

## Game Changer: Fight Fear

*Mark 6:45-52*

If Jesus could teach us how to overcome fear, that would be a game changer. Fear is an incredibly powerful emotion. I remember driving on vacation with my family in Idaho where the speed limit was 80 mph. We were in the left lane when a huge Suburban pulled right into our lane and I found myself driving on the dirt shoulder and rumble strip at 80 mph. At the next rest stop, we all changed our pants. I was afraid. And I remember the call from my doctor that said I had an elevated PSA and needed to get it checked right away. I was afraid.

In today's story, the disciples are terrified in a boat. This isn't the first time. Two chapters ago, they thought their boat was going to sink...even when Jesus was asleep in the stern. This time, they hit a storm and Jesus isn't with them. But wow, does he make an impressive appearance. Remember, he has just fed 20,000 people with five loaves and two fish. We pick up the story in Mark 6:45.

Immediately [Jesus] 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 straining at the oars 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 courage; 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.

If we could get a better handle on fear in our lives, THAT would be a game-changer. And we learn two fear-fighting principles from this story:

- 1-Don't be surprised when Jesus sends you INTO a storm
- 2-Don't be surprised when Jesus shows up

First, Don't be surprised when Jesus sends you INTO a storm. After the meal is over and the disciples collected their twelve baskets of leftovers, we read that Jesus abruptly "**made** his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side..." He didn't even wait until the crowd was gone. He said, "OK, you guys get in the boat and get going. I'll close things down here." They had no choice about it. Jesus was insistent.

So, off they rowed. And suddenly, they were hit by one of those brutal eastern winds for which the Sea of Galilee is so famous. The disciples found themselves straining at the oars. The Greek word is

“tormenting,” often used to describe demon possession. It is a picture of these men, pulling mightily on the oars, barely getting anywhere as these ferocious winds and waves pound against them.

Now...remind me again; why were they out there in that storm? Because Jesus sent them out. The disciples were exactly where Jesus wanted them to be. In that boat, straining at the oars, battling fearsome winds, because Jesus told them to. Did Jesus drop the ball? Did he not pay attention to the weather forecast. This isn't the first time Jesus placed his disciples in a situation that demands more than they had to give. They just returned from a missionary tour where they were out, two by two, preaching and healing and casting out evil spirits!...without their Jesus training wheels.

Jesus is training his men. Preparing them for the time when he won't be there to pick up after them. Sometimes that training was rigorous. It still is. Jesus still sends us disciples into stormy waters. He still orders us into situations that are beyond our control and our capacity. He still requires us to strain at the oars...at times making no headway...but acting in obedience because he has said so. That's what “Lord” means!

Are you in a stormy spot right now? You prayed and prayed. You were certain you heard the Lord correctly. You tried to be obedient. But now you are straining and straining and going nowhere. Be patient. Sometimes Jesus sends us into the storm precisely because it is when we are exhausted and have depleted our resources that he reveals himself to us. Don't be surprised when Jesus sends you into a storm.

And don't be surprised when Jesus shows up. As Jesus prayed on the mountain, he had a bird's eye view as the disciples flailed away down below. Finally, at 3:00 in the morning, Jesus comes to them... walking on the water. Now...let's just stop there. Walking on the water. That's different! If you know this story, you can kind of skip over that little detail. But if you've never heard it before, it sounds...crazy? A man...walking on top of the water? Lots of scholars have tried to explain this away. It was an optical illusion. Or he was walking on stepping stones the disciples just couldn't see. But Mark is clear; Jesus was walking ON the water.

Let's assume this really happened. It was obviously intentional. Why did he do this? This is a different sort of miracle than usual. Normally, Jesus' miracles helped or healed or delivered people. But walking on water? What's that about? And then comes the weird next sentence. “He meant to pass by them...” What? Jesus didn't even intend to get into the boat? Why not? Well...with those winds, maybe it was FASTER for him to just keep walking. Is that it?

It's way more than that and we find a clue back in the Old Testament book of Job. Thousands of years earlier, Job wrote about someone “...who ...stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea....When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.”

Who is Job talking about? God! Almighty God is the only one in the Old Testament who walks on water. Water...and gravity...these are his creations. He can play with his toys anyway he wants. And God is so awesome that when he passes by, Job dares not look upon him because God is too glorious for his human eyes!

When we read today's story through the lens of Job, it is an "aha" moment. Jesus isn't walking on water because he can make better time. Jesus is walking on the water to reveal himself to his disciples...as God! Only God walks on water. And when we read that he meant to "pass by them"... it wasn't because he wanted to beat them to shore. He is passing by just as God "passed by" Job...to reveal his glory to them. But this time, Jesus WANTS them to look. Jesus WANTS his disciples to see that he is Lord; WANTS them to witness this display of power. Wants them to understand who he is.

So when the disciples DO see him through the gloom and spray, what is their response? Did this revelation calm them? Were they suddenly overcome with a deep sense of shalom? Not hardly!

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.

And who can blame them? If you looked out in the dark...and saw a robed figure traipsing across the top of the water in the middle of a storm...it would probably scare you, too. One of my LifeGroup members said, "It scared the "bejesus" out of them!"

This text is sometimes used to show how Jesus comes and takes away our fear and brings us peace during troubled times. But that's not what happened at all! When did the disciples become afraid? Only after Jesus showed up! This isn't like the storm back in chapter four. These men weren't fighting for their lives. They're just straining against the winds; exhausted and struggling to make progress. But they aren't terrified... until Jesus shows up. Only THEN are they terrified.

The fact is...sometimes when Jesus shows up in our lives, it is frightening. Because he asks us to do something we don't think we have the strength to do. He orders us to go somewhere we don't want to go. He asks us to give up something we don't want to let loose of. The fact is...sometimes Jesus is frightening. Because he changes things. He disrupts our lives. And...he is Almighty God, our creator and judge! In the end, we will experience his shalom...but at the time it can be quite unsettling.

We Christians want to housebreak Jesus. We want to domesticate him. Turn him into our little religious lapdog. We want the Jesus who brings us peace. But sometimes the Prince of Peace brings a storm. We want the Jesus who brings us comfort and quiet. But sometimes Jesus is discomforting and disquieting.

Jesus saw how frightened the disciples were. And so, in his compassion, he doesn't pass them by; he moves toward them with the most comforting of words: "Take courage; it is I. Do not be afraid." I love this phrase and I think it is the centerpiece of our own fight against fear. Not one...but two commands from Jesus. "Take courage," he says. "Take courage. Choose courage. Lay hold of courage." And the other command is, "Do not be afraid." What is the most frequent command in the Bible? This one! More than 70 times, those words appear in scripture. "Do not be afraid." Take courage...do not be afraid.

But...and we must see this...these two commands are not abstract moralisms. Jesus isn't saying, "Hey...dig down deeper, grit your teeth, toughen up, be a man." The key to being able to take courage and not be afraid is what comes in between: "It is I!" The Greek is *ego eimi*. The literal translation of *ego eimi*? "I am." Where have you heard those words before? Remember Mt. Sinai when God told Moses

his name? What was it? "I am!" The very same! Jesus who revealed himself to be God by walking on water...now reveals himself to be God by using the divine name. I am.

It's a courage sandwich. "Take courage" and "do not be afraid" on the outside...and the meat right there in the middle is: "I am." Because Jesus the "I am" ...is with us in the storm...we can do what he commands. We can "take courage." Because "I am" is with us, it is possible to choose not to be afraid. And what a comfort this must have been to his disciples, right? Of COURSE they were startled at first...who wouldn't be startled seeing an apparition walking on the water. But ONCE they recognized Jesus...once they heard his comforting and en-couraging words...everything changed...right?

"OH...it's YOU! Good one, Jesus, you rascal! You pulled a good one on us! But now that we know it's you, everything is better. Climb on in this boat, you old knucklehead." Is that how it went? Nope. He climbs in, all right. And the storm stops, by the way. But instead of laughing...and slapping each other on the back...and congratulating Jesus for his prank...did you see their response? And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

They were astounded. Astonished. They STILL didn't get it. STILL did not realize that God was revealing himself to them. It is so disappointing. Especially since, only hours ago, Jesus performed the most massive miracle ever... multiplying loaves and fish to feed 20,000 people. And I'm only speculating here but, remember those 12 baskets of leftovers, a personal reminder for every disciple? Where WERE those baskets? Did they just leave them on the shore? I don't think so. So, if those 12 baskets were stuffed into that little boat, then the disciples were literally surrounded by a reminder of Jesus' power. But they did not understand about the loaves...and, disappointingly, they did not take courage...did not choose fearlessness...did not REALLY comprehend that Jesus, the I am, was in their midst. Instead...they hardened their hearts.

We called my dad's mom, Grandma Peachy. When we went to Grandma Peachy's house, she ALWAYS greeted us the same way. She threw open the door, big smile on her face, leaned down and said, "Come in this house!" We are never told that the disciples invited Jesus into the boat. He just got in. But I wonder if the harsh verdict on their unbelief would have changed if they had just said, "Oh...Jesus...come in this boat! What a relief. You startled us...but we are so glad to see you. This whole walking on water thing kind of freaks us out. But we know you... and trust you...and love you...and we want you as close to us as we can get you! Come in this boat!" I wish they'd said that...but they didn't...because they still didn't get it.

I wonder if we get it? Pentecost is about Jesus coming into this house. That first Pentecost, the people waited for the Spirit of Jesus to come into that house, into their hearts and lives...to empower and encourage them for all that lay ahead. And there were storms ahead; Jesus was sending them into stormy weather! Every time we celebrate Pentecost, we are saying to Jesus, "Come in this house. Come into my life. Fill me up. Whatever startles or scares or terrifies or astounds me...I want to remember... that you are right in the middle of it with me."

We cannot get enough of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. Especially in our stormy times. It is the Spirit who allows us to believe Jesus when he says, "I am. I am your friend. I am your Lord. I am your savior. I am your deliverer. I am your healer. So... whatever you are facing, take courage! Do not be afraid. For I ...am...here."

Do not harden your hearts today. We Presbyterians can't get enough of the Spirit. So...I want us to do something very unPresbyterian. (Describe...coming forward if able, filling stairs and aisles, kneeling down, lifting hands, invite Spirit to fill us anew.)