

Seeing What is in Front of Us

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Today's reading is from the Gospel of Mark. In this gospel the stories known as "the stilling of the storm" and "Jesus walking on water" are not separate events, as they are in Luke and John's gospels, but are found in the same episode. It comes immediately upon the story of the fishes and loaves. As we listen for God's word for us, let us listen carefully to the story and its timing, letting its imagery unroll before our mind's eye.

Gospel Reading: Mark 6:45-52

Right then, Jesus made his disciples get into a boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake, toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying good-bye to them, Jesus went up onto a mountain to pray. Evening came and the boat was in the middle of the lake, but he was alone on the land. He saw his disciples struggling. They were trying to row forward, but the wind was blowing against them. Very early in the morning, he came to them, walking on the lake. He intended to pass by them. When they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost and they screamed. Seeing him was terrifying to all of them. Just then he spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." He got into the boat, and the wind settled down. His disciples were so baffled they were beside themselves. That's because they hadn't understood about the loaves. Their hearts had been changed so that they resisted God's ways.

Sermon: *Seeing What's In Front Of Us*

The disciples were exhausted. They had been rowing futilely all night, trying to return to shore against the wind-driven waves. They were soaked from the spray and feeling battered from the waves crashing against the hull of their fishing boat. It was early morning and it was likely they were despairing of surviving. They saw a figure who, if they could see that well through the mist might have vaguely looked like a professor they'd eaten dinner with, rising and falling on the rocking waves, perhaps leaping from trough to trough or crest to crest. He couldn't have been just gliding, as our mental picture often has it akin to ice skating across a pond. He was coming ever closer in the dim pre-dawn light. The disciples screamed; thinking they were seeing a ghost—maybe they thought they were already dead. That all seems like pretty rational behavior given the circumstances.

I totally get what the disciples were thinking. It's what Jesus might have been thinking that boggles! He saw them struggle all night long, but waited until morning to help them. Except, the text doesn't say he went out to help them; it says, "*He intended to pass by them.*" Really!? Where was he going? What else was on the lake or across it that was so interesting? Was he just going for a morning

constitutional—on water? Maybe to the deli for bagels and lox for breakfast? Making sure he was early for his next preaching engagement on the other side of the lake? On his way to some other more important mission of mercy? "*He intended to pass by them!?*" Did he sigh and start trudging (if you can trudge while walking on water) toward them when they saw him and started screaming? What was Jesus thinking?

To understand what Jesus was intending to do—to understand what Mark was trying to do—we would have to be as steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures as they were. For in words and action, this scene was *déjà vu* all over again—echoes and images that would have been instantly recognized by Mark's readers—and should have been recognized by the disciples—no less steeped in scripture than he.

His intent wasn't what we think of when we think passing by someone—ignoring them, pretending we don't notice them because we are in a hurry and know we don't have time for whatever they want or need, leaving them to their own devices, or hastening past a broken victim by the road like everyone but the Samaritan did.

No, this was something far more powerful and intentional than pretending not to see—and again it was pointing back to God and Moses and the Exodus. Moses was begging God for assistance for guidance—for divine presence. If God didn't go with them, he said, no one would know the Israelites were God's people. There would be no successful exodus. Moses begged God to show him God's glorious presence.

God responded: The LORD said, "I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD.' ... But," the LORD said, "you can't see my face because no one can see me and live." The LORD said, "Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. *As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by....*"

While people wouldn't be destroyed by laying eyes on Jesus, as they would be by laying eyes on the glory of God, clearly Jesus' passing by the disciples as God had passed by Moses (and would one day pass by Elijah) was intended to reveal his identity to the disciples—to let them make sense of the wonders he was performing—and of his whole ministry—not just the fishes and loaves event they had been confused by.

By then, however, the disciples were not only tired; they were terrified. It was clear that the import of such passing by would be missed by them. Jesus tried one more time, with words of assurance. "It's me." He wasn't just identifying himself as their rabbi—as their table companion, as opposed to some other ghost. "*It's me.*" "*It is I*" in older, more formal translations, echoing God's word when God gave the divine name to Moses: "*I AM WHO I AM.*" *Tell them, "I AM sent me to you."* Jesus wasn't just telling them he was Jesus; he was identifying himself with the God who sent him.

But there was no recognition, no ease in the disciples. Jesus climbed into the boat and the wind stilled. It's hard to know if Jesus was so tired from the futile effort to reveal himself to his disciples, that the even the wind fell into sympathetic silence. And still the disciples were baffled: miracle upon miracle; crossing and re-crossing the Sea of Galilee, preaching, healing and hosting feasts that were the foretaste of heaven in both Gentile and Jewish communities; announcements, natural and paranormal acts; reenactments of the history of the people of faith with God; and still they had no idea who he was. How discouraging for the one who was apparently by then aching to reveal himself.

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I wonder how many of us, like those earliest disciples, when we experience or hear of great challenges and great tragedies wonder where God is and what God wants of us. I wonder how often we

feel like we have been rowing all night against the wind. I wonder how often when God's glory shines, we fail to see what is right in front of us. We continue to think we are alone—or worse yet accompanied by people of ill-intention; our trust level for our fellow travelers diminished. If we do have a spiritual encounter, we do our best to keep it a secret and discount it to ourselves as a dream or an illusion brought on by tiredness or wishful thinking. I wondered if perhaps we don't feel that way in these days—exhausted, battered by changing times and beliefs, problems that seem unsolvable—confused, uncertain about the presence of and purposes of God, no less baffled than Jesus' first disciples.

If that is how we feel, today's text can be an invitation to us—an invitation to look backward and forward, to attend to each day's events illumined and informed by the vast imagery of scripture painting signs of God's wonders wherever the faithful turn. It's an invitation, even when considering tragedy, the obscenity of unending gun violence, the racism that tears cities apart, to attend to local and global acts of reconciliation—to people teaching children they are not related to; to community dialogue and peacekeeping efforts around the world. It's an invitation to pay attention to the healing of bones and joints, ferocious diseases and colds, and remember God's hand is in all of it; even when assisted by the most advanced medical technology, healing is still always a miracle. It is an invitation to see a foretaste of heaven's banquet in the first bite of the season's melons, or ripening tomatoes, in providing food at Isaiah's Table, to the treats spread out for fellowship. It's an invitation to allow ourselves to encounter the reconciling, counseling, Spirit of God as we work rebuilding community, nurturing hope and offering vision; in building community with those who don't think or believe like we do; in visiting and being visited; in cards and letters of support.

It's an invitation to do what those original disciples and we have a hard time accepting—seeing the glory of God and presence of God and the purpose of God in the individual acts and events of our days and times. For when we can do that, we will be reassured that we are not the ones called to walk on water; we do not row futilely against the storm and that the purposes of God are evident every day for us who have the eyes to see what is in front of us.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Most holy and compassionate God: Each day and each week, we are changed by the lives we live. We bear the marks of our hurts and joys, rejoicing and grieving, illness and health, successes and failures, disappointments and satisfactions. Things we never dared hope for and things we dread in the night, they happen so quickly. We look in the mirror and find ourselves marked and scarred by events out of our control.

As we gather together in prayer, let us remember that you have marked us as yours, and through your Spirit we have the power to change the lives we live. We may not be able to control events, but with your help we can choose how we respond to them. Each day, whether the events of the day bring us joy or sorrow or both, help us to know that you are with us, caring for us, holding us, calling us to new life in Christ. Remind us that your will for us is wholeness, not brokenness. Give us the strength and endurance to move toward you and to give thanks for your care in all things.