

Amid the Storm...with Jesus (Mark 6:45-51)

Among the gospels, the book of Mark is the shortest, but it tells the story of Jesus' ministry at a pretty quick pace. A key term in the book is the word, "immediately," for it intends to profile Jesus as a man of decisive action. There's no window-dressing in Mark—he gets right to the facts, lays them out, and moves on. There's no birth story in Mark as the public ministry of Jesus is introduced in the first chapter with his announcement that "The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Meaning that the plan of God is underway, God's kingdom is here now, enlarge your vision of the kingdom and trust this good news.

In quick succession through the opening chapters, Mark presents evidence of the kingdom displacing evil through the power of Jesus' forceful actions. This IS good news! That which had held people captive is being overcome by Jesus.

The disciples were gaining insight at breakneck speed. Their perception of Jesus was changing at an astonishing pace and with increasing clarity. The people who came into contact with Jesus are regularly described as amazed by what they were seeing and experiencing. At the same time, opposition to Jesus ramped up rapidly. The religious leaders of that day, who should have been Jesus' allies were upset by him regularly shaking up the status quo. In the dizzying swirl of events, the disciples were put into situations that challenged their assumptions, but which also led them to obey his instruction and trust him in all circumstances. Though the challenges varied, they consistently formed the disciples' primary response.

The event our text for today described took place just after the miraculous provision of food for at least 5000 people. From 5 loaves and two fish the entire crowd was fed, and there were leftovers testifying to the abundance inherent in the kingdom. Immediately, as Kim read for us, Jesus directs the disciples into the boat and sends them on their way ahead of him to Bethsaida over the Sea of Galilee. Jesus remained behind. We've heard the story, so I won't repeat the account, except to point out that Jesus sent them, Jesus later saw them in their distress, and Jesus went to them in the storm. When they saw him we're told they were terrified—and that might be puzzling for us, so it helps to know that in that day, the sea was considered a place of terror, the habitation of demons. To the disciples' mind a bad situation had just gotten worse—first the sea was against them and now a demon was coming to plague them! But then Jesus speaks, "Take courage! It is I, don't be afraid." He got in the boat and the storm stilled.

It's a remarkable story! But the question facing us is: Why is this preserved for us? Why is it here? Is it to substantiate that Jesus was supernatural, able to circumvent the laws of nature thus proving his deity? Some think this—that Mark was piling up evidence to prove Jesus' identity. After all, anyone who walks on water is certainly more than merely human. But then, in a parallel passage to this we read of Peter—undeniably a mere human—also walking on the water at Jesus' invitation, which leads me to believe that there is more going here than meets the eye. I don't believe that Jesus was just "showing off." I'm convinced that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, but I am also convinced that Jesus consistently lived within human capabilities as empowered by the Spirit of God proving for us what possibilities we all have for living extraordinary lives as we yield to the leading and power of the

Spirit. Otherwise, how useful would Jesus be as a model for how we are to live under the direction of the Spirit if he simply reverted to his divine capabilities whenever the going got rough? We don't have that option available to us, so we wouldn't be able to follow Jesus in all things if it required that kind of a shift. On the other hand, I don't likewise think that this event is meant to prompt us to cross Lake Washington on foot. As mentioned last week, these demonstrations of power typically have a deeper level of meaning to teach, and that deeper meaning is what I want to develop with you.

What we're meant to see here is that Jesus rises above the storms of life—that he is there amid them, but by the power of God he calmly progresses towards the goal God intends. Even, and perhaps especially, in the places we normally consign to the habitation of demons where evil dwells and wreaks havoc in creation. Moreover, as we considered moments ago, this power isn't just confined to Jesus. It is also available to his followers who respond to his invitation to join in that place and work. But, as John Ortberg notes, if you want to experience the power of Jesus, you gotta get out of the boat! The storm was still in full throat when Peter stepped out of the boat, yet by keeping his focus on Jesus, he found himself able to stand upon the water and walk above the storm's fury. As we also know, when he glanced away from Jesus and focused on the fury below him, he began to be engulfed by it. Still, Jesus rescued him and brought him to safety.

I like how Gradye Parsons summarized this account because it captures the essence of our call to follow Jesus. His conclusion wrapped up what Jesus essentially said to his disciples: Go, there will be a storm, you will not die. That's it. The plain truth in following Jesus is that when you do so, there will be storms. Count on it. You can't take the message of Jesus seriously and avoid storms as that message clashes with the reality of the world living without regard for him. The goal isn't to avoid storms, but to remember how to rise above them and this happens as we live in the character of Jesus and are engulfed in the power of his Spirit.

Now this holds true regardless of the conflict that characterizes the storm. The history of the church is replete with examples of various conflicts that emerged when the followers of Jesus pressed ahead with the mission given us—that mission being the continuous announcement of the reality of God's kingdom present right now offering a way of life that displaces evil replacing it with good. Grounded in the love of God, followers of Jesus pursue a life of love, which is promoting the best interests of others even those who consider themselves our enemies. Others are, of course, those who are within our own family, our neighborhoods, our community, and our opportunities to demonstrate that love may vary depending upon proximity, but it's the same quality of love in all cases. Love will prevail, as good will displace evil but only as it's pursued with effort. And, as you well know, love is proven or demonstrated through actions towards or on behalf of those loved.

And this is where storms crop up, for the actions of love to stem evil for the sake of the loved can bring us into conflict with the status quo that resists change because status quo works for those who don't suffer by it. But what about those who do? When your heart begins to break over the things that break the heart of God, you're compelled to bring the kingdom and its resources to bear upon that situation—it is our call—and as you do, you're sailing into the heart of a storm—Jesus sends you, Jesus

sees you in the storm, and Jesus comes to you amid its fury but above the fray and invites you to that same place. “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

We have been studying the issue of racial injustice over these past few weeks. Many of us have been working through the materials our denomination has published in the 21 day racial justice challenge. Our goal in this has been to listen to the Spirit of God through it—to examine the issue in the light of scripture and theological thought. It is primarily a theological concern because it addresses the value, dignity, respect, and honor due all people because all are created in the image of God. All is inclusive, no-one is exempted from this consideration. Likewise it applies to all regardless of their faith or lack of it, creed, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or race. As followers of Jesus we are compelled to hold the same values that God holds for all. That’s not an option for super saints—it’s foundational for all Christ followers. This is why our primary focus has been on what scripture teaches and we have sought to be informed theologically as we’ve sorted through this. Our knowledge of this is by no means complete, but we have made a start in wrapping our mind around this issue of racial justice.

You’ve likely discovered that this is a stormy issue in our day. There are many voices speaking into this and it is highly politicized in our contemporary experience. There is no shortage of fury in this storm. As we consider how to respond to this, let me state unequivocally that we are not seeking a path laid by republicans, democrats, libertarians, marxists, independents, or any other political entity clamoring in the fray. We are seeking the way of Jesus—we’re earnestly listening for his voice in the storm, we’re counting on displaying his character in whatever response emerges, and we’re in desperate need of his Spirit to engulf and fill us in whatever we pursue. For unless this is so, we will engulfed by the storm and sink into its depths.

As a next step, I’m inviting those who want to be engaged in the conversation to a 21 day challenge de-brief after the service next week. The goal of that conversation will be to hear what you’ve gained during this time, to hear how God has been leading your thought in terms of response, to pray about how good can displace the evil of racism whether personal or systemic, and to consider together how best to respond to this in our community and beyond. Friends, the storm surrounds us whether we like it or not—but hear Jesus amid it: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” AMEN