



FOOTSTEPS ON THE SEA

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Mark 6:45-56

19th Message

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A couple of my close friends have had more than their share of suffering. At times, as they try to cope with their sorrow, they will ask me, "Where is God? He seems so absent." As a pastor I find this question hard to answer. Following his wife's death, C.S. Lewis wrote in *A Grief Observed* that sometimes when a desperate need drives you to seek God and knock at his door, the door seems slammed in your face and all you hear is silence. The longer you wait, the more emphatic is the silence. Finally, you look up and see that there are no lights in the window. The house is empty.¹ That is sacred honesty.

In the late 1500's, a Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross, wrote several treatises to train disciples in their journey to learn to know God. His most famous has become the classic *Dark Night of the Soul*. He held that there are occasions in every believer's life when God appears to turn away his face and to our dismay becomes surprisingly absent. Have you been through such a dark night? It was St. John's strong conviction that such times are absolutely necessary for our spiritual development.

Our text this morning from the gospel of Mark catapults us into a dark night experienced by the disciples of Jesus following the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. In Mark's cryptic way he reveals much about the mystery of such a night, its necessity for spiritual growth, and its benefits upon the soul.

I. Terror at Sea (6:45-52)

A. An Urgent Dismissal (6:45-46)

And immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the multitude away. And after bidding them farewell, He departed to the mountain to pray. (NASB)

The disciples have just completed the feeding of five thousand men with but five loaves and two fish. Now a sense of urgency comes over Jesus, and with a certain force he "compels" his disciples to quickly leave by boat for Bethsaida, on the opposite shore, the eastern side of the lake. Robert Gundry makes the point that the verb is so strong it implies that he did it against their will.² Time was critical. In his gospel John writes that the people were eager to make him king: "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing they intended to come and

make him king by force, withdrew to a mountain by himself" (John 6:14-15).

Such a messianic upsurge would not sit well with the political authorities. Bargil Pixner comments:

This messianic upsurge was exactly what he wished to avoid. Herod, who in his palace in Tiberias lived within sight of the place of the feeding, certainly had spies among the crowd... [Jesus] had to get his disciples into safety: "Get yourselves into the boats at once! Here we are in danger. Sail to the other side of the Jordan to the tetrarchy of Philip to Bethsaida. There wait for me!" He did not worry about his own safety: "He dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up to the mountainside to pray."³

Pixner gives an accurate picture of the historical and political forces at play. But I feel Jesus separated himself from his disciples for another reason. I think he knew it was necessary to put some distance between them so that they might experience life without him on the turbulent sea. Then they might come to a better frame of mind to understand who he was.

So Jesus left them, and as they set out to sea, he headed up to the mountain to pray. The sight is still well preserved. Pixner's description captures its breathtaking beauty: "The mountain where he preferred to stay time and again rose above the springs of Magadan. At the southern end, facing the lake, there is a grotto below a hanging cliff (known as the *Eremos* cave...) where Jesus could find shelter during his night prayers."⁴ From that high vantage point Jesus prayed to the Father, in full view of his disciples.

B. Footprints in the Sea (6:47-48)

And when it was evening, the boat was in the midst of the sea, and He was alone on the land. And 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.

It was a dark night for the disciples. Pixner writes: "That particular night a cold east wind suddenly sprang up, the *Sharkiyeh*, dreaded by the fishermen. At the end of winter it can become particularly severe, endangering people on the lake. It becomes impossible to sail or row against that wind."⁵ But notice that although Jesus was not physically present with his disciples he never lost sight of them, nor did he cease to pray for them. What a beautiful sight. Our Lord alone in a cave, over-

looking the turbulent sea, praying for those whom he loved.

What was he praying for? It's clear that he was praying, as the apostle Paul wrote, "for the eyes of their hearts to be enlightened" (cf. Eph 1:18). He was praying that they might come to know who he was. Throughout Mark's gospel we have seen how Jesus has been revealing himself to the disciples by means of miracles. In the previous feeding he had shown himself to be the one who was uniquely inaugurating "Isaiah's new Exodus" (Rikki Watts), and Israel's Messianic shepherd who had come to feed Israel (Ezekiel 34), just as Moses, David and Elijah had done. Now in his absence he was praying that they might understand this.

But before the disciples could grasp the secret there had to be some distance created between them. So Jesus watches through the dark night. The first watch passes, gives way to the second, and the third, and finally, by the fourth watch⁶ (between 3 and 6 a.m.), Jesus' penetrating vision sees their desperate plight.⁷ After an entire night of rowing they are still in the middle of the lake, having made no progress. In fact, with the prevailing winds against them they are being blown backwards. What a telling metaphor for our human plight! Without Jesus in our boat we make no progress. Yet Jesus does not intervene too soon lest we fail to make the necessary self-discovery that without him we are helpless.

And now that the disciples are in that frame of mind, it's time to build on what Jesus has taught them. It's time for graduate school, time to reveal his greatest secret as Messianic king: Jesus comes to them, walking upon the water. The one who had previously commanded the sea now walks on it. What is surprising is the expression, "He wished to *pass by* them." If they are in such dire need and he has come to rescue them, why would he want to "pass by them"?

Once again, an understanding of the Old Testament background provides the key. Robert Gundry observes that this verb "*passing by*" (*parerchomai*) indicates a parade of divinity such as characterized OT theophanies (see Exod 33:19, 22; 34:5-6; 1 Kgs 19:11...)." ⁸ We find it on the occasion when God wanted to reveal himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock:

"Behold there is a place by Me, and you shall stand there on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is *passing by*, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have *passed by*. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen." (Exod 33:21-23)

To Elijah on that same mountain, God said:

"Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord was *passing by*! ...not in the wind...not in the earthquake...not in the fire [but in] a sound of gentle blowing." (1 Kgs 19:11-12)

In this instance it is the disciples who are privileged with an appearance of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures it was God alone who walked on and trampled down the waves (Job 9:8; 38:16; Psa 77:19), as it is written:

**"Who alone stretches out the heavens,
And tramples down the waves of the sea." (Job 9:8)**

**"Your way was in the sea,
And your paths in the mighty waters,
And your footprints may not be known." (Psalm 77:19)**

Now it is Jesus who is walking on the water. In "passing by" the disciples he is giving them an "epiphany" of Yahweh, whose presence has come to save them in Jesus. Here is the most amazing secret of the gospel. As Rikki Watts writes: "For Mark, Jesus appears not only to be both Messiah and the true son of God (i.e., true Israel) but also the Son of God (cf. 1:1, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39; Mt 14:33). Yahweh has, in a unique way, 'come down' among his people to save them (Mark 1:10, cf. Isaiah 59:15b-20; 63:1-5, 19)." ⁹

C. Astonishment in the Boat (6:49-52)

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

But, seeing him, the disciples are terror stricken, as if they had seen a ghost. The word "frightened" is used only in this instance in Mark's gospel, but in other places in the New Testament it means to shake up, to throw into convulsions, to be terrified. Yet God who had promised a new exodus in Isaiah said: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...do not fear, for I am with you." (Isa 43:16) Now it is Jesus who tramples down the waves, and upon entering their chaotic world calms them with his voice, using those same words. The simple "*I am*" (the divine name "*Yahweh*") puts everything at rest. Surrounded by a peaceful calm, the disciples are overcome with amazement (cf. Psa 107:28-29).

But, painfully, the rest given to the sea and the quiet bestowed on the prevailing winds does not penetrate the souls of the disciples. They can't make a connection. Mark notes they had not been perceptive about the miracle of the loaves, although they were carrying twelve baskets of leftovers in their little boat; therefore they missed this divine encounter. Here the disciples are so privileged to be in the place of Moses and Elijah, to see the Exodus relived, with Yahweh walking on the sea in the person of Jesus; but alas, it is all wasted on them. Sadly, these twelve are just like the old Israel: their hearts are hardened (cf. Isa 6:9; Jer 5:21). We can hear Ezekiel's words resonating afresh: "Son of man, you

live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious house” (Ezek 12:2). Jesus can see them, but they can’t see him (“see” is a key word in our text). And we are left wondering if Israel’s story, now retold in Jesus, will end with the same failure to restore our humanity and redeem the world.

But in God’s tenacious loyalty the story continues. Undeterred, Jesus keeps giving these disciples more lessons, as the stage shifts from sea to land.

II. Faith on Land (6:53-56)

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

There are three things to note in Mark’s short report. First, where the disciples finally land; second, the faith of the crowd; and third, the impact of Jesus.

A. The Regress of the Disciples

After a harrowing night, the disciples, with Jesus’ intervention, finally beach their boat. Interestingly, the place is Gennesaret, a plain southwest of Capernaum, far from their original destination, Bethsaida, which lies on the northeast side of the lake. Left to themselves, not only did the disciples make no progress against the contrary winds, they went backwards. And so the political danger remains. Rather than being safely out of reach of the Roman authorities on the eastern side of the lake, they are back on the western side, within Herod’s view. Their navigational failure may well serve as a metaphor for their spiritual progress. After a dark night on their own they have not progressed but regressed.

B. The Faith of the Crowd

Secondly, once they have landed safely, Mark contrasts their hard hearts with the fervent faith of the crowds. While the disciples seem blinded by revelation and paralyzed in fear, the crowds appear very adept at recognition and are “*running*” in their faith. If the disciples are ill prepared for the present because of past failure and hard hearts, that is not the case with the common people. They are hearing, running, broadcasting, bringing, beseeching, and in the language of Mark, “*being saved*.” What fueled such faith? The answer seems to be the two stories of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12) and of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:25-34).

Recall Mark’s account of the paralytic who was lowered on his pallet through the ceiling of Peter’s home, to find forgiveness and wholeness through the words of

Jesus. He discovered in Jesus what was earlier offered only through Israel’s God at the temple. And it was the hemorrhaging woman who by faith broke through the crowds and, with a mere touch of the hem of Jesus’ robe, was completely healed. In radical new fashion, rather than her uncleanness defiling him, his holiness cleansed her. One touch was all it took. The memory of these two stories so fueled the faith of the crowds that they had no trouble applying it to their own lives, and with abandon.

C. The Impact of Jesus

So as Jesus goes into one town, one village and one hamlet after another the crowds bring their sick to the market place. All they ask for as they lie motionless on their pallets is one touch—and a touch not even of his whole person but merely the tassel of his prayer shawl (Num 15:38-39; Deut 22:12; Matt 9:20; 23:5). With no theological training or personal mentoring, the crowds take just these two stories and seem capable of grasping the fact that they can find forgiveness and wholeness with a mere passing touch of the Savior. How much theology did they understand? I’m not sure, but their wholeness came in full measure. Mark says, “But as many as touched him were saved.” The contrast proved a stinging rebuke to the disciples. Putting both stories together we can begin to appreciate how Jesus was attempting to teach his disciples, and by implication, how he trains us as well.

I will close by drawing four implications from our story regarding the mystery of the dark night of the soul.

III. The Dark Night of the Soul

A. The Necessity of the Dark Night

Let me say, first, that I believe St. John of the Cross was correct. A “dark night of the soul” is not only a reality for believers, it is necessary for our Christian growth, so expect it. There are times in our spiritual journey when God may appear distant. Like the disciples, we may be going through the motions, with hard hearts, taking him for granted, blind to his kind revelations all around us. On such occasions the best thing he can do for us is to turn us out to sea, “seemingly” on our own. It is there we recover the right frame of mind. We feel the prevailing winds of the world, the darkness of the night, and our own weakness, even when we row in unison. It is then, in that darkness, that we learn to cry out anew to him. As the psalmist said:

**Now as for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I will never be moved.”**

**O Lord, by Your favor you have made my mountain
to stand strong;**

You hid your face, I was dismayed,

To you, O Lord, I called,

And to the Lord I made supplication. (Psalm 30:6-8)

B. The Perception of the Dark Night

Second, though Jesus appeared to be absent in the flesh he never lost sight of the disciples in that sea and never ceased praying for them. Their sense of abandonment was more perceived than real. It is no different with us, especially now, after Pentecost, when he has “sealed” us with His Spirit (Eph 1:13) and promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5). And Jesus continues his high priestly ministry of praying for us continuously.

C. The Benefit of the Dark Night

Third, the sense of distance we feel serves to intensify the feeling of intimacy when he comes to us. At the fourth watch comes the epiphany, when he who walks on the heights of the waves enters our little boat to put everything at rest. Without the dark night we would have not been able to comprehend it or receive it. I have found that these “dark nights” open my eyes to see the divine love of God in the midst of the most ordinary human touch.

D. The Best News!

Finally, we may be hard hearted, like the disciples. When the epiphany of deity arrives in our little boat in the form of human flesh, we are so blind we can't see it; and when his voice says, “It is I, do not be afraid,” we are so deaf we can't hear it. The good news of our story is the patience and the tenacity of God. If we are making no spiritual progress, or even regressing, if we missed a lesson or two, God is willing to go back to the very beginning and redo the whole curriculum. This is symbolized in Mark's gospel by the crowds responding to the stories of the paralytic and the hemorrhaging woman.

Jesus is a very patient teacher. He does not give up on us. He will repeat things over and over again until we get it right. He is loyal, tenacious, and loving. Eventually we are going to “get it,” because the God we serve makes the deaf to hear and the blind to see. This is the good news of the gospel.

1. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (Harper, San Francisco, 1961) 18.

2. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 335.

3. Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee According to the Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992) 73.

4. Pixner, 73-74.

5. Pixner, 74.

6. C. E. B. Cranfield (*The Gospel According to St Mark* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 226) notes that “Mark follows the Roman custom of counting four night watches (cf. 13:35). The Jews divided the night into three watches.” “Therefore be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cock-crowing, or in the morning” (Mark 13:35). The last watch was between 3 and 6 a.m.

7. During the Exodus it was the time of “the morning watch, that the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion” (Exod 14:24).

8. Gundry, 336.

9. Rikk E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 231-232.

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