

The Binding Power of Fear

Mark 6:45-56

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Many people are paralyzed by fear. Fear is neither a good emotion or a bad emotion in and of itself. There are some things (like God, your parents, a policeman) that should inspire a little fear. However, there are other fears that keep us from moving forward. They keep us from

- Making decisions (what if it is the wrong one?)
- Sharing our faith (What if I say the wrong thing?)
- Trying new things (what if they are bust or I am not any good)
- Committing to a relationship fully (what if it doesn't last?)

To look at the problem of fear, we are going to turn to Mark 6 and the story of Jesus walking on the water. The story itself is powerful, and the lessons from the story I believe can be very helpful as we navigate through life.

Let's remember the context of this passage. Jesus had just finished the miraculous feeding of the 5000. After the people had all eaten and had their fill, we read.

Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida, while he sent the people home. ⁴⁶ After telling everyone good-bye, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

There was this great miracle, and I am sure the disciples and perhaps even Jesus was filled with adrenaline. The people were ready to declare Jesus King. Perhaps this is why Mark says, "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat." Mark uses the word "immediately" often and sometimes it is just to denote the passage of time. I think this time it might carry that sense of urgency. Jesus may have been concerned that the disciples would be swept up into the frenzy. Jesus did not come to be that kind of a King. I wonder if Jesus went to pray because He needed to keep His mind on the mission. Since Jesus was tempted in every way we are, all the people wanting to make Him King could become intoxicating if you weren't careful. He resisted worldly methods of gaining power by spending more time with the Lord.

It is important to remember that we are in danger of drifting from the Lord not just when times are tough . . . we can also drift in times of great jubilation or victory. We can start trusting our methods rather than His. God's timing is perfect, ours is not. The story continues,

⁴⁷ Late that night, the disciples were in their boat in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves.

These men, several of whom were skilled fisherman, were not getting anywhere! The storm was raging, and the wind was keeping them right where they were. It was now the 4th watch of

the night (3:00-6:00 am.) It is possible that they had been out on that sea for many hours. I am sure they were tired . . . and maybe felt abandoned by the Lord. The last time they were in a storm, He was with them and calmed the water. This leads us to our first observation:

Life is Unpredictable

Things can be going well in life, and circumstances can change in an instant. There could be a medical issue, a financial disruption, a legal problem, the loss of a job, or even a death. In these unpredictable times. We are easily thrown off balance because we were unable to anticipate the change. As the saying goes, we were “swept off our feet.” In such times we may feel completely overwhelmed or we can choose to rest in the peace and providence of God.

We are supposed to rest in the Lord, but let’s face it, that is not as easy as it sounds. Our instinct is to react. We move into crisis mode, and often we just start doing things because we feel a need to “do something.” We can panic and think that God has somehow deserted us. Maybe the disciples were feeling a little like this.

Here is something we need to remember: **We may not see Him . . . but He ALWAYS sees us and knows what is going on in our lives.** He has promised those who are His: “I will NEVER leave you or forsake you.” He also said, “I am with you always.” You may feel He has turned away but does not mean that He has. And this brings out the second observation.

Unpredictable Times Bring Out Our Deepest Fears

And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, 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.”

We are not afraid of things that are familiar to us. We know we can handle those things. We have experience. But when the experience is new, and it feels like things are out of control we don’t know exactly what we should do and fear wells up inside of us. That fear can unnerve us and often paralyze us. It affects everything we see and hear.

Have you ever been afraid on a city street that is unfamiliar to you? You look at every person as a threat. Your heart may beat faster if someone seems to be following you. Everyone seems to be looking at you. You feel vulnerable. You desperately want to find a place of safety.

This would have explained why, when the disciples see Jesus walking toward them, they think they are seeing a ghost! In their defense, it may have seemed illogical to think that the Lord was walking out to them in a fierce storm on top of the water. Wouldn’t that have been our response?

I feel we need to address the words, “He meant to pass them by.” Does this mean Jesus was going to walk right past the boat of his struggling disciples with a wave and a “I’ll catch you on the other side?” There are lots of suggestions as to what these words mean (and you can read most of them in the notes of a good Study Bible). I’m going to give you the one that makes the most sense to me. Simply put, this was written from the perspective of a person in the boat. From their perspective, it looked like Jesus was just going to walk on by. One helpful rule of Biblical interpretation is this: “If the plain sense, makes sense, seek no other sense.”

Jesus calmed their fears. This is where the crisis ends in the book of Mark. However, in the book of Matthew we are told the story of Peter walking on the water. It is the only gospel writer that tells the story. We may ask, “Why didn’t Mark tell about Peter walking on the water?” I believe the simple answer to this question is that most people believe Mark’s primary source for his gospel was the Apostle Peter. It seems reasonable to me that Peter would leave out his experience from his comments to Mark because Peter may have thought, the story is not about me, it is about Jesus!

I think it is an important part of this story. So, turn with me to Matthew 14 where we pick up the story,

²⁷ But Jesus spoke to them at once. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Take courage. I am here!”

²⁸ Then Peter called to him, “Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water.”

²⁹ “Yes, come,” Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. “Save me, Lord!” he shouted.

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have so little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?”

³² When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. ³³ Then the disciples worshiped him. “You really are the Son of God!” they exclaimed.

This is a remarkable account. What, we might ask, led Peter to tell the Lord to tell him to walk to him on the water? THE CHOSEN created a powerful story for this event. However, the truth is that we don’t know why Peter made the request. What we do know is that when Jesus made the request, Peter got out of the boat and for a while also walked on the water.

As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus he was doing well. Suddenly, he became aware of the waves, the storm, and the seemingly insane thing he was doing. And at that moment, he dropped into the storm-tossed water. Some people put the application of this story on Peter: “Peter took his eyes off Jesus and He went into the water . . . don’t be like Peter!” But that is not the right message from the passage: the real message is not Peter’s weak faith but the Lord’s unending protection. Peter dropped into the water, but the Lord’s hand was immediately there to pull him to the safety of the boat. When we fall into the water the same is true for us.

One of my favorite books is a book written by John Ortberg, titled, IF YOU WANT TO WALK ON WATER, YOU'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF THE BOAT. In this book Ortberg pointed out something so obvious that I had missed it most of my life: Peter Walked on Water! None of the other disciples can say that! Peter was the only one willing to get out of the boat at the summons of Jesus! That doesn't make his faith weak . . . it makes it extraordinary!

Our Fears Can Bind Us

Fear can paralyze us and I think that explains what comes next in the text

⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were totally amazed, ⁵² for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in.

We understand how the disciples might still have been processing the loaves and the fish but I believe the reason their hearts were too hard was not because of an unwillingness to believe (like in so many cases with people). Their hearts were hardened (or perhaps petrified) by fear. Their fear kept them from thinking rationally about all that was happening.

John Ortberg has some helpful words here,

“Fear has created more practicing heretics than bad theology ever has, for it makes us live as though we serve a limited, finite, partially present, semi-competent God.” (131)

In any arena where you are concerned about failure, the single most destructive thing you can do is nothing, it leads us to think we are helpless, hopeless, and beyond change. These in turn lead to destructive emotions - loss of energy and motivation, damages self-esteem, feeling overwhelmed. The end result is self-defeating behaviors- procrastination, avoidance, and escapism. These behaviors then reinforce negative thoughts, and the whole cycle spirals downward.” (144)

Before I draw some conclusions let's look at the last piece of our text,

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴ And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him ⁵⁵ and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

I want you to notice a couple of things: Jesus sent them to Bethsaida, and they ended up in Gennesaret. Why? I think the logical answer is they were blown off course by the storm. I suspect, even though the water was now calm, the disciples were ready to get to land.

We are told everyone recognized Jesus, and it was back to work for Jesus and the disciples. I suspect the disciples had a new appreciation for the awesome power of their Master who was doing the healing.

APPLICATIONS

Let's wrap this up with some take home points.

Everyone faces overwhelming and sometimes terrifying circumstances. Jesus told us "in the world you will have tribulation, but take courage for I have overcome the world." Jesus never sugar-coated the message. If we are going to follow Him, we will face hard times. In fact, if we are going to live God-honoring lives in this sin-stained world, there will be storms, there will be times that threaten our balance, and there will be times we may think we are going to drown. To be afraid does not mean there is something wrong with you.

The Antidote to Fear, is Faith. We can let these tough things eat us up, or we can choose to trust the Lord. When Jesus approached the disciples he said, "*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*" The key words are the ones in the middle, "It is I." Jesus tells us not to fear because He is with us. The idea is this: if Jesus is who we say He is . . . why are we afraid of anything?

Jesus used that same idea again in John 16:33, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But *take heart*; I have overcome the world." Again, the focus is not on us or our ability or lack thereof, the focus is on the Lord who has overcome the world.

Even when Peter took his eyes off of Jesus, our Lord never took His eyes off of him. It is the same with us! We must remember that we belong to Him. If we focus on that fact and His promises to us, our fear can transform into faith. Paul told us that God is "working all things for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28) He doesn't say He is making all things easy! In times of fear we must ask, "Do we believe God or don't we?"

Let's remember those insightful words of John Ortberg: "Fear has created more practicing heretics than bad theology ever has, for it makes us live as though we serve a limited, finite, partially present, semi-competent God." When we recoil in the hard times, we testify that we really don't trust the Lord. When we choose to "play it safe" all the time, we stagnate. A stagnating Christian will never grow personally and will have very little impact on the world around them.

Third **Real faith involves getting out of the boat.** We will only grow as deep as we are willing to trust. I'm afraid that we are much better at honoring the status quo than in stepping out of the boat.

- We are more comfortable doing what we have always done than reaching deeper and discovering what is fresh and powerful. This is why the church is often seen as boring and why programs don't seem to grow. It is because we refuse to take a risk of faith or do the hard work of "thinking outside the box". As a result, people eventually leave the church because there is no vitality. Faith has left the building!
- We need to get out of the boat if we are going to share the gospel with others. There are few non-believers who are going to walk into a church unless someone invites them. Unbelievers do not respond to church lingo. We must think of ways to explain the gospel in words that the unchurched will understand. More than anything else, we need to go out of our way to build caring relationships with those who are not yet followers of Christ. They need to see Christ in us! This cannot happen if we simply huddle together in our boat (the church). To be effective we must get out of the boat!
- We are more afraid of failure than we eager to see the power of God at work. We will not see God really work unless we dare to walk on the water (or do things that seem outside of our gifting).
- Real joy in life comes from seeing God use us in ways that startle us. In order for that to happen, we cannot be bound by fear. We must instead hold fast to faith. Do you want to see Him use you in great ways? You will have to get out of the boat.

But what is our boat? One more quote from John Ortberg,

Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up even if it's keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves. Your boat is whatever pulls you away from the high adventure of extreme discipleship.

Want to know what your boat is? Your fear will tell you. Just ask yourself this: *What is it that most produces fear in me—especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith.* (p. 17)

The Best Reason to Get Out of the Boat is because the Water is Where Jesus Is. If we want a vital relationship with Him, we will have to dare to trust Him.

In the last episode of season three of *The Chosen* there is an incredibly moving scene that depicts what we have read today. Peter got out of the boat, walked on water, went under the water, grabbed the hand of Jesus, and then Peter clung to Jesus saying over and over again, "Don't let me go. Don't let me go." Jesus' response was "I am here. I will always be here."

Faith is an adventure. It pushes us beyond our comfort zone but it promises a life far greater than anything we can find without Him. You may be in a storm right now . . . or you will face one soon. The choice is between fear or faith. Fear will rob you of life and faith . . . while faith will open the door to an adventure that will deepen you and bring you to a level of joy that cannot be attained in any other way.