

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 29, 2012
Pentecost 9
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Kings 2:1-15
Psalm 114
Ephesians 4:1-7
Mark 6:45-52

Our Gospel text this morning begins with the words, "immediately after this." As we saw last week, the "this" to which Mark refers is the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 by Jesus after the disciples have returned from their ministry tour.

To place this morning's lesson in context, let me briefly summarize Mark's Gospel to this point:

- Jesus arrives on the scene early on and says, "repent, for the Kingdom of God has drawn near."
- Beginning with Peter, Andrew, James, and John, Jesus calls people to change the course of their lives and to follow him.
- Jesus begins a very public ministry, where he claims that God's reign has come into the present, and he heals people of their physical, psychological, and spiritual brokenness as signs that he and his message are for real.
- He then takes 12 men up on a mountain, where he calls them to a special ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. He pairs them up and sends them out as his ambassadors, as extensions of the work he is doing.
- They return, filled with wonder and excitement at what occurs. People respond, people are healed, lives are changed.
- As large crowds begin to gather, Jesus commands the disciples to do the impossible (to feed a large crowd of more than 5,000 people). The disciples cannot do it -- so he does.
- Immediately after this, Jesus sends the people home and puts the disciples into a boat with instructions to cross over the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida.

Our text this morning begins with the disciples on that boat, struggling against the winds and waves at 3:00 o'clock in the morning.

Jesus sees that the disciples are struggling, and he goes to help them, walking on the water.

There are numerous things about this story that puzzle me, one of which is Mark's comment here that as Jesus is walking on the water to help them, he starts to "go past" the disciples (v. 48).

Wait a minute. Hold the phone. If you are going out to help these men, why would you (in the words of Dionne Warwick) "walk on by?" Mark says that Jesus started to "go past them," or "to pass by them." Why would Mark say this?

Interestingly, this phrase (or a similar phrase) "to pass by" is used several times in the Old Testament. One of the most important comes in Exodus 33. God has been working with Moses, calling on him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. But Moses is reluctant, and is not sure he is up to the task. He asks God, "who are you going to send with me to help me do this?"

And God answers, "I personally will go with you, Moses."

And Moses answers, "if you don't go with us personally, then don't even let us take the first step of the journey."

God assures Moses of his presence, and then Moses asks this of God. Moses says: "Show me your glory" (33:18).

Here is what God says to Moses:

I will make my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, 'the LORD,' to you...But you may not look directly at my face, for no one can see me and live...Stand here on this rock beside me. As my glorious presence passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by (33:19-23).

There are other occurrences of this phrase in the Old Testament, and they almost always have to do with some sort of *epiphany*, some powerful manifestation of God's presence.

So when Mark says here that as Jesus is on his way to help the struggling disciples, he starts to "pass by them," is it Mark's way of saying that the invisible God, the God whom they cannot look upon and live, is actually now present among them in the flesh? For Mark, the Kingdom of God is not the only thing that has drawn near. God *himself* has come near. His name is Jesus, and Jesus is God Almighty with a face on.

At any rate, the disciples see Jesus walking by, and they are terrified. They think they've seen a ghost (the Greek word is *phantom*).

Here's another thing that puzzles me about this story. After everything that these guys have seen Jesus do -- some of which they have now also done themselves -- *why are they so shocked and terrified to see Jesus walking on water?*

They have witnessed a lot, including a feeding of more than 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish. And yet now a little walking on water has them shaking in their shorts. Why?

And remember, this is the *second* time Jesus has performed a miracle with them on the sea. Remember when they are all in the boat with Jesus asleep, and the violent storm comes, and they wake Jesus up? Their reaction in both cases is the same -- *fear*.

I see this, and I think to myself, "this just doesn't add up. Why are the disciples so afraid?"

But I think this is precisely Mark's point. Things should be "adding up" for these disciples, but they aren't.

Think of it. Jesus has called these twelve men (on a mountain top) as the foundation of a new Israel. He leads them and their progeny out into the wilderness. He sits them down in green pastures. He divides them into groups of 50/100, just as Moses divided the children of Israel into camps in the wilderness. He feeds 5,000 people with bread as the sign that he is the true bread come down from heaven, the Great Shepherd who truly cares for his sheep.

These disciples have witnessed the miracle feeding. They've witnessed Jesus walking on water. They've seen him heal people of all kinds of disease. Three of them have even seen him raise a dead girl up to life (Jairus' daughter).

They've *seen* numerous miraculous events. **But they have missed the significance of those events.** The real meaning of those events eludes them.

These disciples have previously asked, "Who is this?"

By now, they should have their answer...*but they don't.*

At this point we may wonder, "where's the Good News in all of this?"

Mark's take on the issue seems to be somewhat negative, somewhat critical of these followers of Jesus. Mark's conclusion seems to be: "These guys just don't get it. They don't get it, and they don't get Jesus."

But Mark writes this not for them, but for *us*! It's as if he writes this so that he can say, "yes, the disciples don't get it here, but all of you DO!" When someone asks, "who is Jesus?" you all know the answer. You've seen him do wondrous things in your lives, and you have gone beyond *seeing* and you have *perceived* (with eyes of faith) the *significance* of those events. Your story does not have to be *their* story.

As we come to the table this morning, this text also reminds me that life is about learning and growing. We are each given lessons to learn. And the old adage may be true that states that a given lesson will be repeated as often as necessary until it is learned.

So come with faith this morning. Receive the grace Christ offers you. Opening your hearts and your hands at this table is your act of faith, it is your way

of saying that you remain open to *who Jesus is and what Jesus wants to do in your life*. And the bread and wine you receive by faith is Jesus' promise to you that he'll keep showing you your lessons, no matter how many times it may take you to learn them.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.