“TAKE COURAGE! IT IS I. DON’T BE AFRAID”

Mark 6:45–56

Key Verse: 6:50b

“Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’”

The four Gospels were written mainly to show us who Jesus is. Among them, Mark has the fewest of Jesus’ teachings, but it has the most facts about what actually happened. Mark’s main focus is that Jesus, the Son of God, was the Suffering Servant. He still calls people to follow in his steps. Mark also shows how Jesus trained his disciples. During his ministry, though they have a better understanding than the crowds, even *they* can’t fully comprehend what he’s revealing. Jesus had just challenged them to give the crowd something to eat, when they themselves had so little. Now, he leaves them alone all night to struggle on the sea. Jesus is like a master trainer forcing these men to go beyond their limits, and in the process, to face what’s really going on deep inside them. And as he walks out to them on the water, he reveals who he is. We especially want to think about what Jesus says to his disciples at their moment of greatest fear. Life often has been compared to a sea voyage. Sometimes problems can come up unexpectedly and feel like they’re sweeping us away. But those are the very moments we can really encounter Jesus. May God speak to us through his living word today.

First of all, let’s look at the setting. By this time, it’s late in the day (35a). Before this Jesus had sent out the Twelve two by two to do what he’d been doing (7), and they’d just come back and reported all they’d done and taught (30). Jesus had wanted to take them by themselves to get some rest (31), but his plan was interrupted by yet another demanding crowd (33), and Jesus in compassion had spent the day teaching them many things (34b). The disciples had tried to get him to send the crowd away to get food and lodging, but Jesus challenged them to give them something to eat (35b–37a). The disciples had balked at that; they thought Jesus was being unreasonable (37b). But he asked them to “go and see” what they had, and then he used their five loaves and two fish to feed the crowd. It was a stunning miracle that revealed that Jesus has both the compassion and the power to meet all our needs. But that miracle had changed everybody’s ideas about Jesus. According to John’s Gospel, after people saw it, they decided to come and make Jesus king by force (Jn6:14,15). Look at verses 45,46. Jesus wanted to get his disciples away from the influence of the crowd. He also wanted to spend time alone in prayer. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus praying is recorded only three times, and in each case his disciples don’t understand what's going on. Prayer was the way for him to stay on track with God’s plan. But each time he prays, he also has his disciples in his mind. He’s praying for them to understand who he really is and to join him in what he came to do.

Look at verses 47,48a. It was another stormy night on the Sea of Galilee. As we saw in verse 45, Jesus initially had sent his disciples to Bethsaida, which was just a short distance from where they were. But here the disciples are all the way in the middle of the lake, straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Evidently the wind had blown them all the way out there. In Greek, the word “straining” is literally “being tortured.” The disciples were having a really hard time, and it says that Jesus can see them. Now look at the next sentence in verse 48. It begins, “Shortly before dawn…” This means, basically, that Jesus waited all night before going out to them. He let them struggle until they were totally exhausted and had reached their limits. They’d tried to handle the situation on their own, with their own strength. But Jesus was teaching them through firsthand experience that they needed to depend on him.

Next, it says, “…he went out to them, walking on the lake.” This is another stunning miracle of Jesus. Previously he’d calmed the stormy sea; this time, he’s actually walking on it. In the Old Testament this is one of the famous, unique descriptions of God, that he can “tread the seas." He’s above any problem that can threaten to swallow us. He’s reigning over all things.

But then the last part of verse 48 says, “He was about to pass by them.” It’s kind of hard to understand. Why would he walk all the way out to them in the middle of the lake, only to pass by them? Partly it was because he wanted them to witness that he really was walking on the lake. Partly, he also wanted them to respond to him, not just to see him but to ask for help. When we’re in trouble, turning to Jesus and asking his help is how we exercise real life faith and grow in faith. During his ministry Jesus wasn’t just teaching his disciples theoretical knowledge about faith; he was helping them bring their faith into real life situations. This is the problem of so many people; we know many things, but there’s a disconnect between what we know and how we live in real life. Jesus really wants us to reach out to him in practical faith.

How did the disciples respond? Look at verses 49,50a. They thought he was a ghost. They cried out. They were terrified. They couldn’t even recognize that it was Jesus. Fear had captured their minds and skewed how they saw everything. Fear still does that to us. When we’re fearful, we too see things strangely. How did Jesus help them? Read verse 50b. Immediately Jesus spoke to them. He helped them see that it really was him. He was rescuing them from their fears. We learn some important things here.

**First**, Jesus spoke to them. It was through his spoken words that he helped them. It’s still his words that help us, and that help all people when they’re fearful and feel like their situation is overwhelming. Jesus’ words are so calming and so reassuring. The Bible repeatedly tells us that Jesus’ words are what build real faith in us. When we’re scared, we shouldn’t calculate or get emotional; it’s the time to come to Jesus and really listen to his words.

**Second**, “It is I.” In Greek Jesus literally said, “I am.” This was the same way God identified himself to Moses. Basically Jesus is saying that he’s God, and that he’s still with them. Through this horrible all-night ordeal, he wanted them to experience firsthand that he’s God. Actually, it’s when we’re suffering the most that we often learn the most about the reality of God. From the disciples’ point of view, they’d been left alone on that sea that night, and Jesus was nowhere in sight. But actually Jesus had been watching them all along; actually he’s still right there with them; and, he’s actually God himself. Sometimes when we’re suffering it seems like God has abandoned us. How could he be with us if we’re suffering so much? But Jesus promised to be with us always. It means even at our worst moments. Isaiah 41:10 reads, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” And Isaiah 43:2,3a reads, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior…” Each of us needs to hear Jesus talking to us personally, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

**Third**, “Take courage!” These are great words to hear, especially at the beginning of a new year, when we could face anything. We’d like to be courageous and face intimidating people or problems or whatever life may throw at us with courage. But where does courage come from? Some people think it’s a special trait of a few special people. But courage doesn’t come from within ourselves. We can take courage when we realize that Jesus is God and that he’s with us. At this time, Jesus’ disciples are screaming like little girls and thinking they see a ghost. As we read on in the Gospels, they continue to struggle with their fears. But when they finally realize who Jesus is, they’re changed. Eventually they had so much courage that they could rebuke even the highest religious leaders of Israel, because they’d been with Jesus, and Jesus had taught them courage. Without courage, we get knocked down by fear. Without courage we can’t speak up. Without courage, we give up. Without courage, we despair. But with courage, we can stand up. With courage, we can speak out. With courage, we can keep going. With courage, we can be filled with hope even if our situation is bleak. Followers of Jesus are not allowed to be filled with fear. Followers of Jesus need to take courage from him.

What happened next? Look at verse 51. When they accepted his words, Jesus who walked on the water climbed into the boat with them, and when he did, the wind died down. His presence brought peace. The boat is an allegory for our lives. We can steer our life boat with our own strength, skill and smartness, or we can invite Jesus in. Without Jesus, we’re doing our best in our life boat, but often we’re going nowhere, or going in the wrong direction, and we’re struggling with all kinds of fears. But when we invite Jesus in, he brings us peace.

How did the disciples respond to this? Look at verses 51b,52. This tells us that it was not a good kind of amazement. They should **not** have been amazed. Why not? It says they should have “understood about the loaves.” What should they have understood? They should have understood from that miracle that Jesus can do anything. They should have been learning that Jesus was more than a man; he’s God Incarnate. But even though they were right there with Jesus, listening to him, witnessing what he was doing and even helping him, they didn’t really understand. Why didn’t they understand? It says “their hearts were hardened.” It’s surprising. The disciples? Why were their hearts hardened? Maybe they were mad that Jesus was pushing them so much. But more than that, their hearts were hardened with their own desires. When they saw Jesus’ great miracle, instead of learning what he wanted them to learn, they were inspired, like the crowd was, to start making use of him more, to get him to keep solving all their problems. But Jesus didn’t call them to follow him so that they could make use of him. He wanted them to learn that he’s God, who can’t be manipulated by people so that they can get from him whatever they want. For whatever reason, when our hearts are hardened, we can’t learn. We need to ask God to give us tender hearts to really learn of Jesus.

Look at verses 53–56. They landed at Gennesaret, which is on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. People there immediately recognized Jesus. They’d been learning from events in his ministry. They’d learned from the four friends who brought the paralyzed man to him. They’d learned from the woman with bleeding who just touched the edge of his cloak. They were exercising some kind of faith to reach out to Jesus for his help for themselves, their loved ones and friends. And Jesus was among them. Jesus who walked on water, God himself who became a man, was with all those sick and suffering people. He used his great power to serve and to heal. He was the Suffering Servant. He wanted his disciples not to have worldly ideas about him, but to see that this is why he came.

Let’s read verse 50b again. May God help us to hear these words of Jesus personally, experience who he is, and be renewed in courage and peace.