our earth itself, wind, wave, lightning, storm, flood, drought, avalanche,} \\
&\text{earthquake, fire, heat, cold, germ, virus, epidemic—all from time to time threaten and} \\
&\text{destroy life. Sooner or later one of them may destroy us. The story of the stilling of the} \\
&\text{storm is not meant to tell us that Christ will never allow any believer to perish by} \\
&\text{drowning, or by any other natural disaster. Many believers have so perished. It does} \\
&\text{demonstrate that he is Lord of the physical forces in the universe, that for him nothing} \\
&\text{happens by accident, and that no force in all creation can destroy his plan for our eternal} \\
&\text{salvation or separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom.} \\
&\text{8:38-39).}
\end{align*}
\]

**Jesus demonstrates He is Lord over super-nature (demons).** (28-33)

All of us appreciate the work of skilled craftsmen who can take a broken old house and restore it to its original grandeur. Or the kind who can take a beat-up old Mustang and patiently re-work the engine, the body and the undercarriage. Or who find a worn Amish quilt, and carefully reattach each torn piece. In Matthew 8:28-34 we see Jesus’ power over the spiritual world and in the process we also see the heart and hand of a craftsman—not a craftsman who works with things, but one who works with people, people ruined by sin and by Satan, but who can be restored to new life through an encounter with Him. Let’s read Matthew 8:28-34:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-} \\
&\text{possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could} \\
&\text{pass that way. "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come}
\end{align*}
\]
Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."

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

This can be a troubling passage for modern western minds, so let me make a few comments before we look at the passage in depth. I mentioned a few weeks ago that some argue that when Jesus speaks of demons He is accommodating Himself to his culture, which because it was pre-scientific, attributed all kinds of maladies to demons. It is important to be reminded that Matthew and the other gospel writers recognize the difference between Jesus' healing of sickness and His exorcizing of demons from people. They have no problem diagnosing disease when it is present.

Some also wonder why we do not see the same type of demonic activity today that is portrayed in the gospels. In response I suggest that it's only natural to expect a greater degree of demonic activity when Jesus was present on earth, for Satan realized that Jesus was his arch-enemy. Having said that, however, I believe there is probably more demonic activity today than most people recognize. We have been so conditioned by science to look for medical or chemical or psychological reasons for bizarre behavior, but some of what we diagnose as mental illness, or even addictive behavior, I suspect is due to demon possession or influence.

Jesus encounters two demon-possessed men. Mark and Luke speak of only one man in their Gospels, but Matthew here speaks of two. This could be a different incident, but it is more likely that one of the demoniacs was more prominent and vocal than the other, so the other Gospel writers focus just on him. These men are living in the tombs, probably natural caves where people buried their loved ones. Their behavior is erratic and violent. In fact, they are so dangerous that people couldn’t even pass by that area. They are isolated from God and man.

Jesus demonstrates authority over the demons. Do you see the stark contrast between this story and the last? After Jesus calmed the seas the disciples were scratching their heads asking, “What kind of man is this?” But His identity is immediately recognized by the demons: “What do you want with us, Son of God?” They are not simply asking for information. Their question has an angry edge to it. It is as if they are saying, “What are you doing here? This is our turf.” They seem to know Jesus well enough to know that He will not let them continue to plague this man.

And that is why they ask, “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” Demons can read the Bible, and they know their time is limited. They know that they will one day be cast into the Lake of Fire along with their leader, Satan. They want to know if Jesus is going to punish them even before that final judgment.
Speaking through these men the demons beg Jesus to let them enter a herd of pigs that are feeding on the hillside nearby. The fact that they must seek Jesus' permission to enter the pigs shows that they recognize His ultimate authority. This tells me that if you belong to Christ, you need not fear the demonic world. 1 John 4:4 says that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." The authority of Jesus is on our side.

Ethical questions have often been raised over this incident. Some have asked what a herd of pigs is doing in Jewish territory, but the fact is this is not Jewish territory. The east side of the Sea of Galilee is Gentile territory. Others have asked, “Why are these pigs sacrificed, and doesn’t Jesus care about the economic and material well-being of the herdsmen?” Well, we simply do not know enough to judge whether the herdsmen were innocent victims or not, but I think we get some insight into these questions as we consider what Jesus values.

**Jesus reveals His values in allowing the demons to inhabit a herd of pigs.** By permitting the demons to enter the pigs, Jesus is not saying that He does not value animals or the economic well-being of the farmers. But He is saying that people are more important than animals or economics. Scripture makes an extraordinary claim about people that runs counter to the spirit of our age. The Scriptures teach that people are made in God’s image. Human beings did not originate through a chance process of evolution, but through a conscious and purposeful act of God. In doing so He made people different than animals or anything else in the universe.

People bear the marks of God’s moral character and the possibility of a personal relationship with Him. This distinction raises the value of a human being incredibly high. One author has written perceptively,

"This value of a person does not come from his goodness or creativity, his contribution to the state or the economy, the size of his bank account or even the number of press clippings. His value is because he carries in his whole being the image of God."

To society these demon-possessed men are worthless. They do not add anything to the economy. They produce only fear and hardship for the people in the area. But Jesus views them totally differently. He sees in these men the image of God, ruined by sin but not beyond restoration.

Satan wants to destroy people because they bear the image of God, and our culture has bought into his effort to an incredible extent. The dying grandmother is viewed as a burden and an economic liability. The unborn child is just a choice. The child with physical or mental disabilities is pitied and often neglected. But Jesus thinks differently about each one. Each is valuable because he bears the image of God.

**The response to this second miracle: rejection.**

**Jesus demonstrates He is Lord over human nature, claiming to be able to forgive sin.** (9:1-8)
Matthew 9:1-8 tells the story of the healing of the paralytic:

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

The man in this story is probably a quadriplegic. We don’t know what caused his disability, but certainly in his mind, as well as in the minds of his friends, his paralysis is his greatest need. He couldn’t work like others; he couldn’t play; he couldn’t travel; he couldn’t marry and have children. His is an all-consuming problem.

Then he hears about Jesus, whose reputation is spreading rapidly as He heals people of all kinds of diseases. Maybe, just maybe, He will be able to solve this man’s greatest need? It is worth whatever effort he can expend to try to meet Jesus. However, a quadriplegic in that day is a pretty helpless human being. There are no wheelchairs, no computers, and no handicap laws requiring access to public places. Fortunately, this man has some friends who are willing to help him. It is highly likely that this is the same incident as found in Luke 5, where four friends take a paralytic up to the roof of a house and let him down in front of Jesus.

Jesus does not think this man’s greatest need is his physical condition (bad as it was), but rather his spiritual condition—his need for forgiveness—and He addresses that first.

The greatest need any of us has is to experience forgiveness of sin. Some have suggested that the man’s physical condition must have been the result of his spiritual condition; i.e. he became paralyzed due to some sin in his life, and that is why Jesus had to deal with the forgiveness first. Well, perhaps. Maybe he had been drunk, crashed his ox cart, and suffered a spinal injury.

That is certainly possible, but by no means necessary. The Bible makes it very clear that while some sickness is the result of sin, that is certainly not true across the board. In John chapter 9 we have the amazing story of the man born blind, concerning whom even Jesus’ disciples asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” To which Jesus responded, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Jesus did not mean that the man and his parents were without sin, but rather that no particular sin in their lives caused the blindness.

The only thing of which we can be sure regarding the paralytic is that Jesus believes his greatest
need is the forgiveness of sin, whether or not it was the cause of his paralysis. And frankly, that is true of every human being–paralytic, diabetic, cancer victim, or perfectly healthy specimen. Every other need is subordinate to the need for forgiveness, for sin has affected every aspect of our lives. Without forgiveness, no one can achieve wholeness and fulfillment.

**The greatest kindness any of us can offer is to exercise faith in another’s behalf.** I won’t focus much on this fact, because Matthew doesn’t even talk about what the man’s friends did for him, but I want us to understand that the greatest kindness we can perform for someone else may be exercising faith in their behalf by praying to God about their spiritual condition.

Remember George Kenworthy’s message two weeks ago? He essentially told us that the single greatest thing we can do for our own marriages or the troubled marriages of our friends is to pray—for strength, love, and the fullness of God. He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or even imagine!

Parents, we must pray faithfully in behalf of our children. When Proverbs says, “Train up a child according to his way and when he is old he will not depart,” it is assuming a cooperation between the parents and the Spirit of God that produces fruit in the child’s life. And don’t give up when you don’t see results, even for years. It works the other way too, for children praying in behalf of their parents. Many of you have elderly parents who have never given clear testimony of faith in Jesus Christ. They may be religious, but you are not sure they are born again. Stretch your faith; don’t give up on that aged parent who seems so reticent to discuss spiritual things. Claim them by faith; speak to them of God’s grace as you have opportunity. Most importantly, pray for them. It is our duty to take to the Savior those who are spiritually paralyzed through the stranglehold of sin.

**The greatest mistake a person can make is to misjudge who Jesus is.** When Jesus tells the man his sins are forgiven, the religious leaders say to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” Luke adds their further thoughts, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Now their premise is right—only God can forgive sins. It’s their conclusion that is wrong. They have put together a syllogism:

*Jesus claims to forgive sins.*

*Only God can forgive sins.*

**Therefore, Jesus must be a blasphemer.**

But the correct syllogism should be:

*Jesus claims to forgive sins.*

*Only God can forgive sins.*

**Therefore, Jesus must be God.**

Please note that the religious leaders are not saying these things out loud, but Jesus can read their minds and He asks, “Why are you entertaining evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” and He doesn’t even finish His sentence—
He just turns and heals the man.

In a sense, of course, it is much easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven” than “Get up and walk.” The latter may be put to an immediate and obvious test, whereas the onlooker does not know whether sins are forgiven or not. In point of fact, however, it is harder to forgive sins, for while there are many healers, there is only one Forgiver.

Let me speak a word to everyone here about forgiveness. Everyone of us has sinned. We have fallen short of the standards God has set for us—standards intended to make our lives longer, more fulfilling, and more fruitful. Sin in turn produces guilt—that awful sense of personal failure. It gnaws at our consciences, telling us there are no excuses and we deserve to be condemned. Guilt in turn destroys the joy of life. It eats away at our peace of mind and poisons relationships.

Freedom from guilt, desperately desired and needed by everyone of us, is found in the fact that Jesus died on the cross for our sin. The words He spoke on the Cross, “It is finished,” are the same words used in that day for business transactions, meaning “paid in full.” And God does not punish those who repent of their sins! All of the punishment has already been given to Christ. God disciplines His children, but He does not punish them. We may pay the natural consequences of our sin, and those consequences can last a long time, but we must not think of God as punishing us.

Someone has written,

If our greatest need had been for information . . .
   God would have sent us an educator.
If our greatest need had been for technology . . .
   God would have sent us a scientist.
If our greatest need had been for money . . .
   God would have sent us an economist.
If our greatest need had been for pleasure . . .
   God would have sent us an entertainer.
But our greatest need was for forgiveness . . .
   So God sent us a Savior.
His name was Jesus.

The response to this third miracle: awe and praise to God. “They were filled with awe; and they praised God.” In these three stories Jesus shows Himself to be Lord over nature, Lord over super-nature, and Lord over human nature. What is your response today? Is it amazement, causing you to ask, “What kind of man is this?” Is it rejection? Are you saying to Him, “I don’t want to deal with you; please leave”? Or is it awe and praise to God? Are you bowing your knee in worship and gratitude because Jesus is Lord over everything?

i. David Gooding, According to Luke
ii. Today I wonder if Satan and his demons haven’t caught on that identifying Jesus is not a smart thing to do. They are not nearly as helpful today as they once were. I can imagine them sitting around a conference table saying, “Why are we telling people who this guy is? Are we stupid or what! I’ve got a better idea. Let’s start promoting the idea this guy as just a prophet. Or a good moral teacher, but not as the Son of God.”