

We Can't Do It Without Him

Mark 6:45-53

July 30, 2006

I.

Today's gospel reading describes the well-known story about Jesus walking on water. However, it also has two other features.

First, it is part of a mini-series of readings that invokes images of loaves or bread to tell us, in a broad theological way, who Jesus Christ really is.

Second, it has a specific meaning for us today that enables us to understand how Jesus can fit into our individual lives as we approach a time of remembrance on the Gulf Coast next month.

II.

The mini-series began last week with Mark's story of the feeding of the five thousand. It continues today with the next section from Mark about Jesus and the disciples in the stormy sea, and how the disciples failed to understand the miracle of the five loaves. And it goes on for two more weeks with readings from John's Gospel about Jesus being the bread of life. Loaves and bread are common elements of all these readings.

I will elaborate on all this later, but it is useful, at the beginning, to summarize how one of the messages in the gospel today can apply directly to this community today, and how it is an essential part of the larger picture that will unfold over the coming weeks.

That message for today is that the disciples were not the only people who dealt with storms. There also are storms in our lives; being in the boat with Jesus not always easy; and sometimes things go wrong. But through faith in him, he can dispel our fear of the storm and show us the way.

The world tells us that sometimes boats sink and people drown. But Jesus tells us that he cares for us, and will help us do what we cannot do on our own.

The world tells us that the storms will come. Jesus tells us that he will give us the way to ride out those storms.

The world tells us that justice does not always prevail, at least in the short-term. But Jesus tells us that our eternal hope always is secure, no matter what happens next week, or next month, or next year.

And here, on the Mississippi Gulf coast, we can identify in a poignant and heartbreaking way with the difficulties in our lives that have been caused by the wind and the waves. Boats did sink, and people did drown, and lives were forever changed.

We pray that people who lost their lives have a place in God's eternal kingdom. We pray that those who lost their homes can start again and recover a sense of normalcy in their lives. And we pray that all people who live in this community, with the daily depressing reminders of the dreadful power of creation, also can take comfort in the awesome beauty of creation. We seek God's help in looking to that beauty to find peace, and reassurance, and hope for the future.

And for many people of faith, for people who believe in a merciful and just God, a compelling question can be: how could this have happened? I don't want to get ahead of myself because our service on August 27 will point toward closure of the difficult year that has gone by if that is possible, and will lift up God's grace, peace, and love as our hope for the year to come.

But the fact remains that we live in an imperfect world. The Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ began the process of making the world right. But we know that it hasn't been completed yet and will not be completed until he comes again in glory to establish God's kingdom on earth.

In this sense we live between two great ages. It is a time of already, but not yet. The Prince of Peace has already come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. We talk about God's kingdom as "already, but not yet."

In the meantime, storms happen, and I use the term "storm" both figuratively and literally. All we have to do is watch the evening news and we see its figurative application. And all we have to do is drive around the communities near St. Louis Bay and the Mississippi Sound and it literally becomes real.

But God does not send hurricanes, for example, to punish the wicked, and he does not always save the righteous from their consequences. Hurricanes happen because the world is the way it is now. But God is at work to redeem the world, and he is doing it in his own way, and in his own time, and we don't necessarily understand all of it. His judgments are unsearchable, and his ways inscrutable.

So, with that as an overview, let's look at part of today's gospel lesson and see what the story of the disciples in the boat then might mean for us in the church now.

III.

It is obvious from the reading that the disciples did not yet understand who Jesus was. Sure, they had seen some miracles, but they did not grasp their significance. In today's reading Mark points out how they still did not understand about the loaves that fed the 5,000 we heard about last week.

And the gospel also tells us they were terrified. At this point we should remember that these disciples were familiar with the Sea of Galilee and its weather patterns. Several of them were fishermen before Jesus called them to follow him. So a storm, in and of itself, normally might not be expected to cause much of a problem for them. They were used to unusual weather.

But if we look closely, we see that they were not terrified of the storm, but rather of the appearance of Jesus walking across the water. They did not know what they were witnessing; they had never seen it before; and it is obvious that once again they missed the entire point of what Jesus was doing.

As I thought about how the disciples in the boat did not appreciate Jesus walking on water I was reminded of a story about some duck hunters up in the Delta, where I understand some of the best duck hunting in the country can be found.

It seems there was a fellow over there who was known for having some of the finest hunting dogs around. And he was especially well known for his retrievers, dogs that had to bring back the birds that fell into the water.

Now, on one occasion, this fellow happened to find a most unusual dog. He couldn't believe how good this dog was, and he wanted to show this great retriever to his friends. So he quickly arranged a hunting trip with some of his fellow hunters.

Well, they went out to the bank of a lake and built their blinds so the ducks would not see them, and, of course, this special dog was there, waiting. After a while a flock of ducks flew over, and they all raised their shotguns and unloaded, and several ducks fell from the sky

Now was the time for the dog to do his work, and so the fellow gave the command, and the dog just stepped out onto the lake and walked over the water to fetch the first duck, and brought it back. Then he did the same thing several more times. He just walked out on the lake, and retrieved the birds and walked back until all the birds had been recovered

After this was finished, the hunter who owned the dog felt pretty good about the situation, and he turned to his buddies, and said, "Say, did you notice anything unusual about my dog? One of the fellows thought a while, and then said, "Yeah, that dog can't swim, can he?"

This story shows us, in a humorous way, that sometimes people just don't grasp what is happening right before their eyes. In the same way, the disciples, in their fear of what they thought they were seeing, missed the meaning of its reality. And it is a reality that will be brought more clearly into focus in the weeks ahead.

IV.

I said earlier that today's gospel reading was part of a larger picture. It is, in fact, part two of a four part series of gospel readings that focuses our attention on who Jesus really is. The first two readings are from Mark, and the next two are from the Gospel of John where we move from the miracle of five loaves of bread on a Galilean hillside to Jesus' proclamation that he himself is the bread of life.

This timing is appropriate because the series ends the week before our service on August 27 which, as I said earlier, will be oriented toward putting Katrina behind us, and looking toward the future.

But, once again, I don't want to get ahead of myself. Let's come back to today's Gospel as we set the stage for the coming weeks.

V.

A fundamental truth is that we all are in this world and its storms together. The community of disciples in the boat had a lot in common with all of us today as a community of faith. They, like us, were called to follow Jesus' teachings, and they, like us, sometimes falter. They, like us, were called to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, and they, like us, sometimes just didn't understand.

Tradition tells us that the symbol of the early church—perhaps the first Christian logo—was a depiction of a ship in a storm with a cross for the mast. In the days of the early church its stormy seas were persecution by Rome and opposition to Jesus' message among certain Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees.

For us, the storms are different. We don't face persecution or betrayal, but we all have experienced, and may be facing now, some rough weather in our lives. We may have some anxieties or worries that consume our minds. There could be some big decisions to make, or something pretty scary that causes us to fear for ourselves or loved ones. We worry about any number of things that seem beyond our power to control.

Jesus can calm these storms. And if we believe that God is with us as we make our way through the wind and the waves, then our faith is real even though we can fall into doubts or fears. The story of the disciples in the boat is the story of God's disciples in every age, and it shows what it means to be a Christian caught between faith and fear. We have been launched into the storms that trouble this fallen world. And we find that we cannot complete the voyage without God's sustaining power and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

And, back to my earlier point, we also find that we need each other. Certainly we are called to have a vertical relationship with God. But we also are similarly called to horizontal relationships with each other and with the community. We naturally want to experience individual spiritual growth that leads to deeper relationships with God. But we also, as we develop that relationship, are called to extend the church into the world in Christ's love to reconcile, to transform lives, and to bring others into the church.

When I came to St. Thomas I was struck by a sentence in the church's mission statement that describes the horizontal and vertical elements I mentioned. It is reprinted on the front of the service booklet, and proclaims that we are united in Christ's love and drawn into relationship with God and one another. That is a wonderfully reassuring message that has the power to help us through the storms in our lives, no matter how they arise.

VI.

Last week's gospel was a miracle story. Jesus told the disciples to feed the 5,000. He said, "you do it," and he worked miracles with the scarce resources they had. Today's gospel is an epiphany story. Jesus said, "but you can't do it without me." He revealed himself to them in the midst of a storm. Next week we will hear Jesus say "and here's how I can help you."

To repeat, last week was "You do it." This week is "But you can't do it without me." And in the following weeks it is "And here is how I can help you."

And while all of those messages are central to our faith, nothing really works well unless the teaching of this week's Gospel is indelibly etched on our hearts. Try as we might to get by on our own, we cannot do it without him. *Amen.*