

*July 26, 2015*

*St. Mark 6:45-56:   **"God Moves in a Mysterious Way"***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Before our Gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus had just fed over 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples had been busy all day listening to Jesus and distributing and collecting the food in a desolate place. Now they had to row across the lake, while the Lord stayed behind to pray. They did not have far to go, but it took a long time for them to get there because the wind was against them, and their rowing was nearly in vain. It was between three and six o'clock in the morning. The dead of the night was leading to dawn and the disciples had not had any sleep. They were completely exhausted and quite frazzled.

Mark writes: "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." Such is the Christian life. And we should hear it again: "He meant to pass by them." He moves in a mysterious way!

Perhaps you have had a similar experience, or you will have it. Jesus feeds us with himself and gives us wonderful gifts. He seems to be nothing but a gift giver to such an extent that one might think that all work is now over and every frustration should come to an end. "Our lives should not be relegated to rowing the boat in vain. There shouldn't be any wind! There will not be any sleepless nights," so we want to think. And, "Jesus will always be there without any delay whatsoever when things aren't going well." But, what in the world is this that we hear in our Gospel text? Jesus sees that we are painfully rowing on the sea against the wind, and he means to pass us by!

Luther talks about this kind of thing in his commentary on Genesis in another context. But what he says there applies here. He says that because of this fallen creation and our sinful flesh, God must not only create and preserve our faith, but he must increase it as we face the many great obstacles that would prevent us from entering into his kingdom. Like a father dealing with a child, he plays a little game with us in order to teach us to trust him, even in those moments when it appears that he is about to pass us by, or even in those moments when his presence might at first make us afraid.

Most all of us have played a similar game with our earthly fathers. A father grabs a favorite toy and holds it above his child's head so that he cannot reach it. When the child is on the verge of breaking down, the father gives the toy back to his child. It is here that a father is saying, "Even when you think that by my actions I have ill intentions toward you, I am not out to get you." And if the game is played without malice, the next time the father does this, the child will most likely stop trying to jump up and down to grab the toy. The child will stand there in a posture that says, "Okay dad I know what you are up to. I'm not going to frantically jump up and down and scream. You can give it back now."

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, fear overwhelmed them. They thought that they were seeing an apparition - not a ghost like we typically think of a ghost that haunts a house or a graveyard (which are in fact imagination or demons). Rather, they were convinced that what they were seeing meant disaster for them. Mark writes: "But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not

be afraid.' And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

As you can see, the mysterious movements of the Lord are designed to make an impression upon our hearts as they should. When the Lord works in mysterious ways that we often don't completely understand, he is having great patience with us. The disciples were not understanding and really embracing the magnitude of what had taken place with the feeding of the 5,000. With the sea and the wind, the walking on the water and his intent to pass them by, and as he steps into the boat and the wind dies down, he is renewing and repeating his teaching until the disciples understand. He is dealing with their faith life. He also deals with our faith life as well. Jesus is constantly directing us toward himself because in this life we think we see many frightening apparitions that cause us to be afraid and lose hope and even the kingdom.

In the Gospel of Matthew there is an addition that we do not find in Mark that in fact illustrates everything we have said so far. Matthew tells us that before Jesus finally steps into the boat, Peter says to him: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to you on the water." So Jesus said to him "Come!" Then Matthew writes:

And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately, Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying "Truly You are the Son of God (Matthew 14:28-33)."

Like Peter, we get distracted by the boisterous wind. At least by this time Peter is seeing Jesus. But like Peter, because we have great difficulty in seeing the Lord for who he is, he must deal with our faith life as he did with him long ago - as he did with all of his disciples. Sometimes Jesus looks as if he is passing us by. Sometimes Jesus allows us to begin to sink so he can stretch out his hand and catch us in such a way that we fully understand and embrace the great love that he has for us. When he moves in mysterious ways, we are taught to be certain that behind what appears to be a frowning face is a loving heart that has nothing but our best interest in mind. In the day he holds the toy over our heads, it may seem unnecessary and painful, but we are to learn that whatever he does, he has a very good reason. And we are to believe that his reason is for our salvation.

When the Lord moves in mysterious ways, we are to understand that he is really pointing us to and teaching us to rely solely upon him and the place where he shows his full heart. When we confront a wind and our rowing is in vain, when we see what appears to be a frightening apparition of doom, and even when it appears that our Savior is going to pass us by, he is always and finally taking us to the cross of his love where we are brought into his eternal kingdom. His heart for us is always in the context of everything he did for us. His perfect life and suffering and death for the forgiveness of our sins is a constant evidence that the rowing is not in vain, the winds have their reason and will one day cease, we should not be afraid of the apparition for he will not let us sink into the depths of hell.

When the tempests of life rage and seek to upset you, he comes into your boat and says, "It is I; do not be afraid, for it is through water that I have called you - through your Baptism and into my name where you are mine and I am yours. I have washed your sins away with my blood. The food that I give to you is my death on the cross so that you may have life. Do not be afraid for I am with you always, and my goal for you is that you might be with me in the place I have prepared for you. When I move in mysterious ways, you should know that the mystery is really no mystery at all. I want you to understand, to have faith, to persevere in your faith, overcome every obstacle, and be with me in my kingdom forever! Do not be afraid; it is I." I leave you with the words of our epistle lesson (Ephesians 3:14-21). Paul writes:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Indeed! God Moves in Mysterious Ways!

Pastor Brock Abbott