

## Lord, Help My Unbelief!

Mark 6:45-56

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

July 26, 2015 – Ninth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Jesus, in today's Gospel, made His disciples get into a boat and row over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He stayed behind to pray. While He was praying He looked out over the sea and saw that His disciples were struggling. He stood watching their progress until very early in the morning, just before dawn – the fourth watch of the night, when they were eight hours into a three hour journey – for a storm had overtaken them, and the wind and waves had been rising up against them. It was only *then* that Jesus began walking toward them on the water – and when they saw Him, they thought they were seeing a ghost. Yet even though that's one of the most well-known details of this story, St. Mark reports something even more puzzling for you to consider this morning – something you may not have noticed at all.

Mark is the only writer who states that the disciples were utterly astounded, flabbergasted, even bowled over, because of something else that happened earlier – something which made this walking-on-the-water incident necessary. It was that Jesus had forced them to get into this boat and row toward the other side, even though He most certainly must have known what was going to happen to them out there in the middle of the night on the often-violent waters of the Sea of Galilee. And if you think about it, doesn't Jesus sometimes seem to be doing the same thing to you? After all, He knows exactly what's going to happen to you in the dark circumstances of your life, yet He seldom does anything to stop it. Hence the Apostles of Jesus, recognizing this, may even have felt as though *He had set them up* – and they were having trouble believing that their dear Lord would ever do such a thing.

But consider the facts. Jesus *had* stood by all alone on the land and watched them in their dreadful struggle. He *had* to have seen that they were making headway *only* through much pain and travail. He *must have known* they were suffering from torturous distress. He *had to be aware* of the fact that they were aching and exhausted as they threw their backs time and again against the oars – as they were pounded by wave after wave after wave – literally fighting for their lives. And yet, though Jesus could clearly see their predicament, He didn't rush to their aid. Instead, He stood and watched, very much like one other occasion when He

waited until after Lazarus had died before going to the aid of His sick friend. And so here, Jesus came, walking on the water. But Mark informs us that Jesus “intended to pass them by!” Or, stated another way, our Lord gave them no visible sign that He was going to intervene or come to their aid! Remember, this is the same Man who often stayed up all hours of the night and frequently gave as much time as was necessary to care for the needs of just about anyone who approached Him. But here He intended to pass His dear disciples by, as if they were not even as important to Him as total strangers! Why shouldn't they receive the same tenderness, affection and intervention others had received – and richly – from their dear Friend and Lord?

When Jesus drew near to them, the disciples were terrified and cried out – thinking they had seen a ghost. No doubt they probably thought they were doomed and about to be judged – and that death would soon claim them. They believed they were in the presence of something against which they could not defend themselves. What part of your life, or what part of your history do you hear echoing in this Gospel? What do you remember, or what have you experienced, that might help you understand exactly why these disciples were so utterly astonished – not by the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, or His calming of the storm, but by the things He allowed them to experience – and by the way He stood by and permitted them to suffer? Where are you – and where do you find yourself – in this Gospel?

You've asked these questions of God before. Don't try to deny it. Don't pretend it isn't so. You've asked: “Why have You let this happen to me and to my family, Lord?” “Why Lord, have You stood by, watched, and not intervened to save me?” “Why, Father, why do You seem to be passing *me* by at times?” “Why Lord, why have You allowed me to feel, not warmth and comfort from Your hand, but rather, the fear of judgment?” Well, in this Gospel, Mark has not concerned himself with telling us *why* Jesus does the things He does – or *why* He allows the things He allows in the lives of His dear Christians. Of course, we know from His Word that our God is gracious and merciful. We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose – that not even one sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge – and that we are of more value than many

sparrows. But Mark reminds us of none of these things in today's Gospel – only that Jesus sometimes seems to place people in bad situations – the boat – while He watches them suffer for a time before intervening – and that the help Jesus gives might not always seem like help – since here Mark tells us that Jesus intended to pass them by – until He *finally* gave in and intervened when they cried out in fear and terror. Is it any wonder that the disciples were utterly astounded when they finally survived this close encounter with death?

But I want to remind you of one thing here – that is, that Mark hasn't concerned himself with telling us *why* Jesus does these things. Instead, Mark wants us to know and understand why the disciples were so flabbergasted, bowled-over, and utterly astonished. And that, dear friends, is the key to understanding today's Gospel. According to this text, the disciples were utterly astonished because their hearts were hardened, and because *they didn't understand about the loaves*. With these Words, Mark refers us back to the Sacrament-like miracle of the Feeding of 5,000 from last week's Gospel. The disciples were utterly astonished because they didn't understand about the loaves – or more precisely, the significance of that miraculous meal for them.

When Mark recounted the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 last week, I'd like to suggest that perhaps what he wanted was to bring the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm to our remembrance. He wanted you, when reading it, to think of Sunday morning worship as your own personal participation in this Psalm. What I mean by that is that *here*, in this place, Jesus is teaching *you* many things. *Here*, in this place, He's nourishing *you* with a miraculous meal. *Here*, in this place, He's making *you* lie down in green pastures, leading *you* beside the still waters, and restoring *your* soul. Therefore, Mark wants you to add something new to the way you think about your Sunday morning worship – and to be sure, about every day of your life. The disciples, you see, were utterly astonished because they didn't understand about the loaves, and Mark doesn't want you to have the same problem. Mark wants you to understand about the loaves so that you will *not* be utterly astonished by what you experience – so that when you've grasped the great promise of forgiveness and life Jesus provides you in the Holy Communion, nothing else will really matter.

If Jesus, at times, appears to have forced you into some frightening situation, you need to know that it will do you no good to ask why. It will help, however, if you understand the loaves – that is, if you believe God so greatly cares for you through His Holy Communion that you will never lose confidence in His goodness or de-

sire to provide you with everything you need to sustain you, body and soul, unto eternal life. When it seems Jesus is watching you from afar, Mark doesn't want you resenting the fact that Jesus can see your dilemma, and is yet apparently not sending you aid. Mark wants you to understand the loaves, and then remember that Jesus knows *precisely* what He is doing. He will not fail to provide for you, even when it seems there's no way possible for Him to do it – and even when He doesn't appear interested in helping.

In those dark moments when you fear that our Lord Jesus is going to pass you by, you need to understand the loaves that you've received here in Holy Communion. Because of this Meal – and because Jesus teaches you many things even as He did the crowds who followed after Him – you already dwell in the house of the Lord – safe and secure forever. You need to understand that on these loaves you dine safely, even in the presence of your enemies. This Meal is what makes you secure and keeps you out of harm's way – even if you think you're seeing a ghost or some other horribly terrifying thing. When you feel frightened of your Lord – just as the disciples were frightened by Him – remember, and understand the loaves. Believe that every week at this Altar you receive the very thing Jesus says you receive – the forgiveness of sins. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is *nothing* to fear.

Dear Christian, don't ask me to tell you why you or your loved ones experience the things you experience in life. To be sure, there was a time in the past when I might have attempted to offer an answer, but those days are gone. Now I find that the more I think I know, the less I actually seem to know, and the things I don't know seem much more numerous the more I learn by sitting at the feet of Jesus. Yet while I don't know the answer as to *why* God does many of the things He does, there *is* still one thing I can say with utter and complete confidence, and that is that you need understand the loaves and the blessing God brings to you through them. Dear saints of God, it's the loaves – the Supper, the Meal, the Holy Communion, the Medicine of Immortality – and the eternal Word of God attached to it – which are key to your survival, the hope of eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. This is what will sustain *you* unto life everlasting. Cling to it, and fear not, for our Lord will not pass you by. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.