

“Not Again? Another Boat Trip to the Other Side!”

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Date: September 9, 2018

Scripture:

Scripture: Mark 6:45-56

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. 49 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; 50 for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." 51 Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. 53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Sermon:

As I mentioned two Sunday's ago, Mark's Gospel includes at least four and maybe up to six boat crossings of the Sea of Galilee. (A body of fresh inland water that I mentioned is pretty small even when compared to most lakes.)

In only two of these boat rides does Mark go into much detail, and these two voyages are both introduced as trips to the "other side."

But the two stories also share some other elements in common. Both trips included "raging" storms that are silenced by Jesus. Both include potential shipwrecks and frightened disciples who struggle mightily against both wind and waves. In both cases the disciples are left amazed, fearful and confused. And both journeys seem to end in failure to achieve Jesus' purpose.

And since Mark's gospel is far shorter than the other gospels, (Luke and John have only one crossing and Matthew has two but they shorter versions) we must then consider Mark's redundancy as significant.

For Mark the geography and elements of the story are symbolic, powerful evocations of common stories from Hebrew scriptures. But Mark's gospel is more than the mere casting of old stories into a new light but a clear articulation of a radical new direction in God's mission to save the world.

Now this morning's boat trip is the one most of us are familiar with. Which makes total sense since this is the far more dramatic one where Jesus comes across the lake, walking on the water!

But there are some other curious differences. For instance, in chapter four Jesus, perhaps in his most perky voice, states cheerfully and simply, "*(Come on guys!) Let's go across to the other side.*"

But now on their second attempt the text says that, *...he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida...*

Okay, that too makes sense considering how the first trip went. Wind, waves, and coming ashore next to a creepy cemetery. But at least on that trip the disciples started with Jesus in the boat with them to protect them!

Now Jesus is sending them on ahead, alone. And the text goes to extraordinary lengths to emphasize the spatial distances between them:
1) *he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead...*
2) *after saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain...*
3) and in verse 47, "*When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land...*"

Add to this the curious difference that in the first trip Jesus is asleep in the boat, while on this journey Jesus allowed them to struggle all night while he watched them from the shore. From dusk until 3 am the disciples struggled while Jesus watched them from afar. And according to the text, he wasn't necessarily coming to their aid but planned to pass on by?

Whether he was intending to ignore their plight is not really relevant since he did (just as Yahweh always did in Hebrew scripture) harken unto the voice of their cry and came to their aid! Jesus even appropriates that unspeakable name of God, or "I am," when he identified himself to his frightened followers.

But Mark's narration harshly reprimanded the disciples for their lack of faith:

And they were utterly astounded, 52 for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

The disciples' inability to understand "the loaves" likely refers to what immediately preceded our passage, which was the miraculous feeding of a large crowd of people.

Now the meaning of that story is often misunderstood as if the point was that loaves and fishes (like manna) came falling miraculously down from heaven. Mark's point however, is a story of the miracle of radical shared economics. (but which will have to be another sermon for another day).

But if you recall what I said last week, what happens on the Jewish side of the lake must, for Mark, happen on the gentile side as well. Thus the reason for such literary efforts to get to the "other side!" For Mark the real miracle is that the community of radical sharing expands to all peoples.

But an ominous cloud still hangs, for as similar to Pharaoh's opposition to Moses and similar to those who are now opposing Jesus, the disciples' own resistance ratchets up.

This is truly a foreboding turn of events since, "hardening of the heart" represents, in this story, the first stage of alienation or separation.

In this first stage, our heart becomes hardened to the plight of the "other" then we find it easier to become both blind and deaf to their pleas. And as I will try to point out next week, this progression can take on institutional and particularly religious forms when I finish Mark's narrative section in chapters 7 and 8.

However, the storm has blown them of course and they once again end up in Gennesaret, the same place where they had landed and encountered that lunatic on their first voyage. Now if you recall, it was that guy who likely lead to them to aborting their initial incursion into what I described as enemy territory.

Exorcizing a Legion of demons and then seeing a whole "division" of pigs charging down a hill to drown in the lake quickly made Jesus "persona non grata" in that neighborhood, and he was implored, subsequently, to get outta' town!

And now this second attempt to reach the other side too seems to have failed since they do not disembark at their scheduled destination of Bethsaida.

But we shall see?

Mark is crafting a story that makes full use of the symbolic universe of his people and of his times. We too are certainly used to, and able to recognize and understand certain symbolic meaning in modern stories.

Indeed, “the storms of life” are many and most of them can spring up as if as out of nowhere and seem out of our control. But we also know that sometimes we are the ones who actually create unnecessary barriers that can slow our progress and at times cause us to work a lot harder than we have to.

Jesus allowed his disciples to struggle all night long, but they managed to only make minimal progress. The external winds and waves of culture and society can certainly slow us down from seeking relationships with those who are deemed as “others” or as “them!”

But similarly, if internally our hearts are not into it and if Jesus ain’t in the boat or anywhere else close by, well, then maybe we will start giving into our own excuses?

After all what had transpired in Mark’s story in-between the two trips, on the Jewish side of the lake was pretty amazing. Not only were multitudes fed and lots of folks healed and stodgy religious phony baloneys bested,

but even they, those very disciples had been sent out, two by two and they too had performed healings and other miracles.

And now, “here we go again!”
Jesus is still itching to get over to the “other side.”

Why? “How come, when were just doing so well right here, you wanna go and mess it all up.
What do you think were some of their likely excuses?
“We won’t be accepted, they don’t like us and even probably hate us.
They speak a different language, eat different foods, sing different music and either laugh too loud or not at all at some of our jokes.
Some of them smell bad and have ugly teeth.”

Now I believe the point of these harrowing sea stories was not to merely prove that Jesus has superiority over natural world. They are rather intended to dramatize the difficulties facing the Jesus community (both then and now) as it tries to overcome the myriad of institutionalized forms of social division.

For Mark, the struggle going across the lake is in only one direction and that is when Jesus and the disciples are trying to integrate. For him these obstacles are ancient and mythic forces of the cosmos that have always sought to thwart God's dream of universality. It is also, then, little wonder that the disciples are so reluctant!

And it is not because they are dimwitted or intellectually slow. No, in fact, they know exactly what Jesus was trying to do. The problem for them is, they're just not quite on board yet with this radical multicultural ship of fools!

After all, if you get too carried away you could overload this old boat and send us all to the bottom of the lake! But Mark is also reminding us that this is not only God's boat, but it is God's lake as well!

Add now to those facts that Jesus is here, he has been sent to come to rescue of what was God's original project. These cross cultural, cross racial and across the economic divide journeys are essential for all who truly desire to follow Jesus. And they are also often difficult and fraught with dangers.

But I do take comfort in Mark's story because it is both miraculously powerful as well as completely realistic. The journey is sometimes really difficult and it will appear many times as if we are not making any progress against the winds and waves of, not only cultural indifference, but against those actual intentional systemic forces that seek to divide and to keep folks separated by our perceived differences.

Sometimes we will even fail and make mistakes in our well-meaning attempts to bridge those divides. We may lose our way or get knocked off course by immense social and political pressure and even end up in some places where we had not intended or anticipated.

And yet we must push on, with Jesus as our guide,
and struggle through those dark nights until once again
as dawn breaks we are again safe on shore.
It may be familiar and it may be new to us.
But we are safe and with Jesus in the lead.

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