

Permission to Come Aboard?

Last Sunday we traveled across Lake Galilee and landed in some remote shore where Jesus and His disciples fed the multitudes with five loaves and two small fish. The action in today's Scripture took place later that night or early the next morning. Jesus dismissed the sleepy, well-fed crowd. He also dismissed His disciples, and sent them on ahead of Him in the boat, with instructions to go to Bethsaida.

Alone at last, Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray. Jesus could finally spend some quality time with the Heavenly Father, talking with Him about the death of His friend and cousin John, about the progress of His disciples, and about the epic struggle that awaits Him and which will open the doors of salvation for all the world, even to you and me.

I believe that it was in the midst of prayer, that Jesus received the vision. Though it was after dark and the disciples were several miles out on the lake, Jesus could see them struggling at the oars. He could see the wind and see it swirling around them. His friends were in danger as the darkness engulfed them and as the storm buffeted their small boat. Jesus could hear their cries, smell their sweat, sensed their fear.

As I step back to look at our Scripture lesson this morning I am drawn to verse 48 where Mark says, "He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake."

It seems to me that the picture of the disciples in the boat at sea, struggling at the oars, is a great metaphor for our lives. We even use this reference in everyday speech. We say, "We are all in the same boat," or "If you were in my boat," or "when my ship comes in." Sometimes I see it in the crossword puzzles: Someone who is confused is described as being "a sea," which is short for being "at sea." Besides that they were "straining at the oars," "because the wind was against them."

We all know people in this position. They are trying to guide their own lives from one place to another, trying to get from a sad place to a happy place, from a poor to a more prosperous place,

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trying to find peace in place of chaos, trying to find some worthwhile meaning or purpose for their lives. But they are "struggling at the oars," because "the winds are contrary." Does that sound like anyone you know? Perhaps you have been there yourself? Perhaps that's where you still are this morning?

The big question today is how? How do we navigate through these troubled waters? How do we bring our lives to that calm sea and secure harbor for which we all seek? What do we see in this passage of Scripture that can help us on this voyage?

The first thing we see as we look at this Scripture is that there is Someone watching over us, Someone Who sees and cares about our life's voyage, Someone Who will never leave us or forsake us, and that Someone is Jesus Christ. One of the things that invariably occurs to us when we are struggling, and one of Satan's favorite lies, is that we are totally alone on our journey. "Nobody really cares whether I am dead or alive, and when I'm dead no one will miss me."

In tempting us to think this way Satan is appealing to one of our most basic primeval fears, the fear of abandonment. That's why it's so hard for a mother to see her children leave home for college or for a father to walk his daughter down the aisle at her wedding. That's why the death of parents, divorce, or the death of a spouse are so devastating. That's why it's so hard as we grow older to see old classmates, friends, and neighbors dying ahead of us. We find ourselves feeling more and more alone, more and more isolated and abandoned.

But guess what? When you are out there feeling all alone, and it's pitch black in the middle of the night, and the storm is raging, and you are straining at the oars and thinking that it's no use to keep paddling, Jesus is watching and Jesus cares. **He sees and He cares for you.**

The first thing we need to remember is that we are not alone. Jesus is interceding for us. Jesus cares for our lives. A second thing I see in our Scripture today is Jesus has the power to come to us, and He will come to us in the midst of our need. When He saw His disciples struggling at the oars against the wind, He went to

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them. It didn't matter that it was four O'clock in the morning. It didn't matter that the sea was rough and the winds were strong. It didn't matter that it was pitch black. He saw and He came.

It may be that we think God makes Himself scarcest when we are going through tough times. We may be tempted to adopt a deist theology that holds that God made the world and then just sat back and watched it unfold and evolve without any further interference or intervention from Him. In other words, we may think He sees but just doesn't care. The truth, however, is just the opposite. The truth is that He will come down from the mountain and even walk on water to come to our assistance. **Jesus hears our cries and comes near.**

We are not alone and we are not without assistance. The third thing we learn from our Scripture this morning is the most ironic, and that is that the thing we may fear the most is the One who has come to save us. When Jesus showed up, walking on the water, His disciples didn't see Him as the Savior; rather, they took Him to be the omen of death. They thought He was a ghost. When they first saw Him, they choked with terror.

And, as long as God is held outside the boats of our lives, and our knowledge of the Lord is shrouded in darkness, we will naturally be afraid of Him, and for good reason. This One who comes walking to us on the water is holy. He is powerful. He holds life and death in His hands. He can pronounce our forgiveness or ban us to the abyss, where there is eternal anguish and gnashing of teeth. This One who walks on water is inherently scary. Until we know His heart, we will not trust Him. How could we?

I dropped in to see Ray & Carol Ramstad's daughter Amy and her fiancée, Richey a week or so ago. When they opened the door I was greeted by their dog who happens to be a Bull Mastiff and looks like a cross between a Great Dane and a Pit Bull. Those of you who have seen the original Harry Potter movie may remember the three-headed dog that guarded the chamber of secrets--or was it the chamber of horrors? Well, this dog looked exactly like that except that he only has one head. While I am not usually afraid of dogs, I found that one to be rather awe-inspiring in a Biblical sense. When I saw him I was glad to be saved because it occurred to me that I might be close to meeting Jesus face to face!

That's what went through my head until I came to understand this dog's heart. He meant me no harm whatsoever. Despite first impressions he turned out to be a big loveable baby who just wanted me to scratch his ears and rub his tummy. He was glad for another friend.

Now I certainly don't mean to imply that God is anything like a dog, but there are at least three useful parallels in this case. Number one, God is powerful. Just as Amy and Richey's dog could eat any one of us for lunch, if he had a mind to, so God could easily snuff us out now and for eternity. We would be foolish not to take note of that. Number two, God is benevolent. Just as Richey and Amy's dog means people no harm, so God means us no harm; the Lord hasn't come to condemn but to save us. Aren't you glad? And, number three, just as Amy's dog was looking for another friend, God is inviting us to friendship with Him; He desires intimacy with His creation.

So we see that although the Lord God is throat-chokingly awesome and powerful beyond measure, He is infinitely benevolent and kind to all His creation; He desires entrance into our lives to calm our storms, give direction, and to help us at the oars, but we won't let Him in until we are convinced to trust the goodness of His heart.

The disciples were afraid of this One Who came to them walking on the water, but then they didn't yet know what we know. They didn't understand the miracle of the broken bread. They hadn't yet seen God's heart revealed on that old wooden cross. They hadn't yet seen Jesus' willingness to suffer for the forgiveness of their sins. They hadn't yet become aware that He would go through hell to keep them out of it. **We need to remember that the only thing more awesome than God's power is God's love.**

The Lord Jesus sees us in our distress and He comes to us walking on the water; He comes to save us not to harm us. Then the fourth and final observation I would make this morning is that if we want God in our lives we must respond to His invitation. He comes to us all, but each of us needs to make Him welcome. Salvation is not automatic.

One of the intriguing things in our Scripture passage this morning is found at the end of verse 48, where it says, "He was about to pass them by." I love the Amplified Bible's translation of this phrase that says, "And He acted as if He meant to pass by

them." My take on all of this is He wanted them to see Him, but He wasn't going to force Himself upon them. He would frighten them and He would ease their fear: "It's me, He said, no need to be afraid." And, then when they were satisfied, He would enter into their boat.

We see this same theme reflected in the last verses of Mark 6. Verses 54-56 say, "As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went--into villages, towns or countryside--they placed the sick in the market places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed."

What's significant here is that Jesus didn't initiate the touch. He didn't go around touching people whether they wanted Him to or not. Rather, He let them touch him. He made Himself available so that whoever believed enough in Him to reach out could touch Him. And Mark tells us, "and all who touched him were healed." **That's something to be considered: all who touched Him were healed.**

Do you need Jesus in your life, in your boat this today? Do you need to touch Him? He has seen you struggling at the oars against the wind. He comes to you walking on the water. You may fear His Lordship, but there is no need to fear. He makes Himself available. He loves you and only wants to bring your ship safe to shore. Would you give Him the nod, say, "Come to me Lord Jesus?" Will you reach out and touch Him and be healed? He has already done everything needed on His part, now the rest is up to you. Do not be afraid. Invite Him into your life and into your circumstance. Reach out by faith and touch Him. He will calm the storm. He will touch you back and make you whole.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for September 2, 2007

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Mark 6:45-56

Jon R. Neely, Pastor