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Life on the Water: I Am
Mark 6:45-52

Good morning/evening! Welcome to Chapel Hill! My name is Ellis and I am one of the pastors here. I'm so glad you decided to come join us as we kick off a new sermon series for the month of July. We're calling it Life on the Water.

I have spent all of my life living in towns on the water. I grew up in a small town about 30 miles west of London called Marlow. It's a beautiful small town on the River Thames. This past week our Senior Pastor Mark Toone and his family actually got to go and visit my hometown. Here's a photo Mark sent me of his wife, Cyndi, and children, Cooper and Rachel, standing beside the river in my home town. It's beautiful, isn't it? Although my memories of growing up on the water are perhaps a little bit more raucous—like this video of a time a group of friends of mine went on out a couple of boats.

So I grew up in a small community on the water, and now I get to live in Gig Harbor—another small community on the water. You may not have thought about this, but the reality is that Jesus grew up and did the majority of his ministry in small communities on the water just like Marlow, or Gig Harbor, or Port Orchard. Small towns on the water with a fishing heritage. As you read the gospels you notice that Jesus didn't spend most of his time in the large city—Jerusalem. But rather, he spent almost all his time in the small towns surrounded the Sea of Galilee [PHOTO], which is really just a lake. He spent most of his time in small towns like Capernaum and Bethsaida—fishing villages were where Jesus did most of his ministry. So for this month, we wanted to look at some stories that involve Jesus doing ministry on the water—on the Sea of Galilee. Because I believe that we have a unique connection to Jesus as residents of the Gig Harbor peninsula.

Today, we're going to be looking at a story about Jesus from Mark 6. Jesus has just fed 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. I'm sure many of you have heard that story before. Quite the miracle. But what happens next is even more amazing.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was

out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, 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." And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Jesus finishes up serving dinner to his unexpected guests, and while he is dismissing the crowds he tells his disciples to get in the boat and start heading to the other side of the lake—at least several miles away, since the lake is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide. Imagine going from Gig Harbor to the Port of Tacoma and you get the idea. And while they are out there, Jesus heads up to the mountain to pray—something that he had tried to do earlier, before 5000 people showed up hungry. As he is praying the wind starts to blow against the disciples and they switch from sailing to rowing. And they row, and row, and row. For hours and hours. It's now 3am and they are still barely making progress way out in the middle of the lake.

Now, I don't know about you, but if I were one of the disciples, I'd be pretty ticked right now. Jesus has just told you to get in the boat and head to the other side and it's late in the day. You're hoping you get there soon so you can get some sleep, and then along comes a gale blowing right in your face. By now you're in the middle of the lake and going back isn't an option. So when you're hoping to be sleeping, you find yourself rowing hard, trying to do what your master has told you. I'd be ticked.

But when I think about it, I wonder if this isn't what much of our lives feel like? We are trying to follow what Jesus says, trying to do what he has asked us to do, but as we're going through with it, all of a sudden, along comes this wind blowing us back to where we came from. We face difficulty, we face opposition, we face trials. And we start losing sleep over it. And what do we do? We start working harder. We start rowing against the wind, because we're trying to follow Jesus, and he asked us to do this. And it is hard work. And we're exhausted.

I remember when we got stuck in England last year for a couple of months when our visa was denied. We felt like Jesus had asked us to serve here in Gig Harbor—that was where Jesus has told us to go. And here we were facing opposition—not the wind, but the State Department. And it was hard. We were tired. We just wanted a vacation with family. But we had to keep working and pushing to get to where we believed Jesus had asked us to go.

Maybe you're in a similar situation? Jesus has called you to something—marriage, a job, a new school, a sports team—and you're facing opposition. It's hard for you to do what Jesus has asked you to do. It's hard to stay married, to keep working this job, to keep going to this new school where you don't have friends, to keep playing on the team, because life is hard. The world throws wind in your face and you are feeling exhausted from rowing against it. If you're there, you're in good company. That's how the disciples were feeling.

But then, in the middle of the night, as the disciples were out there, they see this figure coming towards them walking on the water. And if you're a fisherman, like some of the disciples were, you knew the stories about people seeing ghosts in the middle of the lake. You knew what people said about the souls of the departed fisherman coming to haunt people. And so the disciples start freaking out! They were terrified!

But it wasn't a ghost. It was God. You know sometimes, I find, that it is in the midst of life's biggest struggles that we see God show up. It is when we are at our most exhausted, most fearful, most stressed that we see God reveal himself in the most remarkable ways. And I believe this is what is going on here. God is revealing who he is to the disciples in the most remarkable way.

God is going to reveal that He is Jesus. That this man they've been following around, who's been teaching great truths, healing the sick, and feeding the multitudes, is not just a teacher or a healer, but is, in fact, God himself. And that God himself, in the person of Jesus was going to calm this wind, and help them chart a course to where they needed to go.

There are three things that tell us that Jesus is revealing that he is God in this story. The first is obvious. It's Jesus' power. [SLIDE] Jesus walks on the water. For a fisherman living at this time, the sea was seen as a powerful force, controlled by the god of the sea, whose Roman name was Poseidon. When Jesus comes to them, in the middle of a storm, walking on the water, this is a declaration that Jesus is more powerful than any other god or power in this world.

When I was in England, I saw God come through to gain us a visa. We felt like the power of the Department of State was so great in this situation. Like we were just pawns in the middle of a great political game. And yet, we saw Jesus' power over the powers of this world as he came through for us in granting us a visa when we were denied with no ability to appeal or overturn things. In the midst of our trials, Jesus revealed to us his power.

The second clue in the story is more subtle, it's Jesus' passing by. There's this interesting line that is in the Bible that says, "He meant to pass by them." At first I just couldn't get my mind around it. Why would Jesus mean go pass them by? Surely Jesus was going out to help them? Why would he just walk by?

But then, this week, I was reading my Bible In One Year—if you don't read the Bible regularly, you should try this app, it's awesome. And I was reading the story of Elijah. Elijah lived hundreds of years before Jesus, and Elijah was a prophet to God's people. At one point, Elijah is feeling thoroughly depressed, and he's all by himself in a cave. It's at this point that God reveals himself to Elijah. And God tells him to go stand outside of the cave, "for the Lord is about to pass by." (1 Kings 19:11) Do you notice that's the same words as in our Jesus story? Jesus intended to pass by his disciples?

In both stories, God was choosing the reveal who he was to someone or some people who were in the midst of difficulty. And both times he used the same language: to pass by. And actually, there's a third time this happens in the Bible in the life of a man called Moses, but I don't have time to tell you that story too. I believe that when the Bible says Jesus intended "to pass by them." What that is really saying, is that God intended to reveal himself to them, in the midst of their difficulties and trials, just like God did to Elijah and to Moses.

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So, three clues that show Jesus was God: first, his power; second, his passing by; third, his pronouncement. (Sorry kids, that's a pretty complicated word, but it begins with the letter p like the others, so I'm going to use it. A pronouncement is something someone says in a powerful way.) Jesus' pronouncement to his disciples was "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

And that could simply be a statement that they need not fear. Someone said that the Bible contains the statement do not fear 365 times so we have one for every day of the year. That's a lie, by the way, it's only about 1/3 of that. But it's a nice sentiment, nonetheless. Jesus does say do not fear. But more importantly Jesus says two words in the original language for this part of the Bible, which was Greek, which have a powerful meaning: egō eimi.

egō eimi could just mean, "It's me!" But, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, these two words are the words used when God reveals his name to his people. They literally mean: I AM [SLIDE] They are a statement by God that he is who he is. No matter what is going on in this world, God is. And when they are on the lips of Jesus, they make a bold claim: that Jesus is God. The Jesus is the I AM.

That in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the wind, Jesus is. He is calm. He is peaceful. He is walking on top of the waves. He is God.

In a moment we're going to sing a song. It's going to be new to many of you, but not if you were at Day Camp this week. Its title is I AM. And the lyrics in the chorus are: "I am, holding on to you, I am, holding on to you, in the middle of the storm, I am holding on, I am." And we could take this as a declaration at face value that we are holding on to God in the middle of our trials. But I think David Crowder, who wrote this song, is trying to be a little bit clever. I think, these lyrics are not just being sung from our perspective, but are also being sung from God's perspective. If God's name is I Am, then perhaps what Crowder is trying to tell us is that no matter what storm we might be in, God is holding on to us. The I AM—the creator and sustainer of all, the God of the universe, Jesus—is holding on to us in the middle of the storm. And he is revealing that he is God, above all things that we face.

So if you are rowing into the wind right now... if you are facing opposition, or a trial, or difficulty, because you are seeking to do what Jesus has asked you, I want you to know that you are right where you are meant to be! And I want you to keep your eyes open. Because I know that in the midst of what you are facing Jesus is revealing himself to you. He is showing you that he is God. He has power over the storm. He is passing by to reveal himself to you. And he is who he claims to be. Don't fear. God is with you. And he is showing himself to you in the person of Jesus.