

Back to Sunday School sermon series  
Jesus Walks on Water – Mark 6:45-52  
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We're continuing our "Back to Sunday School" sermon series today, looking at some of the iconic Bible stories we heard as kids and learning from them what they speak to our lives as adults. As kids, most challenges we faced were solved with a simple kiss to make our boo-boo feel better or a sticker to calm us after a dentist's visit. But what life throws at us today doesn't have any easy answers and can't be solved with stickers. Do these stories still have something to say?

Today's story is a bit of an enigma. I guess you could count it as one of Jesus' miracles, but when you think about it, nothing really gets accomplished. No one gets fed, no one gets healed, nobody is raised from the dead. This feels more like a magic trick to impress his friends than anything of substance. As a kid, I was always fascinated by this story. "Jesus can walk on water?!? Cool!" But as an adult, I don't really know what this story is trying to prove, other than that Jesus is more than your average magician.

Proof. That's an interesting word to use in conjunction with this story. Was Jesus trying to prove something? I faced a similar situation back in the summer of 2009 when I was interviewing for the job of Senior Pastor at Crestwood Christian Church. I was at a gathering of the Administrative Board members and their family at the luxurious home of a church member. We were in the back yard enjoying dinner when Harry Dodson, a gentle soul with a sly sense of humor, walked up to me and said, "So, you're the candidate, huh?" "Yes sir, I am." "Hmm. Interesting." He pointed at the in-ground swimming pool and said, "Do you like that pool?" "Yes sir, I like it very much." Harry said, "Walk across it and you've got my vote." I smiled and said, "Mr. Dodson, my mom told me I couldn't get into the water until an hour after I'd eaten." He said, "That's good enough. You've got my vote."

When read through the eyes of a child, this story about Jesus doesn't seem to have anything to say to us beyond its spectacle. There are more powerful stories of Jesus dealing with water in the gospels – Jesus calms a raging storm, he turns water into wine. But if you go below the surface, this story is an important part of a building narrative in Mark's gospel about who Jesus is, what he came to do, and how we should view him through our lens of faith.

The fact that Mark is telling us this version of the story is significant. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is a man of action, constantly on the go, teaching and healing and performing miracles. Right before our passage today, Jesus has turned five loaves of bread and a couple fish into a feast for over 5,000 people. Mark also is one of the harshest gospels when it comes to the disciples. Despite repeated efforts on Jesus' part, they just don't get him, much to his frustration.

At the start of our story today, Jesus needs some alone time, so he puts the disciples in their boat and casts them out into the Sea of Galilee, while he takes some much-needed R and R to go up a mountain and pray. We're told that when evening came, the disciples were out on the sea and Jesus was alone on the land.

There's a significance to this geography we probably missed as kids. Back in those days, the sea was more than just water. It was a great unknown. Because the people didn't have submarines and scuba gear, they thought that the water was where evil resided. It was the home of Leviathan, the great sea monster. While Jesus is grounded on the shore, his disciples are struggling to row their boat. Mark says they were "straining at the oars against an adverse wind."

That's a pretty good description of life sometimes, isn't it? You ever feel like you are straining at the oars of life, trying to make progress, trying to climb up the next rung of the ladder or get one foothold closer to climbing out of that hole? And the whole time, the wind is against you, holding you back, pushing you down, keeping you from any feeling of satisfaction or accomplishment. Just when you get a stretch of good health or financial stability or job security – WOOSH! The wind blows in and pushes you back. So, what do we do in this situation? We do what the disciples did. We're not going to give up. So, we keep rowing. What else can we do?

Last year, Amy and I were given a pair of blow-up kayaks, and we were excited to put them to use. We found a creek out in Paris, inflated our kayaks, and took to the water. We got about a mile away from our put-in point when I realized that the water level around me was rising. Well, actually what was happening was my kayak was slowly starting to deflate and I was sinking down into the creek. I very calmly pointed this out to Amy, remarked in a soft voice that we might want to consider turning around, and then began rowing like I was competing in the Olympics to get back to our cars. It felt like the faster I rowed, the more I sank.

But that's what we do, right? If we feel like we're sinking, if we feel like the wind is against us, we just row harder. We work more, worry more, try to exert more control, try to change our circumstances through brute force or sheer willpower. If I can just row harder, be better, not admit I need help, I can make it to the other side.

This was nothing new for the disciples. They were fishermen, they'd been in storms before, they knew what it was like to face the wind. Their muscles were aching and their hands calloused from rowing, but that's all they knew how to do. I belong to a gym that includes rowing in every single class. I hate it. I'd never survive as a fisherman. Rowing is hard work, and if the wind is against you, you're not going to make much progress.

Mark tells us that Jesus sees this, he sees his friends struggling, so he goes out to them, walking on the sea. Did you catch that one peculiar line? "He intended to pass them by." That's weird, right? Why would he walk all the way out there only to pass them by and not help? In his essay on this passage, German theologian Tobias Unk offers several theories to try and explain away this behavior, but nothing Dr. Unk says makes sense of this. I think this is another opportunity to go below the surface and soak in the symbolism of this moment.

There's a story in the Hebrew scriptures where Moses asks God if he can glimpse God's glory, so God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock and then passes by so Moses can see him. In another story, the prophet Elijah is feeling alone and abandoned, and we're told that God passes him by so that he can know God has not forgotten him. The original Jewish hearers of these stories would have caught the meaning: when Jesus passes by the disciples, he is letting them know they are not alone.

The good news is they see him, but the bad news is they think it's a ghost. What other explanation could there be for a figure hovering over a wind-driven sea at 3 a.m. in the morning? They certainly never thought for a moment it could be Jesus. Despite the mounting evidence that he's more than just a rabbi, more than just a miracle worker, more than just a sleight-of-hand artist – did you see what he did with the loaves of bread? What does that mean? – the disciples never think someone who could do this. There's only one person who can walk on water.

And who is that? Remember that the sea was thought to be where evil lives. Therefore, only God could control the waters, as God did in Genesis when God's spirit swept over the waters and brought order to chaos. Calming storms, defeating evil, was the kind of thing only God could do. Job 9 says that it's God alone who stretched out the heavens and trampled on the

sea. And yet, here is Jesus, seemingly just a man, walking on the water, getting into the boat with them, saying to them, “It is I,” a statement which overflows with divine symbolism and identity. And what happens? The wind ceased.

If we read this story through the eyes of a child, we have a Jesus who walks on water and quiets the wind. But if we read it with adult eyes, hear it with new ears, feel it with bodies that have been buffeted by the wind and hands that are calloused from rowing, there’s more here for us. There’s the story of a savior who sees us struggling, who senses our challenges, who empathizes with our desires to make it to the other side. He saw his disciples’ discouragement, a word that literally means “without courage.” They were losing heart, their fear was getting the best of them. So, what does he say to them when he steps into the boat? “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.”

It’s significant to note what Jesus doesn’t do in this story. He doesn’t miraculously transport their boat to the other side of the lake. I’m sure if he could walk on water, he could do that. No, Mark tells us, “Then he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased.” Now, there’s two ways to read this. One way is that Jesus makes all the bad stuff go away. That’s a child-like interpretation of this story, but we adults know better, don’t we? Having faith doesn’t make us immune to the capriciousness of life. The other way of reading this is that when Jesus gets into the boat with them, the winds that seemed so strong before lost their power and the rowing became easier.

Maybe we should try that strategy. After all, we’ve been rowing and rowing and rowing and we haven’t made much progress. So maybe, instead of rowing harder, we should invite Jesus into the boat with us, hear his invitation not to be afraid, and hand him an oar. Jesus doesn’t offer us the absence of trouble; instead, he offers us his presence in the midst of our troubles. And if life has taught us anything, it’s that when we add Jesus to the mix, things change. People get fed. Evil gets defeated. The wind decreases and our courage increases. Take heart. Do not be afraid.

Are you ready to invite Jesus into your boat? Are you ready to stop rowing so hard against the wind and trust that Jesus offers a better way, a way of peace in the midst of your struggles? It’s really up to us. We can keep rowing. That’s what good, strong people do, right? We’re not weak, we don’t need help, we can make it to the other side. Maybe. But the winds aren’t going to go away. And Jesus is passing by. Will we keep our heads down, our eyes locked, or arms pumping? Or is it time to turn aside, to admit we need help, to look to the one who controls the wind and the waves, who promises us courage in the face of our storms? “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”