

JESUS WALKS ON WATER

Mark 6.45-52

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When evening came (that is, the first watch of the night beginning at 9 p.m.) Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead without him while he dismissed the crowds. Then he hiked up a mountain to pray. As Jesus prayed the disciples faced peril on the sea. Adverse winds arose. The disciples were rowing. They were straining. The Greek word Mark uses is "tortured." Their muscles were tortured. Their backs tortured with pain. Blisters tortured their hands as they fought the wind and waves. They wanted to go one way but the wind blew them in another direction.

We can identify with his disciples. We also have been in peril on the sea. We've felt the wind against us. We want to go one place, the wind takes us another. We lose ground. What makes it worse - so often we're simply trying to obey Jesus. We feel that it was God's will for us to marry, but once in the marriage we discover we can't change our spouse no matter how hard we try. We're rowing against the wind. God blesses us with children, but they torture us with anxiety and anger and frustration as they grow to maturity. We're rowing against the wind. And work - the Lord provided us with a job but we sometimes feel at odds with our boss and co-workers. They want to go in one direction, we in another. And society itself - we're rowing against the wind. The values of society - against the values of God's kingdom. We're getting no place. We're losing ground. We're rowing against the wind.

Mark infers that Jesus looks up from prayer and sees the disciples straining against the wind. He sees they're in trouble but they don't know *Jesus* knows they're in trouble. We often feel God doesn't know how difficult it is to row against the wind. Has God forgotten us? Does God see? Does God care? Mark wants us to imagine Jesus watching us as we row against the wind. He wants us to know, in the words of the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, that "we cannot drift beyond his love and care."

"When Jesus saw them straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning." Mark actually says Jesus came in the "fourth watch of the night." The fourth watch begins at 3 in the morning, the darkest, loneliest, scariest time of night. For as many as 6 hours the disciples have been torture by

rowing against the wind. When the wind first arose, these disciples, strong, hard-working fishermen, were confident of reaching their destination. But after nearly six hours their strength is gone, their nerves are raw, and their minds are filled with fear.

Then Jesus came to them "walking on the sea." "He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm." He "walked upon the foamy deep." Did this really happen? Can we explain it rationally, scientifically? My advice is, "Don't try!" Nineteenth century scholars were famous for their rationalistic explanations: Jesus was just walking in shallow water. He was walking on the shoreline and the disciples didn't know how close they were. He knew where the stones were. It was a dream vision. Don't rationalize! Just listen! When we listen to Christ and faithfully follow him, he expands our understanding of what is possible. When you think about it, it's easy to believe that Jesus walked on water. ^{of to some things.} If we can swallow that, maybe we can believe there's hope for a troubled marriage; hope for a prodigal son or daughter; hope for peace in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. Follow Jesus! He opens our minds to new possibilities.

Mark says that "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 (one of Mark's favorite words) he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Sometimes it takes a desperate situation to recognize the voice of the Lord. I watch people move from the discovery of an illness to its fatal end. They say at first, "It's probably nothing." Then, "It could be serious." Then, "It's very serious but I'm going to beat it." Sometimes they do beat the odds. Often, however, they come to realize that they're terminally ill. There's nothing anyone can do. Sometimes, *only then* do they welcome the words of Jesus, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."

What a daring call to faith! "Take heart. Have no fear. It is I." He doesn't say, "Just keep on rowing. Keep doing your best." He doesn't say, "Everything will be all right." He doesn't promise that the winds will stop. He doesn't say, "It's almost morning. Things will get better." The only thing he says to back up why we should take heart and not fear is his word, "It is I." The promise of his presence. "I am" is what the Greek literally says. "I am." It's a revealing word. That's what the Lord said to Moses from the burning bush. "I am!" That's what the Lord said to Isaiah, "I am, and there is no one beside me." That's what Jesus says, "I am

the Bread of Life." "I am the Light of the World." Jesus proclaimed to the terrified disciples, "I am!" "I'm alive!" "I'm present!" "I'm concerned!" "I care!" "I'm the Resurrection and the Life. Believe in me and even though you die, you'll live!" (Ormond).

After proclaiming, "Take heart; I AM; have no fear," Jesus emerged from the darkness and got into the boat with his disciples. They were utterly astonished. Jesus was right there but they still had questions. They still didn't understand. I'm so glad to read that they didn't understand because I believe in Christ but still have so many questions. There's so much I don't understand. I can't explain. But the wind ceased, the waves were calm, and they reached shore safely because they heard a voice as they rowed against the wind, "I AM."

When you're out there at night, rowing against the wind, not getting anywhere, listen! There's a voice in the wind. The voice gives no easy answers. The voice doesn't explain everything or anything. You still don't understand. But it speaks a strong word: "Take heart; have no fear, I AM." God is; God comes; God is here.

You may be in the fourth watch. ^{or a forecast} You may be rowing against the wind. The stress and strain tortures you. Jesus will come! Listen for his voice. ^{If we could hear testimonies} He comes again and again over the waves, through the darkness, against the wind. He may not come when we want. He may not take us where we want. But he will come! "Take heart; have no fear, I AM."