

If you've been with us really for the past three weeks or so, we've been in this section in which Mark seems to be bracketing these events where we watched the brutal death of John the Baptist. We've seen the contrast between the kingdom of Herod and the Kingdom of God, as we saw last week with Jesus feeding the 5,000. The text today, where we see Jesus crossing the sea again, and see this chaotic scene, is what scholars call pericope, which is this section of text Mark is intentionally framing so we can think through Mark's particular themes. We looked at this contrast between King Herod's kingdom and the Kingdom of God. We talked last week about how the Kingdom of God is based on this Eucharistic revolution, this breaking and blessing.

This is fundamental to what it means to follow Jesus because this Kingdom of God was established through the act of Jesus on the cross of blessing his enemies and then breaking for them. This becomes not only the thing that inaugurates the Kingdom of God, but it's also the thing that we, as followers of Jesus, are animated into.

And so when we now get to this scene in the crossing of the sea, Jesus is sending them back. We're going back with Jesus to do this ministry and the sea; this tumultuous, chaotic sea is very much indicative of what it means to live this Eucharistic blessing. And so, in this chaos, we want to ask the question, How do we navigate the chaotic waters as we try to follow Jesus? How do we go about living this blessing and breaking type kingdom? Because we, too, will hit these metaphoric storms that the disciples hit. I think this is an important message for our day because, if you haven't noticed, things seem a bit unstable in the world of late.

In 2020, the American Psychological Association conducted a few studies to explore the increasing levels of stress within our country, and without surprising results, the numbers were a bit staggering. In 2020, at the beginning and intensifying stages of the pandemic, 83 percent of Americans reported that the future of our nation is a significant source of stress. Just a few years earlier, in 2017, it was only 63 percent. That is a 20 percent increase in just two and a half years. They also found that 72 percent of Americans reported that this is the lowest point in history that they can remember, which was up from 59 percent from 2017. But I think, as most of us have learned through the pandemic, that the pandemic heightened whatever was already below the surface.

You saw this at an individual level as well as a macro level. That it just brought forth and accelerated everything that was stirring beneath the surface. And to take note of this, if you look back just a few years earlier, you'll see similar studies around stress, worry, fear, and anger. And if you take each of those individually or if you look at them separately in their own spaces, you'll find that the results were increasingly stressful.

In 2017 there was an upward trajectory that had stress, worry, and fear, all increasing 10 to 15 percent over time.

Gallup did a study that identified these and said that the worst cases of this were in young people ages 15 to 29. In the Gallup study, they ended with this quote. "The world took a negative turn in 2017, with global levels of stress, worry, sadness, and pain, hitting new highs; higher levels of stress, anger, and worry nudged Americans' overall negative experience index to 35, which is three points higher than any previous score to date."

We live in a time of fear. We live in a time of anxiety, stress, and of worry. Whether it's the crumbling economy or whether it's the fear of institutions failing, whether it's watching leader after leader fail, whether it's the instability in the political and social world, whether it's even environmental concerns as they continue to rise, we live in a time of fear, a time of storm. So how do we then, as the followers of Jesus, go about this alternative kingdom and live within this milieu without giving into that? Because what we find time and time again in Jesus is his ability to wade into chaotic circumstances. And in my mind, he represents what Edmund Freeman, in his beautiful book, *A Failure of Nerve*, would say a non-anxious presence.

How do we then, following our rabbi, walk into these sorts of storms and learn from our non-anxious Jesus, and also slowly become the people who can embody that in a time of rising anxiety, stress, and fear? I think that's one of the questions we're going to see in our text in Mark 6.

We're picking up right where we left off. Mark, in his typical fashion, is moving stories very quickly from one scene to the next. So after feeding the 5,000, we read, "*Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.*" (Mark 6:45-46). Now what I want us to do is almost envision ourselves as the disciples and, from their perspective, watch the way in which Jesus interacts with them.

So it opened with "*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat.*" That word means compelling. He forced them into the boat. Now there can be some debate on why exactly Jesus forces them or even coerces them into the boat. You have to contextualize back to the story last week. There was this group of 5,000 revolutionaries who wanted to start this uprising. It's very plausible that Jesus was a bit worried about what this mad crowd was going to do and so ushers them into the boat. He says, "You guys get out of here; I'll dismiss the crowds." But for whatever reason, Jesus tells them they need to go. He told them to go on ahead while he went up on the mountain to pray.

Again, this is a very consistent rhythm of Jesus. I want to point it out every time we see where Jesus works and then escape away to rest. I think it's part of the reason he could be a non-anxious presence in a very anxious, fear-ridden time in history, and yet this escaping away to pray enables him to stay rooted and connected with God.

It's a rhythm that you see in him working and resting. But there's also a keynote here because, again, Mark is a literary genius. He's brilliant. Let's make sure we give him the credit where credit is due. All throughout this text, he's going to leave little breadcrumbs about what it means to encounter God in these particular ways.

Mark is especially fond of the Exodus narrative, and you'll see that clearly in this text. You'll see the way that Jesus is portrayed as a new Moses, and you see this first little glimpse of a clue right here in verse 46, *"After leaving them, he went up to a mountainside to pray."* Now, in the biblical imagination, mountains hold a pretty important point. Think of all the scenes of people going up mountains to encounter God. Maybe most notably in Exodus 34, with Moses going up to Mount Sinai to encounter God. I think of the Mount of Transfiguration, which was another moment in which Jesus takes a few of his disciples up on a mountain, and they see the glory of God revealed in no other way.

See, Jesus is ascending this mountain in order to connect with God in the same way that God has connected with his people throughout the generations. Let's read on in verse 47.

Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. 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, vv. 47-48

All right, so Jesus is up on the mountain. He's been there for a little while. He's praying, and he looks out, and it says that he can see the disciples, and they're just fighting this storm. These storms would have been very familiar to have on this sea. They swell up out of nowhere, and you'd get trapped in them.

Now, remember, most of the disciples were fishermen. They were familiar with being on the sea. And so the fact that they're straining and fighting should be indicative of how severe the storm is. They're familiar with navigating these waters, but Mark says that when Jesus looks out, they are stuck in the middle of the lake. They took off after dinnertime, and in the middle of the night, they were still fighting the storm. This was not a long trek across the lake. They are straining hour after hour. Then it says shortly before dawn, which in your scriptures it might say, if you have a different translation, during the fourth watch.

The Romans divided the night into four watches of three-hour segments. And so the fourth watch would've been between 3:00 am and 6:00 am., which means the disciples have been rowing and fighting the winds, fighting the waves all night. Remember, chapter and verse numbers were added much later in the Bible. This is one cohesive story. The disciples just came from this long, intense night of ministry feeding, waiting on 5,000 people. They're exhausted physically. They

hop in this boat, they go out ahead trying to get across, and they're even more exhausted as they're fighting this storm. You get the picture that the disciples are at the lowest of the low—spiritually, emotionally, and physically just spent.

Have we ever experienced that? Have you ever been in a place where you feel you have poured your life out, where you, in all capacities, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, are just spent for a long work day, a long work week, and you are just exhausted? The last thing you need is this image of this storm. I find that when we are in those circumstances, we begin to ask questions like, "Why, God, are we stuck here? Why, at this moment, do you send this storm?" But the problem is again that following Jesus will, in fact, bring storms. There are just no two ways about it.

I think you could boil down all the reasons for storms into two categories. The first category is disobedience, and the second is obedience. Which, by the way, includes pretty much everything. Think about it. The nature of sin when we disobey will cause a ripple effect of consequences that are our own doing that will instigate a storm. It just will. When you make a mess of things, when you fail, when your sin is on full display, that brings a little bit of chaos. There's that part of why the storms.

But the other side is also true. What did Jesus do to the disciples? He made them get on the boats and told them to go across. They are doing exactly what Jesus asked, and yet they're still caught in a storm. Obedience to Jesus and living in the Eucharistic Kingdom of God will bring storms by following Jesus. Think of Job who experienced immense loss for trying to be faithful to God. Think of Shadrach, Meshach, and a Bendigo, which we studied almost a year ago now. They were obeying God. They were fighting to uphold to the way of Yahweh, and they found themselves right in the midst of a furnace because they were refusing to step into the idolatrous worship of the state that Nebuchadnezzar was demanding. Think of Daniel; same story. He found himself in a lion's den as he refused to give in to the kingdom of Babylon around him. Faithfulness brings a storm. Think of prophet after prophet. When you read the story of the prophets, you don't come away with the thought that following Jesus makes life easy.

Think of the disciples themselves. Each of them, at this moment, is fighting a storm but then launches out over the course of their lives, and almost all of them would be martyred for their obedience to Jesus. If we are to follow Jesus and take seriously that call, we will step into storms. We will experience storms of our own doing all under our own power and our own volition, but others will be just because that's what it means to live in the Kingdom of God, which is completely different than the kingdom of the world.

We will experience storms. I don't know where we bought the illusion that following Jesus would lead to a trouble-free life. But we have to resist that urge. We have to step in open-eyed, recognizing that our very discipleship and working that out in our lives will cause conflict. It will cause chaos. It will challenge us. And if we can go into that wide-eyed, understanding that storms will come, I think we have a better chance of weathering those storms because we don't get caught off guard.

It will not make them easier. There's no promise of that. We see that here in the life of Jesus. We see Jesus stepping into the storm with them, not swooping them up and placing them on the other side, and we'll see that over and over. To follow Jesus will require that we walk through storms.

Look again at verse 48. It's right after Jesus is looking out over them, in the middle of it. *"He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them"* (v. 48a). Think about that. He saw the disciples. When you or I are in the midst of a storm, Jesus sees you. He sees you. He is not aloof and distant. It is very plausible that as Jesus is on this mountain and he's praying, he's looking out, and he begins to pray for the disciples in the midst of the storm because Jesus sees you.

I map this onto other relationships. I think about this with my daughters. When they are nervous when they're fear-driven, when they're anxious, and then they pop their head out of whatever circumstance it is, it brings a bit of relief because there's a sense in which everything's going to be. It'll still be difficult. It'll still be hard. And for my little six-year-old redhead, she'll still have tears streaming down her face. She'll still have to navigate whatever the circumstances are, but it's different if dad's watching. Church, Jesus sees you in the storm. You are not alone.

And I have a feeling that the disciples, in the midst of it, had no idea that Jesus was watching. I don't think they could tell. I don't think they looked back on the mountain, and there's a glowing ember of Jesus watching them. I think they were caught in the circumstances, fighting the waves, fighting the winds, and yet Jesus sees them.

But then you get this interesting phrase in verse 48 as well. He saw the disciples strain at the oars. And then notice the first move of Jesus when he sees them is not to remain distant, but to move closer. It says, *"Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them,"* (v. 48). What's going on here?

What I want you to think through is how many times, particularly in the Old Testament, has the presence of God passed by people? Go back to Moses. Remember I told you Mark is very fond of the Exodus narrative and particularly of Moses. He wants to have to express himself to Moses. So he had Moses stand there, and he would pass by, and so Moses would experience his presence in a radically new way. [Ex. 33:19-23](#)

In 1 Kings 19, which we preached on about a month or so ago. When Elijah was scrambling, he was at the end of his rope. He was, in some ways, very suicidal. He told God it would be better if he just took his life. And what does Elijah do? He goes out, and he looks for the presence of God. And listen to this. In 1 Kings 19:11, The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." See this narrative note in Mark is not that Jesus is trying to get by without them noticing. It is something radically different. Mark picks up on this theme throughout the scriptures, in which the presence of God passes by his followers. In the midst of the storm, Jesus sees you, but then he's going to pass by you as a way of you encountering his presence in a new way.

Jesus, in the midst of all of that, is with you. Listen to the way the New Testament scholar Tim Gombis writes of this.

Jesus is not testing his disciples, nor is he intentionally ignoring them, as if he wanted to race ahead of them to Bethsaida without getting a ride from them in the boat. This is certainly a strange scenario, but because of the scriptural backdrop to this episode, it appears that Jesus was revealing to them his identity as the agent of God's salvation, the one who will go ahead of them and make a pathway through the sea. Tim Gombis

When Mark says that Jesus was about to pass them by, he's not saying he's distant. He's saying that Jesus is going on ahead of them in the storm. He is the one who will create the path through his very presence in the midst of the storm. Again, the promise is not that we'll be snatched up and taken out of the storm. The promise is that Jesus sees you in it and then that Jesus is with you in the storm.

but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Mark 6:49-50

Now we have to do a little work on the lake and the sea because, again, it's different from the first-century imagination. For you and I, we think of a nice day out at Lake Tahoe as a lovely relaxing time. But for the disciples and for the biblical first-century world, the lake or the sea was not a source of relaxation.

It was actually a source of immense fear. They lived in a very quiet world. There wasn't a lot of ambient noise in the first century, but when you went to the ocean or to the edge of the sea, there's wind, there are waves, there's crashing; it's a bit more chaotic. They believe that you couldn't actually control the seas. They thought there was this uncontrollable force that appeared very angry, which by the way, when Jesus calms the sea a couple of times, it's not just speaking of his sheer power but talking about something far more significant. His redemptive power to calm and control the chaos. So the sea was this source of anxiety. It was a source of stress. The Hebrews were not seafaring people. They weren't used to being out on the water. There were myths that the seas were haunted by those who had drowned in the lakes.

So pause for a second. After a whole day of ministry, they're exhausted, emotionally and spiritually, and they've been fighting this storm. It's the middle of the night; it's the fourth watch, which means between 3:00 am and 6:00 am, and they look upon the haunted sea and see what appears to be a ghost. The Greek word here for ghost is the word *fántasma*, which is where we get the word phantom. They look up exhausted; middle of the night, the darkest stretch of the night, and there's a ghost coming now. And what I love is listening to the eloquence of their prayer. At the end of verse 49. *"They cried out."* They just screamed. That's how I interpret that. They didn't crowd to Jesus. They just cried out. I think it was utter fear and confusion, and they didn't have the words to speak. They are just terrified, and they just cry out.

Now, where's another place in scripture where people cried out to God, and God hears? Think of the Israelites again, enslaved in Egypt; it says they cried out. And the text says that God heard their cries, which was a radically new idea that the God of the universe could hear what was happening here on earth. Mark is pointing out here that when they cry out in terror, it's very much like those Israelites; they just cry out. Church, when you are in the middle of that storm, when the waves are crashing, and the winds are blowing, Jesus isn't waiting around for you to say the right words; he's listening for you because Jesus sees you in the storm.

But Jesus also hears you in the storm when you're asking those why questions when you're shaking your fist at the heavens because you have no idea why you're going through this particular thing. Jesus sees you and hears you.

Read what he does in response to hearing them. Look at the end of verse 50. *"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid"* (v. 50b). Because it's one thing to be seen in the storm and it's one thing to be heard in the storm, but there's still not a source of courage. Where does our courage come from?

Jesus says, listen, take courage, and what is his answer? Why would we be courageous at this moment? And it's in this little phrase. "It is I." In Greek, this is a very important phrase. It's the Greek sentence, *ego eimi*, and it simply means I am. There's actually no personal pronoun in the text. It's just I am; as far as it is I, it's not that. It's quite literally "I am."

Mark loves Exodus. Are we remembering when the last time we heard that particular name? Moses, when he's called to go confront Pharaoh, and he is terrified of what he has to do because he's about to go confront one of the world's strongest leaders at the time, he says, "Hey, if they ask, who sent me, what do I say?" And God says, "Tell them I AM who I AM." It's the exact translation of that Old Testament word. The Greeks, in the first century, had what was called the Septuagint. It was a Greek translation of the Old Testament. In that scene in Exodus, when God says his name is "I AM," the phrasing in Greek is *ego eimi*.

When Jesus climbs in the boat, in the middle of the waves, he says, take courage. Not just, Hey, tough it out. You got it! He says, "No, take courage because God is here; I AM. It is this profound statement.

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" Ex. 3:13-14.

Fast forward to Isaiah 43. You see this *ego eimi* again. [Isaiah 43:1-3a](#)

When Jesus gets in the boat, he looks at his disciples, who minds would've been filled with these texts, and he says, "Take courage because I am." Our courage in the midst of fear, our courage in the midst of anxiety, the ability we have to withstand an anxious, fearful age is not flippant like in my own ability or just tough it out. No. It's because Jesus sees you in the storm. Jesus hears you in the storm, and Jesus is with you in the storm. And because of that, we can withstand. It is not on

our own ability, quite the opposite. The disciples been fighting all night against the storm. It is not because of their ability, but it's because "I Am" is present, because of Yahweh, because God himself is in the boat, and the promise was not to escape the storm. It was to walk right through it. And Jesus says, "I will be with you. It is I." Jesus sees you in the storm. Jesus hears you in the storm, and Jesus is with you in the storm.

Most of us walk into these moments thinking we have to do it on our own, but that's never been the story. Look back at what we talked about last week. The Kingdom of God is about blessing and breaking. It's what Paul would say, "In my weakness, your power is made perfect." It was not in his ability. And as we walk the road of following Jesus in a cruciform kingdom, that means it's shaped by the cross. It will mean we constantly find ourselves ill-equipped to carry on the tasks that we're called to, but yet in that being ill-equipped, it's exactly the place that Jesus wants us because we find a different encounter.

Jesus will pass by us; he will be with us. He says to take courage because it is him with you in the midst of the storm. And it's in those moments we experience God in an altogether different way. See, what I often find when I talk with people who are in a dark night of the soul is there's no way to navigate or rationalize why they are there.

I worry that often we give up right before there's growth and intimacy with God because it's in that dark night of the soul that we watch our life fall apart around us. When you're in this moment that you feel the weight of life, whether it's your own decision-making or whether it's just circumstances beyond your control, you find yourself at that moment. I think we're all too quick to just give up because we believe following Jesus was meant to make us feel good. But it's not.

Any step of maturity, any step of growth, will sting. It will hurt at any moment. That's when we grow the most. Most will not grow when everything is going well. Most grow through storms. People talk about when everything seemed to fall apart, but it was somehow in that moment that they experienced the presence of God in a different way. In a way where they finally were beyond their own strength. The disciples were straining against the oars. There was nothing they could do. They were just stuck in the midst of this storm. They simply had to lean into the very presence of I AM, who was with them.

Did you notice that when Jesus climbed into the boat, the storm began to dissipate over time? If you've ever seen a storm on the ocean, it doesn't happen just like that. It takes a while for the waves to slow and go down, but there's something different when we see Jesus in the boat with us. You are not alone, but Jesus is with you.

"Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." (vv. 51-52). This is interesting because, remember, the whole section that Mark is working on began with them coming back from a mission trip in which they'd watched God do these incredible things. They'd healed the sick, they'd cast out demons, and they'd just seen Jesus feed the 5,000 miraculously. But Mark says they were completely amazed because they didn't understand the loaves.

It's Mark saying they still weren't getting it. They were still struggling to understand that Jesus could help in this circumstance, which is a very human response. Have we not seen God do great things in our own lives? Have we not seen God move in ways that are beyond explanation, and yet when we find ourselves in the storm, we don't understand the loaves. We don't understand about all that we have seen God do?

And then Mark says that their hearts were hardened. It's an interesting phrase where we don't know what the source of the hardening is. What Mark is constantly doing is inviting us to see where we are in the story. Are we in the crowds, or are we in the disciples? Are we in the "in-group or the out-group"?

And Mark loves to flip these groups. The ones we assume should be in are often on the outside, and those we assume are on the outside, are often on the inside. And hear, the very 12 disciples, Mark is saying their hearts were hardened, which means they were in danger of being on the outside. The very ones we thought would be in, and he's saying they're not getting it.

Now, as we watch the disciples progress, we'll see, particularly through the Book of Acts, that they very much get it, and Jesus grabs hold of their hearts. Think of Peter, the one who denied the very knowledge of Jesus becomes the cornerstone in which the church is planted and built. So they very much get it. But Mark is a good writer, inviting us into this moment, and he's saying that in the midst of the storm, the disciples couldn't quite figure it out. They were trying to navigate this, and they were just looking on in amazement at Jesus because Jesus was doing those Jesusy-type things.

He is saying they didn't understand about the loaves, and I just wonder will they get it soon? Will they see this? This wasn't the first storm that Jesus had calmed in Mark; by the way, remember back in Mark 4. But what's interesting is here, it says that they were amazed, and I believe in Mark 4, it says after Jesus came to the storm, they were terrified. Its progress. Maybe they're moving in the right direction. but Mark says they still didn't get it.

But the Kingdom of God is like a little tiny mustard seed. A little bit of faith goes a whole long way. We don't have to get it, but we just have to have a little bit of faith. God will work with that. Jesus will work with that.

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. 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 marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge

**of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.
vv. 53-56**

Mark gets right back to the work Jesus was doing before because Jesus carries us through the storm. The Kingdom of God keeps moving forward. All who touched Jesus were healed because that is what Jesus does. That's what the I AM does. He gets into the chaos, he gets into the brokenness, and although here it may not be a literal storm, every single person who came to Jesus sick and on a bed was in this metaphorical storm that we're talking about, and Jesus continues calming the seas over and over.

I don't know how you came into this, but I know that in a room this size, in an age of fear and anxiety like ours, there are storms all throughout this room. And I know some of you are in the midst of it, and the waves seem like they're crashing over. The uncertainty that's the only thing we can be certain of.

Church, Jesus sees you, Jesus hears, and Jesus is with you. What would it look like to take courage? Not because of your own ability, not because you think you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps, but because I AM in the boat with you. What would it look like to lean into that today? Because the only thing I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt—I don't know how your circumstances will end. I don't know whether it will end in tragedy or good news or somewhere in between—I do know Jesus is moving towards you. He's walking in the midst of the chaos and the waves, and in a shocking, surprising way, he's going to put his foot over the edge of that boat. He's going to climb in, and he will be with you.

Can we learn to trust that? Can we learn to lean into our weakness and say, "It is his power made perfect in weakness, not through our own ability." That's my prayer.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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