

Passing by on the Water

For the past few Sundays, we have been considering some of the wonderful miracles that Jesus performed as presented to us in chapters 5 and 6 of the Gospel of Mark. The next miracle appears in Mark 6:45-52. It comes right on the tail of the miracle we talked about last Sunday when Jesus took five small loaves of bread and two fishes and feed about 20,000 people—like a Shepherd feeding His sheep. So let's take a look at the whole story—it's fairly short, only eight verses that read as follows:

⁴⁵ "Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. ⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." Mark 6:45-52 (NIV)

There's a lot packed into those verses, so let's begin unpacking some of those things to see what Jesus was trying to get across to His disciples—and to us, as well. First, think about verse 48 that informs us that Jesus had His eyes upon the disciples and was quite aware of the fact that they were *"straining at the oars, because the wind was against them."* Remember the lyrics of the old Bob Seger song, *"Against the Wind."* Toward the end of that song, Seger sings that he's *"older now, but still running against the wind."* When I was a young man, I thought that that was so cool—that defiant, undaunted attitude of just lowering your head and plowing through the storms of life. But the reality is that you can't live your life like that song—not for very long. Sooner or later those howling winds and crashing waves will wear you down and overwhelm you. We need something more than our defiant attitudes to weather the storms of life. That's what Jesus was trying to teach His disciples. He wanted them to understand that only God can quiet those storms that roar not only in the world outside, but also inside the very heart of humanity. And so, that's the situation in which the disciples now found themselves—they were *"running against the wind."* More than that—they were actually struggling to keep their boat afloat as the wind-driven waves crashed against its wooden hull. They were in a tight spot and very much in danger of drowning. But they had not gone unnoticed—Jesus knew that they

were in great peril, and the Scripture says that Jesus actually **saw** them. The question that remains is whether they would **see** Jesus—see Him for who He really is.

But, the very fact that Jesus' eye is upon us is so very encouraging! So many times, we are "**running against the wind**" and "**straining against the oars**" when the misfortunes of life swept upon us with hurricane force. Sometimes our difficulties, pains and suffering seem to overwhelm us just like tidal waves of a storm. The good news is that Jesus is watching over us. You don't need to shoot up a flare to get His attention, or send out an S.O.S.¹—unless it's an S.O.S. in prayer. What a great comfort to know that Jesus is watching over you—but, like the disciples, the question becomes will **you SEE Him** through the confusion and chaos of the storm, and allow Him to be your "lifesaver."

And you might wonder, if Jesus was watching over the disciples, why didn't He just calm the waves immediately—save Himself the effort of walking all the way out into that raging sea? That's a good question. Someone might respond that He wanted to show His disciples a great miracle. O.K. But, the Scripture is pretty clear, Jesus could see them, so presumably they could look back on the shore and see Him as well. Why didn't Jesus just stand there on the shore and wave His arms to miraculously calm the sea? If Jesus wanted to show the disciples a great miracle, He could have done it that way. But He deliberately chose to walk on the water. There is a reason for that, and a clue is given in verse 48 which says: "He went out to them, walking on the lake. He was **about to pass by them.**" Did you ever notice that—it does not say that Jesus was walking toward them as if to get into the boat. Rather, it specifically states that Jesus was about to walk **right past them**? Why would He be set on such a course? Well, the answer lies in the Old Testament.

Quite often, when God would present Himself in the Old Testament, He would have to do so, obviously, in some visible form. He would appear to people in some form that they could **see** Him. For example, in the Book of Exodus, Moses turned to God and said ¹⁸ "**Now show me your glory.**" ¹⁹ And the LORD said, "**I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence . . .**" ²⁰ "But," he said, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live . . ." ²¹ Then the LORD said, "**There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²² When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.**" Exodus 33:18-22 (NIV) Here, God mentions three times that He will show His presence as He **passes by**. We see this again, when God appeared to Elijah after he had fled to a cave to hide from Queen Jezebel. God's presence could only be seen as He **passed by** Elijah.²

And that's why Jesus was out there on the water **passing by** the disciples. That was the way God displayed Himself—and Jesus had hoped that the disciples would see Him **passing by** and make this

connection. But, they didn't. Can you imagine just how disappointing it must have been for Jesus to go to all of this effort in an attempt to show them His divine nature as the Son of God, only to have the disciples cry out in great fear in thinking that they were seeing some kind of a ghost hovering over the water? Yeah, they looked up and saw the glory of God passing by, but mistook it for a ghost. How blind can you be?³ ***Only a prayer could save them now.***

Earlier this past week, I was reading from a daily devotional entitled, *Stories of Faith and Courage from World War II*. It told the story of a B-17 bomber crew that was trying to make their way back to base after running a mission, but their plane was riddled with bullet holes and damaged from flak fire. They were flying over the English Channel with the British coastline coming into view, but it became obvious that they were going to have to ditch their plane in the water. Their situation was not unlike that of the disciples fighting the waves in the Sea of Galilee, only in their case, they'd be struggling against the waves of the English Channel. The crewmen just sat there frozen in fear waiting for the plane to crash into the rough water. It was then that one of the crewmen, an aviator named "Brownie", started praying. George Hoyt, the radio operator, looked over to his praying friend and later wrote of the reassurance that the crew received just by watching and hearing this man pray. This is what he wrote: "***Brownie's faith shone as bright as the very sun itself. I remembered him giving me a smile as big as all outdoors. Out my window I saw the choppy and rough sea coming towards us, closer and closer, and I prayed fervently as I continued to beat out those SOS signals.***" Hoyt then described the incredible sense of peace that overcame all of them as Brownie continued to pray: "***As we were waiting to hit the water, a complete calm came over us as if 'all is well.' A feeling of absolute calm, just like I was laying under a tree back on the farm. . . (I felt) a great calm take possession of me which language can't describe. I experienced a peace that surpasses all imagination as I watched the whitecaps now flicking by under the wing. . . I called to Brownie and the boys, 'This is it!—[We are gonna be OK].'***"⁴ That is, indeed, the power of prayer: It can bring the peace of Jesus Christ.

Now contrast that with the disciples in their storm-tossed boat. Isn't it interesting that we don't read about any of the disciples praying? Yet, someone had been praying for them. In fact, someone had been praying fervently for quite a long time. Verse 46 says that "***After leaving them, He [Jesus] went up on a mountainside to pray.***" Do you know how long Jesus was praying for them? According to the timeline given here, Jesus would have dismissed the crowd right around sundown, maybe as late as 8 p.m. And it appears that Jesus prayed right up to the time that He left to walk out onto the Sea of Galilee. If the disciples saw Him coming around the "***fourth watch***" at night that means it was around anywhere from 3 to 6 a.m. in the morning. With that being the case, Jesus had been praying for over

seven hours. What was Jesus praying for all those many hours? Well, Jesus had a lot to pray about and I am sure that a significant portion of this prayer time was taken up praying for His disciples to see them through the storm that they were about to face. But they are not the only ones who Jesus prayed for.

You may recall from last week that after He feed this huge crowd of people, they wanted to make Him their King to lead them in rebellion against the Romans. Jesus had come to save them, but not from Rome. The crowd really didn't see Jesus for who He is, just like the disciples failed to see Him for who He is when Jesus walked out across the waves and started by them. I have no doubt but that Jesus was praying for them as well. Jesus prayed for each and every one of those 20,000 people who received the bread and fish that He so miraculously gave to them. He prayed that one day they would know Him as more than just a great preacher and teacher and healer. He prayed that they would begin to understand that He had not come to lead them in rebellion, but to put down the rebellion of sin in their hearts. And Jesus continues to pray. He offers prayers like that to the Father for you today.

Some people might object that one man could not remember each and every person in a crowd so large—just by looking over them—and then offer an individual prayer for all of them, one by one. But the people who pose such an objection—well, they don't see Jesus either, because they just don't realize the magnitude of what the divine Son of God can do. The opening verses of John's Gospel tells us that Jesus created the entire universe, and that nothing exists that was not created by Him.⁵ Every grain of sand to every star in the night sky and beyond—Jesus created it all, everything there is. And He is aware and cares for even the smallest things in His universe. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground that God doesn't take notice of it with love and compassion.⁶ Praying for 20,000 people?—that's nothing for Him to do. But there is something else that we need to realize—He prays for you too. He wants you to see Him. And if you see Him in the sense of coming to know who He is and just how much He loves you—there's not a storm in the world that can separate you from Him.⁷ And no matter what the storm is, or how intense that it may be, Jesus will give you His peace.⁸

Now lastly, how are we to deal with that difficult concluding verse—the one that tells us that the disciples' hearts were hardened. What does that mean—to have a **hardened heart**? Well, the usual meaning is not too good. In fact when Jesus refers to the Pharisees as having "hardened hearts", it has a very negative connotation. It refers to a condition of the heart that just completely misses the point as to who Jesus is for us on a personal level, and what He means to humanity in general. A lot of people are like that—they have heard of Jesus, maybe even attended Church for most of their lives—yet somehow they have missed understanding who Jesus really is. We find this hard to comprehend in light of the miracle that the disciples had just witnessed within the last 24 hours when He fed the multitude,

plus the many other miracles that they had witnessed. Yet, the disciples were “amazed” to see Jesus walking on the water and were shocked that the waves and the winds died down when Jesus entered their boat. The “hardness” of their hearts came from the fact that, despite witnessing these wonderful miracles, they just couldn’t conceive of Jesus as being anything but a man—and nothing more. They were still stuck at that level. Jesus, for them, was a great preacher and teacher, like a John the Baptist, or perhaps a miracle-worker like one of the great prophets—perhaps an Elijah or maybe even a Moses. At that instant, that was as far as they were then prepared to go. But, they were right on the verge of taking that next step of faith. They were just about to realize something else—something that offered them salvation, not just from the angry waves of the sea, but from the searing fires of Hell. They were about to come face to face with the reality that Jesus was not only a man, but also the Son of God.

Now when I say that the disciples were right on the verge of believing that—just how close were they? Well, the answer is that they were real close. And we know that because of an additional fact that is revealed in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew informs us of something that occurred once Jesus got into the boat and quieted the raging sea. The amazement on their faces that betrayed their misunderstanding as to Jesus’ true identity melted away as they considered the fact that no man could do such a thing—**only God could walk on water**. Perhaps they remembered that reference in the Book of Job which says, “[God] alone . . . **marches on the waves of the sea.**” Job 9:8 (NLT)⁹ And when that fact dawned upon them, Matthew’s Gospel tells us: ³³ **“Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”** Matthew 14:35 (NIV) And when they said that, those hearts of stone melted into something much more pliable—something that God would shape, and mold into new creations that would serve His purpose in spreading the Good News of the Kingdom of God.¹⁰

Are you living your life in a storm? Does it feel like a constant struggle against the wind?—and you’ve put your head down for so long trying to plow through on your own—but, it’s just not working. Take comfort in what Mark is telling us here: The Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Maker of the Universe is always praying for you. He is always watching out for you. And He longs for you to see Him pass by. He wants you to get out of the boat and trust Him as you walk against the wind step by step **with Him**—follow Him like a sheep following the Shepherd. If you will do that—well, there’s absolutely no storm in this world that you cannot withstand. His peace will come into your life and those howling winds—when they do blow—they will never overwhelm you again.

Let us pray.

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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor ©2017

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 6".

² 1 Kings 19:11 (NIV) The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

³ R.C. Sproul, *St. Andrew's Expository Commentary – Mark*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2011), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 147-149.

⁴ Larkin Spivey, *Stories of Faith and Courage from World War II*, God and Country Press, Chattanooga:2009, p. 235.

⁵ John 1:1-3 (NIV) ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

⁶ Matthew 10:29 (NLT) What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.

⁷ Romans 8:38-39 (NLT) ³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

⁸ John 14:27 (ESV) Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary – The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1: The King and His Kingdom (Matthew 1-17)*, Paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 273.

¹⁰ **Ezekiel 36:26 (ESV)** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.