

Walk on Water

Author, priest, and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has claimed that “the Bible is not a book about admirable men and women, neither is it a book about a conventionally admirable God. It is a book in which wonderful and terrible things happen by the power of an almighty God, whose steadfast love for us does not seem to preclude scaring the living daylights out of us from time to time.”

And indeed He does.

The same God that rescued Jonah from the belly of the whale is the God who put Jonah there in the first place when he fled to Tarshish instead of going to Ninevah like he was asked.

In fact, the stories of God’s grandeur and fearsomeness have caused many to question how the God of the Old Testament and the God revealed in the person of Jesus could be the same. As we shall see today, however, the very power of God that controls the seas resides in the person of Jesus. Join me in reading Mark 6:45-52.

READING

Mark 6:⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

⁴⁷ Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Let’s pray.

I. JESUS IS LORD (45-48).

You may have noticed in our reading today that a familiar bit of the story is missing. One of the first things we think of when we hear walking on water is Peter trying to join Jesus out on the lake only to sink after a few steps. Yet Peter is nowhere to be found in Mark’s retelling. This is particularly interesting since Mark’s Gospel is believed to have been based largely upon Peter’s preaching and witness. It makes you wonder if Peter was trying to hide something. “Nah, you can just skip that part” But then Matthew is like “No, hey, remember when Peter tried to get out of the boat! What was he thinking?”

Instead, Mark includes a different unique detail. Unlike the accounts we find in Matthew and John, Mark tells us that **Jesus intended to pass the disciples by**. Why would He do this, especially if he'd seen them struggling in the boat?

There's a few possible explanations:

1. First, the text could actually refer to the impression the disciples had when they first saw Jesus, rather than Jesus' actual intention. In that case, it would be read something more like, "We had thought he was going to pass us by, but then we got scared thinking he was a ghost".
2. Alternatively, passing them by may have only been his original intention - not wanting to scare them, but then he felt he had to come to them when he saw how they struggled against the waves.
3. An additional option, similar to this, is that Jesus just hadn't wanted to deal with the disciples at that moment. Just a near the beginning of the chapter we learn that John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin had been beheaded by Herod, but when Jesus heard the news he wasn't actually able to do anything to grieve.

Instead, it says that when he went to find a quiet to place to rest with the disciples, they landed the boat and found crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd, so Jesus had compassion and taught them many things.

Then it started getting late, and this crowd of thousands had nothing to eat, so Jesus miraculously fed the thousands with just a few loaves and fishes.

Afterward, he sent the disciples away and dispersed the crowds, and it says that he went up on the mountain to pray. It doesn't say why or what about, but I'm just going to take a guess and say that maybe he needed to spend some time in rest with His Father and to grieve the loss of His cousin, John.

So when he got back to the lake to go across, MAYBE he just found that there weren't any boats. Walking around would take way too long, and he might run into more people. So instead, he just thinks, "I guess I'll just walk across then"

4. But probably the most likely explanation for Mark's phrasing here is that it's a cue for how we are to understand Jesus' action as a revelation of His divinity. The miracles in this chapter are heavy with allusions to God's revelation to His people in Exodus.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 is supposed to call to mind God's miraculous provision of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness.

Likewise, the walk upon the water itself immediately calls to mind God's authority over the waters so that he could part the Red Sea and allow Israelites to walk through on dry land.

In Exodus 33, Moses asks to see God's glory, and God tells Moses that He will "pass him by" but that Moses cannot see His face...

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah is told to go out on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.

Job 9:8 speaks of God as being the only one to stretch out the heavens and trample upon the sea...later in that same chapter Job says that God "passes by and I will not recognize Him"

What we are supposed to understand here is not that Jesus didn't care about the disciples' struggle in the boat, it's that the disciples are about to experience a part of Jesus' divinity that they have never seen before.

This man Jesus who has called them to himself and has been teaching and healing many is much more than they understand.

Jesus is not just a great teacher and wonder worker. **JESUS IS LORD.**

And that revelation is terrifying.

II. FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM (49-50).

It's hard to tell what scared them more - the thought that there was a ghost on the water, or the realization that there wasn't.

Many of them have grown up around the sea of Galilee, and some have made their living fishing on these waters. For them, the sea is a source of sustenance, but also a source of great peril. The dangers and storms of the sea were the source of a great deal of superstition and folklore, even as they are today.

Not unlike modern legends about Davy Jones' locker or the curse of the Flying Dutchman, it was commonly believed that those who drowned at sea were unable to move on to the realm of the dead and so instead wandered in a spirit form upon the waters.

James, John, Andrew, and Peter - all fishermen by trade - may have easily picked up the common superstition. It is little wonder, then, why they would be terrified to see a figure walking upon the water toward their struggling ship in the midst of a storm.

But how much more terrifying and awe-inspiring would it be to discover that it was not some haunting or trick of their imagination, but the very real power of the Living God made present in their teacher. You're not supposed to be able to do that, Jesus!

Who IS this man?

We speak a lot about the grace and glory of the Incarnation, especially at Christmas time. How wonderful that the Lord of All Creation humbled Himself to come down in the form of a little baby, born in a stable.

But what do you do when the terrifying, awe-inspiring power of God manifests itself in our lives in that nearness? It's actually a bit of an off-putting thought.

R.C. Spowls says that "Meeting [God] personally may be our greatest trauma"
(*The Holiness of God*, p 45)

It's like when God first tried to speak to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. They gathered around a ways off from the mountain, and God's presence came in a very tangible and palpable way - with a dense cloud of smoke enveloping the mountain, and there was the sound of loud trumpet blasts, and the whole mountain trembled...so the Israelites told Moses - y'know, you could just go talk to God yourself and tell us what He says. That'd be fine.

It was traumatic.

And yet that trauma helps us to right-size our thinking about God and ourselves.

Proverbs 9:¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Getting a sense for the power and the grandeur of God reminds us of just how small we really are in relation to Him and how ridiculously gracious it is that He would even be mindful of us, much less love us.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM. But just the beginning.

III. PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR (51-52)

The text tells us that the root of their amazement was the fact that they didn't understand about the loaves.

They didn't get that the God-man who can walk on the waves is the same Jesus who walks in the character of God providing for His people. This incredible, Creation-bending power resides in the hands of the One who has inexplicably committed Himself to our good. But their hearts were hardened with a belief that God couldn't really be that good.

I mean, could it really be that the transcendent, awesome, Speaks-a-word-and-the-world-is-made God came down to spend time with them? To provide for them? To know them? To be known BY them?

I want to just take a moment and really let it sink in what Jesus has done in the Incarnation.

Think about how uncomfortable it had to have been for Jesus to take on flesh and live as a human...

- This whole walking on water episode is actually the default status of what Jesus can do.
- Jesus never once NEEDED to get on a boat, and yet we see him on boats kind of a lot in the Gospels.
- He's constantly having to limit Himself, just so that He doesn't blow the disciples' minds.

Jesus coming in the flesh was the ultimate example of cross-cultural ministry, because He stripped Himself so completely of His divinity just so that He could draw near to us in a way we could understand.

Jesus embraces the things that are awkward, uncomfortable, and even dangerous so that He can reconcile the world in perfect love.

Why? Because PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR.

1 John 4:¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We fear rejection. We fear negative consequences. We fear humiliation, shame, and discomfort. So we avoid anyone and anything that might make us feel that way.

We fear the Lord because He has the authority and power to do whatever He wants with our lives. He brought us into this world, and He can take us out anytime.

But perfect love drives out that kind of fear because it knows God's character and promise. Christ's perfect love knows full well what God COULD do, but also knows what He HAS DONE and WILL DO.

Listen again to what Jesus says to the disciples as they quake in fear: "Take heart. It's just me, there's no need to be afraid."

Jesus' actual words in the Greek say "ego eimi" - Literally I AM - the same way that God identifies Himself to Moses when speaking from the burning bush. It's a profound statement that He's not some ghostly omen of disaster but actually the very God who can save from calamity.

"Don't worry, It's just me. Everything will be alright."

And then He climbs in the boat with them. How strange is that? He didn't have that much farther to go. But He knew they'd want Him there.

CONCLUSION

Jesus is Lord. And that is terrifying and yet completely comforting at the same time.

The one who walks on water chooses to walk with us.

It reminds me of one of my favorite songs by a band called Enter the Worship Circle. It says:

It's you alone who does great wonders,
you set the earth apart from the waters
It's true, oh the Lord is good.

By Your word You created the Light,
the moon, the stars, those heavenly sights
It's true, Oh the Lord is good

And who am I that You would know my name?
Know my deepest parts and love me just the same?
Who am I, that you would sing a song about me?
Oh the Lord is good...

And He is good. Would you pray with me?