

July 25, 2021

Mark 6:45-56

“Take Heart; it is I. Do not be Afraid”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Jesus walks on the water in our Gospel lesson. Job says that God stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea. God does great things beyond our ability to search them out. They are marvelous things beyond our ability to number. “Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not,” Job says, “he moves on, but I do not perceive him. Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back? Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing (Job 9:11-12)?’” God works in strange ways that are beyond us, but what he does is done to reach us and bring us home to him.

I find that the words of Job have a lot to say to us about our Gospel lesson for this morning. Jesus tramples the waves of the sea as a flesh and blood human being. He is God. The first thing that comes to mind is that we make God very small. In our blindness the heavens are beyond God and the waves of the sea are somehow more powerful than him, despite the fact that he made it all. And he is right in front of us and we do not perceive him. The disciples could only see a “ghost” walking on the water. Jesus is not a ghost. This is God who tramples the waves of the sea. He is in charge. He is our help when the down here is churning and he is our stay when things are calm and at peace.

How is it that we cannot perceive him? How is it that we make him so puny and so unable to help us when everything before him is insignificant in comparison to who he is and his almighty power? It is really hard to believe that we whine so much about so many things that are truly insignificant before him. It is stunning how we make everything larger than him and his care for us at the cross. It can’t get any bigger than at the cross. And if Jesus was victorious there he is victorious in all things. We would do well to listen carefully to the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples who were in the boat rowing against the wind, **“Take Heart; It is I. Do not be Afraid.”**

Our Gospel lesson is a dandy. But before we dive into it, consider that this isn’t the first time that the disciples have had a rough time on the sea. Just back in Mark 4:35-41 we find the record of Jesus and his disciples getting into a boat to sail across the sea of Galilee. A great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. The disciples woke Jesus up and he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. The disciples were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Now we come to our text - Mark 6:45-56 - where Jesus walks on the water. You would think that having had a previous sea experience that the disciples would be ready for this one. You would think that their perception would have been dramatically sharpened. But, as we note from the reading of our lesson, they are hardened. But Jesus is wise in heart and mighty in strength. Who can harden himself against Jesus and ultimately succeed (Job 9:4)? And, with that in mind, we are brought to our text. After feeding the five thousand it says: “Immediately *he made his disciples get into the boat* and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. *And he saw that they were making headway painfully*, for the wind was against them.”

It is Jesus who makes his disciples get into the boat. He watches them as they are in pain. These two statements begin to shape in our understanding the reality that the disciples are in the midst of a trial. Jesus has done this to them. Jesus is watching. He is once again using a sharp spiritual knife to cut through the layers of their hardness and inability to perceive. And, if we have any doubts about whether or not this is a trial, we are surely convinced when we are told in verses 48-49, “And he [Jesus] saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. *He meant to pass by them ...*”

How often is it that Jesus puts us into a boat to face the winds of life alone? How often has it been that Jesus recedes into the background simply watching us as we are making headway painfully? The Greek word for “painfully” is closer to the word “tormented.” So, how are things with you this morning? Are you being tormented? Perhaps in the past? Perhaps not today but tomorrow. Trials sent by Jesus are a part of our walk with him. As it was for his disciples, so it is for you and me, and we should be grateful. Trials are designed to cut through the layers of our hardness in order to bring us to who Jesus is and the cross he endured for us.

And our text really emphasizes this in a big way. One might think that it is enough for Jesus to watch us when we are being tormented, but he doesn’t stop there. Rather, he even goes so far as to walk on the sea and pass us by. He does these strange things so that the outcome for us may be as it was for his disciples long ago. It says at the close of our lesson, “And he [Jesus] got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased.” In the end, we want Jesus in our boat and the wind to cease. In the end, we want to be where Jesus is forever. The disciples who did not understand about the loaves and the feeding of the five thousand had hearts that were hardened. Those hearts had to be cut. In the same way, if our hearts are not cut then we will remain in a horrible state where Jesus will remain unperceived.

The whole point of our Gospel lesson, the whole point of our own personal trials, is to bring Jesus into our boat so that we may be with him. All that really matters is that Jesus breaks through the hardness of our hearts in such a way that faith is created and strengthened until we reach the goal of heaven. If our heart grows hard and remains hard, we will never receive the cross and forgiveness of sins. It will be as if we are forever condemned to row against a wind that will never let us move forward.

Nothing matters but to reach the destination that Jesus has in mind for us. When the whole world is collapsing on us - or when the sea and the wind rage - it is our Savior who opens up the particulars of the universe in order to show us that he is victorious and will give us that victory in him when it is all said and done. Sometimes in this process, it appears that Jesus means to pass us by. These are the moments when we feel like we have no answers and that God has left us alone to be tortured by whatever. The truth is that he is opening up the cross and the forgiveness of sins. He is answering the question: “Who is this?” He is saying, **“Take Heart; It is I. Do not be Afraid.”**

Those words of Jesus are really packed full of comfort. Between “take heart” and “do not be afraid” we hear Jesus say “It is I.” It is Jesus. But who is this Jesus who causes the wind and the waves to cease? Because of the connection between this incident and the feeding of the five thousand in Mark, which

naturally takes us to the feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt, we should understand that this Jesus is the great “I AM” who appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:14). Jesus is the one who leads the Israelites out from their Egyptian slavery to sin, death, and Pharaoh. He is the one who causes the wind and waves to cease in order to get into our boat. Jesus is the “I AM” who became one of us to be the lamb of sacrifice on the cross in order that death might pass over us and we might have eternal life.

There is nothing more important than for Jesus to get into our boat. But for him to get into our boat the way in which he needs to be in our boat must happen in such a way that we are truly ready to receive him. We need to understand that Jesus is doing great things, even when those things appear to be strange and beyond us. He is doing marvelous things when he puts us into a boat, watches us when we are in pain, and means to pass us by. What he is doing is getting us ready so that we may appreciate what it means to have him in our boat forever. I don't know about you, but I am willing go through whatever it takes to have him in my boat. Hell is not an option.

May all of us “greatly rejoice,” as Peter writes (1 Pet. 1:6-7), even when we go through necessary trials that our faith “may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ!” With that in mind, may the words of Jesus reverberate in our ears every day of our lives in the midst of the wind and waves: **“Take Heart; It is I. Do not be Afraid.”**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott