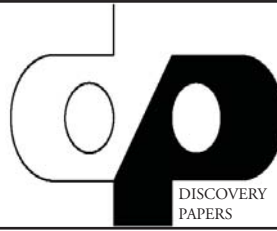


AGAINST THE WIND

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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It is a truth universally acknowledged that two single men, upon meeting a beautiful woman at the same time, will likely both make fools of themselves. When I was about twenty years old, I went with some folks for a weekend trip to the mountains. I knew some of the participants; some I didn't. Among those I didn't know was a particularly attractive woman. Predictably, I wasn't the only one to notice her. A friend of mine promised her that he'd cook a fish for her if she caught one. Sure enough, she caught a trout, but he botched the job. By the time the fish ended up on her plate, it looked like a small pile of hash browns.

I seized the moment. I told the lovely lass that I'd take her out on the lake in the rowboat, just the two of us. When we put in, it was like a dream. The glassy-smooth lake reflected the pine trees and mountains like a picture. When we were halfway across the lake, however, a breeze came up. The trees began to sway, ever so slightly, and the surface of the lake rippled. By the time we reached the other side, the winds were gale-force. For the return trip, I had to row into the teeth of a fierce headwind. We progressed at the rate of about ten yards a minute. I was huffing and stroking. Every inch was precious. Just about then, I heard a voice from the back of the boat: "Can't you row any faster?"

Let's just say I lost interest in her at that point.

Rowing into a fierce headwind, hearing a voice of discouragement—isn't that a metaphor for life? As we make our way through life, we often feel as if something is against us. Progress is slow. Sometimes, we feel like we're fighting for inches to move forward, to stay where we are, or not to be pushed backwards. If Jesus is Lord, how might he help us in the middle of the storm?

After miraculously feeding 5,000 men in the wilderness of Galilee, Jesus put his disciples in a boat and sent them on their way. Their adventure mirrors the challenge of life.

Mark 6:45-56

Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away. After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray. When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land. Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them. But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost,

and cried out; for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

When they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. When they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, and ran about that whole country and began to carry here and there on their pallets those who were sick, to the place they heard He was. Wherever He entered villages, or cities, or countryside, they were laying the sick in the market places, and imploring Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were being cured.¹

Footsteps on the sea

Earlier, when the disciples couldn't understand how they could cater to thousands of people in the wilderness, they urged Jesus to send the crowd away. Jesus, however, enlisted his disciples to feed the crowd in miraculous fashion. Mark, by depicting the miracle in ways that evoked the exodus and by reporting that the crowd constituted or included 5,000 "men," has raised the specter of a military uprising. John, the writer of another gospel, is explicit: the crowd tried to make Jesus king right then and there (John 6:15). Mark does not report that the potential army became aware that Jesus fed all of them with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

The disciples know what happened, of course, so Jesus, who has no interest in fomenting revolutionary fervor, quickly sends his disciples away before word leaks out. He instructs them to travel from the western side of the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida, on the northeastern shore, away from the territory of Herod, whose spies are likely to hear of a potential military uprising in the wilderness, the usual staging ground for such movements. Protecting both his vision of a revolution and his disciples, who will carry on the revolution, seem foremost in Jesus' mind. Jesus stays behind to disperse the crowd. He does what the disciples wanted—he sends the crowd away—but not when they wanted him to do it and for different reasons. The disciples, as usual, are out of sync with Jesus.

Earlier, when Jesus first attracted a crowd, in nearby Capernaum, he separated himself from everyone to pray and then decided, to the chagrin of his disciples, to move on (Mark 1:35-39). Once again, under similar circumstances, Jesus separates himself from both his disciples and the crowd in order to pray. Like Moses, who ascended Mount Sinai in the wilderness to meet with God, Jesus leaves for a mountain in the wilderness to pray. His plans are formed in private with God, not in public with the misguided masses.

The last time the disciples traveled to “the other side” of the Sea of Galilee, a wind-whipped storm swamped their boat and they appeared on the verge of drowning. Jesus was in the boat then, and he calmed the storm after the disciples roused him. Once again, as the disciples attempt to make their way to the other side, they do battle with the wind. In this case, the wind threatens their progress, not their lives, and Jesus isn’t in the boat with them. Nevertheless, he is aware of their predicament, for he sees them from the shore, either in the pre-dawn light or supernaturally.² A day earlier, the disciples faced the seemingly impossible prospect of feeding a crowd of thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish, but Jesus miraculously met their need. Now, as they strain at the oars, Jesus comes to them, walking—yes, walking—on the water. Jesus is able not only to command the waves, as he did when he and the disciples first crossed the sea, but also to walk on them!

Jesus sees his disciples’ predicament. Miraculously, he makes his way to them. We think, especially based on the previous storm narrative, that Jesus is coming to his disciples to shut down the wind again. Mark, however, informs us that Jesus intends to pass by his disciples. What? Pass by? Is Jesus unconcerned for their plight? Well, as parents know, sometimes the best way to help someone is by holding back. Jesus doesn’t intend to intervene, at least at first, but he does intend for his disciples to see him walking on the sea. He does intend to expose them, once again—in even more impressive fashion—to his mastery of the sea, which represented, in the Jewish mindset, the abode of evil (Genesis 1:2, Daniel 7:1-8). What do the disciples need most: help at the oars or help understanding who Jesus is? Jesus has evidently concluded that the best help he can give his disciples is to walk by them on the sea.

Jews believed that their God “tramples down the waves of the sea” (Job 9:8). The psalmist said, in reference to the exodus, that the Lord’s “way was in the sea” and his “paths in mighty waters” (Psalm 77:19). The Lord, in his glory, passed by Moses and Elijah, just as Jesus intends to pass by his disciples (Exodus 33:21-23, 1 Kings 19:11). Jesus at this point may not intend for his disciples to equate him with their God, but he probably intends for them to see the power of their God in him, a human. Walking on the sea, which God conquered in the first creation and in the first exodus, symbolizes what Jesus came to do: defeat evil and inaugurate the kingdom of God in a new exodus and a new creation.³

He came to restore humans to their proper place as rulers over creation. He is a man—yes, more than a man, but a man nevertheless—who, by the power of God, fulfills God’s design for humanity to subdue the earth and rule over it (Genesis 1:26-28). The eye-opening sight of a man walking on the sea provides for the disciples more mind-opening evidence concerning who Jesus is and what he came to do.

When Jesus walks on the sea, then, it’s not as if he thinks to himself, “I think I’ll go for a walk on the sea tonight and give the boys a thrill.” The miracles of Jesus aren’t like that. Jesus’ decision to walk on the sea is wrought in prayer with the Father, in response to his disciples’ predicament, and congruent with his mission in a symbolic way.

Helping by not helping

One of the roles of a shepherd is to protect the sheep against predators. Jesus, as Mark depicted him in Mark 6:30-44 (the passage immediately preceding this one), is the long-awaited messianic shepherd. As such, he protects you. He is concerned that you don’t fall for false versions of the kingdom of God—false definitions of humanity. He leads you, as he led the disciples after the feeding of the 5,000, away from trouble. Much of the time, his leading seems strange and you don’t understand what he’s doing. You may feel, at times, that he does what you want but not when you want it—and for reasons beyond you. Much of the time, like the disciples, you feel out of sync with Jesus, like he’s walking according to some alien cadence that you can’t follow. You might want for him, at least at times, to go along with the crowd, to not be so ... well, so contrary. Then again, you can be thankful that Jesus forms his plans in private with the Father and not in public with the misguided masses.

So, Jesus sends you away from false versions of humanity. You believe the scriptures and do your best to live according to them. Near as you can tell, you’re following Jesus—not perfectly, of course, but he’s your Lord and you’re submitting to him. Progress, though, is slow. It feels like something is holding you back in life, as if you’re rowing into fierce headwind. Jesus led you away from trouble but sent you into a headwind. Where is he now? Not in the boat but back on the shore. If he were asleep in the boat, at least you could wake him. There are times when he’s felt close enough for you to do that. Not now, though.

You can’t see Jesus. Seemingly, he’s too far away. But Mark’s narrative—and other scriptures—invite you to believe that Jesus sees you. He sees your predicament. You can’t get to him, but he makes his way to you. Once again, though, he doesn’t do what you want him to do. He doesn’t shut down

the wind. He doesn't make it any easier for you to make progress in life. In fact, he intends on going right by you. Hasn't he heard that old hymn? "While on others thou are calling, do not pass me by"? Doesn't he care? Doesn't he know what you need? How about a helping hand, Jesus?

Larry Crabb tells about a man who approached him after he had preached at a conference:

I saw him waiting while I chatted with a group that had gathered. When the folks left, I quickly made my way over to this short, elderly man. He put both hands on my shoulders and told me a story: "Dr. Crabb, I am eighty-four years old. Five years ago my wife died after fifty-one years of a good marriage. I cannot express the pain that I feel every morning as I drink my coffee at the kitchen table alone. I have begged God to relieve the terrible loneliness that I feel. He has not answered my prayer."⁴

Could it possibly be that he's helping you by not helping you? Could it be that what you really need is not for him to help you but for him to not help you—at least not in the way you want to be helped? Could it be that what you need is for Jesus to walk right past you so that you might see him in a new light and come to a deeper appreciation for both him and his mission to defeat evil, restore humanity, and create a new world? If you see Jesus in a new light, then you see your predicament in a new light. And if Jesus helps you see your predicament in a new light, then he's helped you in your predicament. He comes to you—rather, he walks by you—in the middle of the night, in the middle of the sea, when the winds of life are pushing against you. The best spiritual insights—those that shape you and stay with you for life—often come in the darkest nights.

Fear in the boat

Alas, the disciples don't even know they're looking at a man; they suppose they're looking at a ghost, an assumption based on the popular belief in spirits of the night that terrorized victims. The sight of Jesus, whom they don't recognize, terrifies the disciples.

Jesus, who had earlier intended to pass by his disciples, confronts their fear by revealing himself to them. Literally, he tells them "I am," a conventional way of saying "it is I" but evocative of the name of the God of Israel, which is related to the verb "to be."⁵ Again, we would be reading too much into his words to assume that he intends for the disciples to understand that he is the Lord God. Nevertheless, his self-identification serves his original purpose in coming to them: that they might gain insight into who he is and what he came to do. The self-identifying words serve the additional purpose of addressing the disciples' fear by assuring them that they are looking at Jesus, not a ghost. As in the previous storm narrative, the wind abates in response to Jesus. Earlier, he commanded the wind to stop. In this case, it stops when he gets in the boat.

In the previous narrative, after Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples "became very much afraid" but had the presence of mind to ask each other, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (Mark 4:41) Now, they are "utterly astonished." Mark reports no reflection on their part concerning the identity of Jesus. They are not so much impressed as bewildered beyond belief, which Mark attributes to their hardened hearts. By echoing the previous storm narrative, Mark implicitly shows us that the disciples haven't progressed any further in their understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do than they had in their efforts to reach the other side of the sea. In fact, it appears as if they've regressed. By specifically recalling the more recent feeding of the 5,000, Mark upbraids them for being utterly astonished. They knew Jesus performed a miracle, but they missed the significance of it—they missed its connection to the biblical story, which would lead them to believe that Jesus is the expected messianic shepherd who miraculously feeds God's people in the wilderness. In days of old, God fed the masses with manna, bread from heaven. Likewise, Jesus, looking toward heaven, turned a few loaves of bread into a feast for thousands. If the Lord supernaturally fed the masses with manna and Jesus supernaturally fed the masses with bread, and if the Lord supernaturally parted the Red Sea, then the disciples should not have been "utterly astonished" when Jesus, in a demonstration of messianic sovereignty, walked on the Sea of Galilee.

The feast in the wilderness was like a parable, but Jesus told his disciples that "those who are outside" would not "understand" his parables. Now, his insiders literally fail to "understand" the miracle. They are, like Israel of old and the so-called outsiders, seeing but not perceiving, hearing but not understanding (Isaiah 6:9-10, Mark 4:11-12). Worse, Mark attributes their failure to hardness of heart, which Jesus earlier detected in the Pharisees, his opponents (Mark 3:5). If Jesus called his disciples to join him in his kingdom movement, and if the movement depends on these men, Mark at this point gives us little hope for it.

Holding on to your world

Jesus wants to pass by you to show you who he is and what he wants to do. He wants to help you. The kind of help he wants to give, though, is not what you were looking for, so you don't recognize him when he comes. This new, more expansive vision of Jesus, striding on the waves of creation as its Lord, bringing all things into subjection under his feet, is too much for you. You wanted a little help, not a whole new world. You want to hold onto your world, not submit to someone who's going to rock it. Jesus passes by, yes, but you don't recognize him because you think he—or whatever it is you're starting to understand—is a threat, something like a ghost.

Listen, it, or he, speaks: "Take courage. It is I. Do not

be afraid.” He wanted to pass by, but you aren’t ready for him to do so, at least not yet. So he stops and identifies himself—again, to help you understand who he is and what he’s doing. Suddenly, the wind stops. Yes, he can turn off the wind simply by stepping in your boat—if he wants to, if he has to. But why didn’t he help earlier, why was he walking by you instead of helping you, and why does he seem more intent on rocking your world than keeping it together? His vision is too vast. You’re worried about how you fit into it. Jesus puzzles you—frightens you a bit. He’s so ... unpredictable. Better not to believe, or to proceed cautiously, trusting a little in Jesus but mostly in yourself.

C.S. Lewis writes of an early conception he had of God:

He was, in my mental picture of this miracle, to appear neither as Savior nor as Judge, but merely as a magician; and when He had done what was required of Him I supposed He would simply—well, go away. It never crossed my mind that the tremendous contact which I solicited should have any consequences beyond restoring the status quo.⁶

Perhaps that’s what you’re looking for Jesus to do: simply restore the status quo. What, a hardened heart? That’s your problem? You thought that was the Pharisees’ problem, the secular humanists’ problem, the unbelievers’ problem. Well, if you are “utterly astonished” by what happens in life instead of reflectively concerning the person of Jesus and the nature of his mission, then perhaps a hardened heart is your problem, too. And maybe, despite the smooth seas, which now enable you to make your way through life again, you haven’t progressed in the way that matters most: the way of faith. If you’re happier for the smooth seas than for the new opportunity to know and follow Jesus, then maybe there is hardness in your heart—resistance to Jesus and his mission. You know the Bible, at least a little bit, but maybe you can’t connect it to the crucial moments your life. You see, but you don’t perceive. You hear, but you don’t understand. You experience life, but you don’t draw the right conclusions. You don’t get it, whatever “it” is. Is there any hope for you and your involvement in the mission of Jesus to defeat evil, restore humanity, and build a new world?

Faith on the land

The disciples, with Jesus in the boat, come ashore at Gennesaret, not far from where they started. Apparently, after Jesus got in the boat, the group arrived at Bethsaida, the original destination, and then subsequently returned to the western shore, to Gennesaret. Mark casts the locals’ positive response to Jesus against the backdrop of the disciples’ bewilderment.

Whereas the disciples mistook Jesus for a ghost when he came to them, the people of Gennesaret immediately recognize him when he gets out of the boat. All the disciples cried out in fear, though not to Jesus, when he came to them, but the “whole country” runs to Jesus.

Jesus had to literally tell his disciples “I am,” but the locals came to him when they literally heard that “he is.” Unlike the disciples, who had not gained any insight from the miraculous feast, the locals are able to draw on what they’ve learned about Jesus. Earlier, Jesus healed a paralyzed man who was brought to him on a “pallet” (Mark 2:1-12); now, people bring the disabled to Jesus on pallets. Earlier, Jesus healed a woman who simply touched his “cloak” (Mark 5:25-34); now, the sick are being healed when they touch his cloak. Whereas Mark notes hardness of heart in the disciples, he notes that the sick are literally being “saved”—Jesus heals them, but in a way that evokes salvation from sin and death.

Together, the response of the people and Jesus’ response to them serve as a rebuke to the disciples, but they also remind the disciples of earlier episodes. Jesus never gives up on his disciples. If necessary, he goes over earlier lessons.

Faith in life

Jesus helps you by not helping you, by showing you more of who he is and what he’s here to do. But you’re resistant. He passed by; it didn’t help. He spoke; it didn’t help. He shut down the wind; it didn’t help. Nothing has helped soften your hardened heart. What now?

You see other people—if not a “whole country,” then what seems like a whole church—recognizing Jesus and appreciating what he’s doing. This, maybe, is what you needed to see. You needed to see other people run to him and find something for their pain in Jesus. You needed to see that he’s real, and the way you needed to see it was in the lives of those who are trusting him. You needed to see faith in action. You needed to see others draw on what they’ve learned about Jesus so that you might draw on what you’ve learned, or maybe on what you should have learned.

It’s inspiring for me to hear people talk about Jesus in this church. So many here have been through so much and have learned so much from it. I’m fairly good at seeing faith in the scriptures; I feel I’m not so good at incorporating faith into my life. But when I see and hear and experience faith in the lives of my brothers and sisters, I learn to draw on what I’ve learned.

When you see faith in others, you remember: yes, Jesus was showing you himself when he passed by, Jesus spoke to you on the sea, Jesus shut down the wind. Okay, so you weren’t looking for Jesus in the middle of the storm. Maybe in the next storm, you’ll be ready for him to show you more of who he is and what he’s doing. Maybe you’ll want not so much for the storm to cease but for Jesus to reveal himself to you.

Is there hope for you? Jesus never gives up on you. If necessary, he goes over earlier lessons.

A glimpse of Christ

When Jesus doesn’t help you in the way you want to

be helped, consider whether he's trying to reveal more of who he is to you.

The eighty-four-year-old man who lost his wife and begged God to relieve his loneliness only to have his prayer unanswered also told Larry Crabb, after pausing and looking past him, "God has given me something far better than relief of my pain. Dr. Crabb, he has given me a glimpse of Christ. And it's worth it all. Whenever you preach, make much of Christ!" With that, Crabb says, the man turned and walked away.⁷

In the middle of the night, in the middle of the sea, in the middle of the storm, when the winds of the world are pushing against you, watch for God to give you a glimpse of Christ.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A Disciples departed in boat (45-46)

B Jesus came to disciples; revelation amid affliction that (literally) "I am" to all (47-50a)

C Wind abated; disciples fail to understand (50b-52)

A' Disciples moored to shore (53)

B' Whole country came to Jesus; revelation amid affliction that (literally) "he is" (54-55)

C' Those who touched Jesus were (literally) "saved" (56)

² The fourth watch of the night, when Jesus came to his disciples, was 3:00 to 6:00 a.m.

³ In the exodus, which Mark echoes throughout his gospel, the wind turned back the Red Sea and enabled the Israelites to cross on dry land. In this case, the wind opposes the twelve disciples, who represent new Israel. But the wind poses no problem for Jesus. He makes progress in the face of it and then shuts it down by getting in the boat.

⁴ Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) 169.

⁵ When speaking of his name, God told Moses to tell the Israelites the "I AM" sent him. The name of God, YHWH, commonly translated "the LORD," means "He is" or "He will be" (Exodus 3:14).

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego, London, New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1955), 21.

⁷ Crabb, 169.

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