

Walking on Water -- Mark 6:45-52

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January 29, 2011

Please bow your heads with me for prayer:

Lord, today we come desiring a meaningful spiritual experience. Some of us have felt separated from You this week. All of us need more of You in our lives. And so we ask that as we turn our thoughts to Your Word, that our hearts might be drawn out to You. May we leave here with a stronger connection to You than when we came. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

I remember my first and last attempt at water-skiing. My brother and I were students in academy. We were invited by the family of my brother's girlfriend. They lived in West Virginia. I was not an experienced swimmer. In fact, I almost drowned at my baptism. Not really, but I did come up coughing and sputtering. I do better in places where I can breathe regularly. Somehow I was coerced into jumping out of the boat into the water. Amazingly I actually did get out of the water and in a somewhat standing position, at least for a few short moments. Then I fell headlong into the water, surprisingly without inhaling any water. This process was repeated a few times, before I was allowed back in the boat.

We'll find out in our story today that Jesus didn't need a boat and a pair of skis to be able to stay on top of the water. In fact, He could walk on water.

Let's begin with a summary of today's story:

After the miracle of the loaves and fish Jesus sent everyone away. The disciples departed in the boat, and on their way encountered a fierce wind on the sea, which lasted all night. // Toward morning Jesus came to them walking on the water. The disciples were frightened but Jesus calmed their fears. As soon as He got into the boat, the wind stopped blowing. The disciples were overcome with amazement.

What did Jesus experience in this story? First, He experienced dispersing the crowds. A great miracle has just taken place. Jesus has fed thousands of people with five loaves and two fish. Everyone is excited and ready to go spread the news. At this moment Mark 6:45 says that Jesus immediately made His disciples get into the boat. The use of the word "immediately" reveals a sense of urgency. Mark doesn't explain the reason for the urgency, but John does say in his account of this story that the people were planning to proclaim Him as the King of the Jews, and use force, if necessary. Jesus rejected their agenda and with authority made it necessary for the disciples to leave. Jesus also sent the multitude away. The word used here for "sent" is a courteous dismissal.

Second, Jesus experienced praying alone. After sending everyone away, Jesus was left alone. Mark 6:47 says Jesus was "alone on the land". So at this point what did Jesus do? Verse 46 says "He departed to the mountain to pray." There are only a few times when Mark records Jesus going alone to pray. Certainly it was probably a common practice of Jesus, but in Mark's account these instances reveal times of significance in Jesus' ministry. The only other time so far that Mark has mentioned Jesus going to a deserted place to pray is back in chapter 1 verse 35. This was just before Jesus began His ministry in Galilee, certainly a very significant time in His ministry. So, this time must have also been a very crucial time in Jesus' ministry. It seems that the miracle of the loaves and fish brought His ministry in Galilee to a climax. And with His refusal to be proclaimed king, it was also the beginning of His rejection in Galilee, which led to the end of His ministry there.

Third, Jesus experienced being re-united with His disciples. Mark 6:47 mentions that while Jesus was alone on the land, the disciples were out in the middle of the sea. The separation between Jesus and His disciples is very clearly portrayed. And through a series of events Jesus was re-united with His disciples. The first step in this series is mentioned in Mark 6:48, which says that "[Jesus] saw them straining at rowing". While He was up on the mountain, He could see the disciples struggling. They had confronted a strong wind that was opposing their forward progress. While they were working desperately, Jesus had His eye on them. He was aware of their predicament. The second step towards this reunion came when "[Jesus] came to them, walking

on the sea" (Mark 6:48). By this time the night was almost over. The disciples had been fighting this windstorm practically all night, when Jesus came to them. What an amazing sight this must have been. The fourth watch of the night, as Mark describes this time of night, was the darkest hour, just before dawn. In this darkness Jesus walked on the stormy sea. Nothing could keep Him from His beloved disciples. The third step in Jesus' reunion with His disciples was when He "would have passed them by" (Mark 6:48). Jesus got close enough to the boat for the disciples to see Him, but He kept walking as if He was going to continue on. When the disciples saw Him, Mark 6:49 says "they supposed it was a ghost". The word translated "ghost" is "phantasma" in the Greek, from which we get the word "phantom". This word was rooted in Greek mythology. This idea portrayed in this word had crept its way into the lives of the Jews of Jesus' day, so that when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, this superstition aroused their fears. Mark 6:49 also says that the disciples "cried out". The idea portrayed here is that they screamed with intensity and/or repetition. Clearly they were overcome with fear. However, to deny the possibility that one of the disciples was simply hallucinating, Mark mentions that "they all saw Him" in verse 50.

The fourth step in the re-uniting process was when "immediately [Jesus] talked with them" (Mark 6:50). At some point in their screaming, the disciples recognized that this "phantom" was actually Jesus Himself. And at that moment, their screams turned to cries for help. Mark again uses the word "immediately". This cry for help was what Jesus had been waiting for. And as soon as it came, He talked with them. The New King James version says Jesus' first words were "Be of good cheer!" and a more literal translation would be "Be courageous!" Then Jesus identifies Himself. Our translation says, "It is I", but literally the Greek says, "I AM", perhaps referring back to the Old Testament name for God, "Yahweh", which means, "I AM". The last step in this re-uniting was when "[Jesus] went up into the boat to them" (Mark 6:51). The reconciliation was complete. Jesus was now in the boat with His disciples, and the disciples were relieved. As soon as Jesus stepped in the boat, "the wind ceased" (Mark 6:51). It quieted down immediately. At this point the attitude of the disciples changed dramatically. Mark 6:52 says their hearts had been "hardened". The last time that word was used was in Mark 3:5 in reference to the hearts of the Pharisees, who left the synagogue to plot Jesus' destruction. But now the disciples' frustration and hostility has turned to amazement. They were "greatly amazed...beyond measure and marveled" (Mark 6:51).

This is a remarkable story. But it is more than a story. It is an event in the life of Jesus that has been preserved for our benefit. It is a narrative in which Jesus is revealed as our example. We discover in this passage what a healthy and dangerous Christian looks like in the twists and turns of life. And Jesus is revealed as our example in this story, first of all, in that He prayed at the height of popularity. Jesus didn't try to use the miracle of loaves and fish as a stepping stone. This would have been a perfect opportunity for Jesus to ride the wave of popularity. He could have gone in to Bethsaida or Capernaum and accepted His rightful kingship. But He did not do this. Being accepted as the Messiah was not His first priority. If He had simply been looking for a chance to be proclaimed king of the Jews, this moment in Mark 6 would have been His long-awaited day. But Jesus lived by another principle. Turn with me to John 14:10. Jesus is speaking here to His disciples in the upper room after the Last Supper. (Read) Jesus says that He is in the Father, and the Father is in Him. This is an imagery calling to mind a branch being connected to the center of a vine. It's a very close connection. And Jesus says that His every word and action are from the Father. Maintaining this connection was always Jesus' first priority.

And so He reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone whose first priority is maintaining fellowship with God. I could probably write a book on all the good things that should NOT be a Christian's first priority. I have tried evangelism and missionary work. Certainly good things, but devastating if made the first priority in the Christian life. I also put a vision to change the world for Jesus at the top and found only failure. At other times in my life getting married and having a super-career were at the top of my list. But these have all failed me. Today there is only one thing that holds my top priority in life. There is a powerful passage of Scripture that I would like us to read. It is 1 John 1:3. The disciple John, who wrote the gospel of John, also wrote this book. And he wants to share what he has seen and heard of Jesus, as one of His own disciples. Notice what he wants his readers to experience. (Read) Fellowship. Fellowship with one another and fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. That's what it's all about. Jesus on the cross gave up His

fellowship with God, so that we might experience it. That's what we lost in the Garden of Eden. And that's what Jesus has given back to us. Fellowship with God.

Jesus reveals in our story that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who makes maintaining this fellowship with God their first priority.

Second, this story reveals Jesus as our example in that He drew out the hearts of the disciples. Our story begins with Jesus and His disciples being separated. The disciples were "in the middle of the sea" and Jesus was "alone on the land". When Jesus came to the disciples, He acted like He was going to pass them by. Why did He send them out on their own into this windstorm? Why did He act like He wasn't going to stop? He was creating a desire in their hearts for Him. Mark says their hearts had been hardened. They were frustrated with Him and possibly questioning whether they should even be following Him. But through troubling circumstances and by giving them a taste of what it would be like without Him, Jesus created an overwhelming desire in the hearts of the disciples to be with Him.

And so Jesus reveals that a healthy and dangerous Christian is someone who creates a desire in people's hearts for Jesus. They themselves pray that their hearts will be drawn out to Jesus. Whatever circumstances they find themselves in, they pray that in the end, they would experience Him in a more real way than before. And in relating to other people who have not yet given their lives to Jesus, they seek to fill them with a craving for Jesus. They don't try to rescue people from every hardship, because they know it might be the very thing that will draw them to Jesus. They try to let people see how much they need a Savior. They portray the reality of our sinful depravity and our sinful world, because they realize that it is only in the bleakness of a dark night that we can see glory of the bright and morning Star. Jesus reveals that a healthy Christian is not someone who tries to save people from difficulty. It's someone who stands by their side in the midst of the storm, ready to point them to a crucified and risen Savior.

The disciples' experience was like an emotional rollercoaster. As we have been reading through the book of Mark, they keep going back and forth between fear of circumstances and amazement at Jesus' power. They're terrified of the storm, and then amazed by Jesus' power over it. They're scared to death of the raging demon-possessed man, and then amazed by Jesus' authority over the thousands of demons. It seemed that Jesus' miracle of the loaves and fish brought their faith to a peak, but His sending everyone away almost made them lose their faith. My Christian experience used to be defined by feeling really close to God one moment, with His power and presence revealed in a remarkable way. But then these times would be followed by moments when I wondered if I even was a Christian.

I would like to close by reading a verse from Matthew's account of this story in Matthew 14:33. This is the final verse in describing the disciples' reaction to the whole experience. (Read) This is the first record of such a response. Never before had they "worshiped" Jesus. Never before had they declared Him to be the "Son of God". A couple chapters later Peter will make the famous declaration, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But here following a windstorm and feeling separated from God, they experienced a stronger faith. They had a better understanding of who Jesus is than ever before. They emerged from this horribly low and depressing experience with their faith being brought to a whole, new level.

There will always be ups and downs in the Christian life. That is part of living in a sinful world and having a sinful DNA. But if we ride the storms of life, we will emerge with a new song to sing. We will gain a richer experience with God. Our feet will be planted on higher ground. That is really what it's all about, isn't it? I'm pressing on the upward way, and by God's grace, gaining new heights every day. Please sing with me our closing song, "Higher Ground".