

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Mark 6:45-56
 “When Jesus Passes By”
 Year B – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
 July 29, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And he 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, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (6:48-50).

The disciples had had a long day. They were tired. They needed a break, a chance to catch their breath, and maybe eat just *one meal* in peace. They thought it was going to happen, too, when they joined Jesus in a boat and he directed them to a desolate place. But the crowds found them there, too. The crowds wanted to hear and see Jesus.

And as we heard last week, Jesus spent the day teaching the crowds, and it got late. The people were hungry. So Jesus calls upon his disciples not only to witness, but also to participate in his miracle feeding of five thousand men, plus women and children, with only five loaves and two fish. The disciples, I’m sure, were still trying to sort out everything they just saw happen, as they collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

Our Gospel today picks up immediately after that miracle. There was no break in the action. Jesus ordered the disciples back into the boat. He was going to stay behind to dismiss the crowds, and the disciples were going to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Except the wind began to pick up. This wasn’t going to be an easy trip for an already-exhausted crew.

Meanwhile, Jesus has finished with the crowds and goes up on a nearby mountain to pray. And it seems he takes the opportunity from his vantage point to watch the disciples, who were out on the sea. And what he saw was that they were “making headway painfully, for the wind was against them” (v. 48).

But Jesus doesn’t immediately go to their rescue. He waits all the way until the fourth watch of the night, which would be sometime between 3 and 6 a.m. This means the disciples had been struggling for almost the entire night, and it was just before dawn. And that’s when Jesus descends from the mountain, goes to the shore... and begins to walk on the water.

Think about that. *Walking on water*. If you were out on a nearby lake in the pitch-black night, and the waves were crashing all around you because of the wind, and then you look out and you see someone you think you know just strolling across the water, you’d probably think you’d seen a ghost, too!

And if that wasn’t strange enough, Mark adds what is probably the most confusing detail of this whole account in verse 48. Six words: “He meant to pass by them.” Pass by them? Does this mean that Jesus wasn’t planning to stop for them? Was it an accident that the disciples saw him at all, and once they did, Jesus was startled into saying something?

Well, we aren’t told what was going through his mind. But, as we’re going to find out, there’s this connection between the feeding of the five thousand and this walking on water. And we shouldn’t be surprised that in both instances, everything is done intentionally in order to communicate who Jesus is and what he had come to do, even if it’s not clear at first.

What is clear, however, is that the disciples were confused. As Jesus is passing by them, the disciples see him, and cry out because they think he's a ghost, and are terrified. And Jesus turns to them and says, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And he gets into the boat, and the wind ceases. And the disciples were "utterly astounded."

You know, I think about all the times that we do not understand what God is doing, especially in our own lives. Which may be more times than we'd like to admit. When you see the circumstances of your life, the people, the work, the purpose, the life-changing moments, the diagnoses, the struggles... and you wonder what His plan is.

There may even be days where you feel like *you're* in a boat in the middle of the sea, struggling against the wind with no shore in sight. And it's a human reaction, that when we encounter the unknown or the uncertain, we allow ourselves to be afraid. To be afraid for ourselves, for loved ones, for our future. To wonder, where is God in all of this?

The disciples were afraid and uncertain. But Jesus wasn't being callous or aloof in his reaction to them. There's a reason Mark uses that phrase, "He meant to pass by them." And to understand what Jesus is doing, we need to take a step back and make sure we see what Jesus is doing both here, and with the feeding of the five thousand.

You'll recall from last week that Jesus showed he was stepping into an important role, literally and figuratively, as the Shepherd God. The same God who fed and gave His people rest in the book of Exodus, and all throughout the Old Testament. The God who shepherded His people through the wilderness, and into green pastures of the Promised Land. Now, this Jesus, God in flesh, provided again with both Word and food for His people, the great crowds, in a desolate place.

And it was the disciples' turn to understand that this God was there for them, personally, as well. Jesus was going to demonstrate once again who he was, and what he'd come to do. First, Jesus would show that he has power over the untamed waters, something only the God who created them could do. It was God at creation who separated the waters, it was God with Noah who controlled the waters at the Flood, and it was God at the Exodus from Egypt who parted the Red Sea for His people. At the Sea of Galilee, Jesus would lead another exodus, but instead of parting the waters, he would tread upon them. And Scripture is clear, it's only God who can "make a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters" (Isaiah 43:16). In other words, Jesus is demonstrating he is the Creator God.

Then, while doing all this, Jesus passed by His disciples. And that phrase is intentional. It's meant to call to mind when God passed by Moses, after Moses requested to see God's glory, to see His presence, to gain the assurance that the presence of the Almighty God was indeed with His people. And amazingly, God granted his request. He placed Moses in the cleft of the rock, and covered Moses with His hand, and Moses caught just the smallest glimpse of God's glory as He passed by (Ex. 33).

And for Moses, God "passing by" was an unbelievably merciful and gracious act. And what Jesus did for the disciples was intended to be so, as well. Jesus wasn't looking to blow by them, nor turn a deaf ear to their frightened cries. By passing by his disciples, Jesus was showing them who he really is: the Almighty God. Creator of the waters. To assure them, in their exhausted, uncertain, and frightened state, that he is God. And like God did for the Moses, and for the Israelites, he has come to save. For all those reasons, Jesus could truly say, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

But the disciples still didn't understand. Mark says, "They were utterly astounded for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." Which seems like an

odd thing to say. But remember, the loaves from the feeding of the crowds, and the walking on water, it was all meant to reveal the true identity of Jesus as God. The God who has come to provide for all needs of body and soul, the God who has come to give rest, the God who has come to show His power, the God who has come to save. But in the disciples' sinful ignorance, in their fear, in their hard-heartedness, they couldn't see Jesus for who he truly was. At least not yet.

We at times can have hard hearts like the disciples. And it's all we can do, when we find ourselves in difficult and dark days, to keep them from hardening even more. To lose sight of Jesus in our lives entirely. Our hearts can become so calloused from sin, from apprehension, from uncertainty, from fear, from worrying about our future, that we wonder where God is, unable to find Him in the darkness of our lives.

It demonstrates why Jesus came to this earth in the first place. Why Jesus chose to "climb into our boat" of humanity. He came to show that no amount of darkness can ever separate us from the love of God. Because even in the darkest of times, even when we think we may not know where Jesus is in all of this, Jesus makes himself truly known to us.

Jesus stepped ashore that day, and continued to follow his dark road out of love for us. A dark road that led to a dark hill outside Jerusalem, where Jesus hung on a cross, the cross we deserved, and was crucified. He was rejected by his own, scorned, beaten, and shamed. And it literally became the darkest day on earth.

But what is counter-intuitive to the world, God chose that sin-darkened cross to be the place where His love would be known best. Because it was at cross that God reconciled hard-hearted humans with Himself. Where the Son of God died so that we might have forgiveness and the assurance of life with Him. Where Jesus showed once again who he is and what he had come to do.

Jesus died and was buried, and his disciples were afraid once more. Three days later, some frightened women ran from an empty tomb, having just seen an angel. The angel had told them, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:6-7).

You see, out of love for his disciples, Jesus was giving them another chance to see him. He would go ahead of them and meet them in Galilee once again, so that he could "pass by" them one more time. Except this time, their hearts wouldn't be hardened, but rather their eyes would be opened. This time they would truly understand. Jesus *is* God. The God who died, and rose again from the dead to abolish anything that would cause them to fear.

You may find yourself in dark times. There may be days when it seems you are fighting the wind with no end in sight. And there may be many moments when you just don't understand why God is doing what He's doing in your life. But your risen Lord passes by you so that you may see that he is God, and as God, he has abolished anything that would cause you to fear. And that his plan for you is that of eternal salvation, and peace, and rest.

Jesus passes by you in his Word, where he makes his voice known. He passes by you in Baptism, where he washes away your sin. He passes by you in his Holy Supper, where he invites you to take his body and blood, to touch him, and see that he is there to forgive you. And as Jesus mercifully and graciously passes by you in his Word and Sacrament, you hear him say, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.