

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 7, 2011)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Astounding Astonishment

(Mark 6:45-52)

Study #12

Introduction: Unremarkable things...

It is not remarkable for a rock to lie flat or for a flower to bloom, for a dog to fetch a stick or for you to use your cell phone. But it would be remarkable for a rock to bloom or for a flower to fetch or for a dog (at least MY dog) to use a cell phone.

We are not astonished when we hear that Michael Phelps swam fast in the recently held World Swimming Championships in Shanghai, China, or that Warren Buffet made money in stocks, or that Congress has difficulty coming to a happy consensus on debt reduction. These are not astonishing things.

We are astonished, though, to see the remarkable, and remarkability occurs when normal doesn't.

This morning in our study of Mark's Gospel, we are going to discover that astonishment is not always a good thing, and that our astonishment may reveal more than we wish it would about what we consider remarkable.

Matthew is not Mark is not Luke is not John...

Today's passage takes us to one of the better known of Jesus' miracles. But even though it is a well-known miracle, the various Gospels treat it quite differently.

For reasons we can only guess at, Luke does not even mention this miracle (leading some commentators to call it Luke's "Great Omission.")

Then, there are details about this miracle that we find in Matthew's account and in John's account that Mark does not include.

That's understandable. Different authors writing about the same event are free to include some, all, or no common elements. They will include different but true parts of the story to drive home the particular point that they want to highlight.

So, I want to warn you at the outset today that I am going to restrict myself to the story as Mark tells it. We are not going to borrow from the accounts found in Matthew or in John.

In Matthew's telling of this incident he succeeded in making a profound point. So did John. Mark, by including the details he does and excluding some details, too, makes his own, slightly different but extremely profound point, too.

Review

Last Sunday we worked our way through the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. There, Jesus filled the bellies of thousands and thousands of men, women, and children by multiplying five small loaves of bread and two small fish.

Today's story is closely linked to that one. In fact, our passage opens with Jesus rushing His disciples away from the scene of that miracle.

Parting Company (vv. 45-46)

Disciples Launch Alone (v. 45a)

[45a] Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida

Immediacy

If we wonder why Jesus was so concerned to send the twelve away, there is one very good theory.

Many Bible scholars believe that Jesus wanted to send the disciples away to get them away from the pressure the crowds were putting on Him to become their king!¹

This crowd had insurrectionist thoughts. They were looking for a chance to rebel against Rome and wanted to re-establish Jewish supremacy, just like it was in the good old days of David and Solomon.

Who better to install as the new King of Israel than this Jesus, the One who can provide bread from heaven!?

But Jesus wanted nothing to do with becoming king. So, as soon as the multitudes were fed and the twelve baskets of leftovers were collected, Jesus marched His apostolic band down to the boats to (immediately) leave the scene.

Geography

Mark tells us that Jesus sent them sailing, west to east, across the northern section of the Sea of Galilee to the coastal town of Bethsaida. This would have likely been a journey of roughly six miles, taking the disciples far out into open water.

And Jesus didn't just make a polite request that they get in the boat. He ***“made His disciples”*** go away.

Command authority

This is unusually forceful of Jesus. He compelled them to leave, to get out of Dodge! He ordered them to go.²

Jesus had been in command at the feeding of the five thousand. There He had told His disciples, ***“You give them something to eat!”*** He commanded that the crowds all recline in groups of fifties and hundreds on the green grass.

Here, He is still exercising command authority as He moves His disciples to another location.

The twelve disciples had arrived at the place of the feeding with Jesus, but they leave alone, without Jesus.

Yet there is something we need to notice here. That is that Jesus had no intention of leaving them for long.

Mark tells us that they were just going ***“ahead of Him”*** to Bethsaida. He would join them soon. The disciples understood that, although it is doubtful that they understood HOW He would join them...³

After the disciples sailed or rowed away, Jesus turned His attention back to the crowds.

Jesus Sent the Crowd Away (v. 45b)

[45b]...while He Himself was sending the crowd away.

It's not hard to imagine that this would have taken some time. Perhaps He stopped to speak with some of them. Maybe He counseled a few folks, or prayed with them.

It had been late in the afternoon when the feeding began. By the time the crowd leaves, it is surely early evening, nearing dusk, maybe dark.

But when the final “Good-byes” had been said, the crowd, filled with the loaves and fishes meal, finally walked away to return to their homes.

¹ John's Gospel (John 6:15) explicitly says this.

² The verb “made them go” suggests that the disciples were reluctant to leave.

³ How do you think they thought Jesus was going to join them? What did they think He was going to do? Walk around? Take another boat?

And Jesus walked away from the scene of the miracle for some time alone with His Father on top of a nearby mountain.

Jesus - Off to the Mountain to Pray (v. 46)

[46] After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray.

There are mountains surrounding much of the Sea of Galilee, so there is no telling which of these mountains Jesus climbed. But it is not unusual to see Him retreat to a wild place to pray. We see Him do that on a number of occasions, especially after a time of trial or after suffering from a bout of popularity.⁴

Jesus recognized the danger of popularity. So, after this effort on the part of the crowd to make Him king, He made a beeline to God for some re-centering time in worship and prayer.

Often, He prayed at night, as He does here. So, with night falling, Mark tells us that the principal players in the unfolding drama are all in their places.

First, the disciples.

Meeting on the High Seas (vv. 47-51a)

Everyone in Place (vv. 47-48a)

The Disciples' Plight (vv. 47a; 48a)

Sailing far from land (v. 47a)

[47a] When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea

When we read “evening” here, we are probably to think DARK. It is bound to be quite late in the evening by this time.⁵

⁴ See 1:35-39; 6:45ff; 14:26-42.

⁵ It is not hard to imagine this, as the feeding of the five thousand, which must have taken some good amount of time, did not occur until late in the day.

And by “middle of the sea” we are to understand that their boat was far out from shore, miles from shore, out in the deep water.⁶

Having located the disciples, Mark now tells us that Jesus, from His nighttime perch on the mountain, could see them.

Straining at the oars due to contrary winds (v. 48a)

[48a] Seeing them straining⁷ at the oars, for the wind was against them

On one occasion we saw the disciples overwhelmed and panicked on the Sea of Galilee. That was in the middle of a raging storm.⁸

Here, there is no storm. But the wind is in their faces. They were having to deal with a persistent, frustrating headwind that was slowing their forward progress to a snail’s pace.

They are all in one boat, and at least a few of them are experienced mariners. They are in open water, at night. And their lives are not in danger. It’s just tough going. The wind is blowing from the northeast, keeping them from their intended destination of Bethsaida.

Jesus was watching all of this from His perch on top of the mountain. He saw their struggle.

A “Jesus eye view” (v. 47b)

[47] When it was evening...He was alone on the land.

Jesus and the twelve are separated, but they won’t be for long. The dark and windy night on the high seas is just about to get waaaaay more interesting.

⁶ The maximum depth of the Sea of Galilee is approximately 140 feet.

⁷ Straining = Greek, “basanizein”; tormented; the idea is that they are really having to struggle against the wind to make any progress.

⁸ Mark 4:35-41

Jesus Walks on Water (v. 48b)

[48b]...at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea: and He intended to pass by them.

The fourth watch of the night

The time stamp is given. It is late, bordering on early. The fourth watch of the night was roughly the hours from three to six am. These are the dark hours before the dawn.⁹

And at some point during this watch of the night, Jesus came to them, walking on the sea.

He came to them on the sea

Supernaturality

There is no other way to understand what Mark is saying. He is telling us that Jesus walked on top of the water. The way he says ***“walking on the sea”*** is exactly the way he would say, *“walking on the land.”*

Of course, that Mark is telling us that this is what happened doesn't mean that everyone believes that this is what happened.

Some very intelligent people believe that the miraculous can't happen and that the laws of nature are inviolable. So, there must be explanations for what happened here.

One popular explanation, first floated in the 19th century, was that Jesus had been walking on a sandbar that jutted out far from shore.

Another suggestion is that the disciples' boat had been much closer to the shore than they thought it was and that Jesus Himself was actually on shore and simply waded out to their boat.¹⁰

⁹ As he typically does, Mark gives the Roman time, not the Jewish, which divides the night into three watches.

¹⁰ This incident was the subject of intense interest in post-Enlightenment studies of the life of Jesus.

But these explanations don't square with the facts or with what we know of Jesus.

- First, these disciples were intimately familiar with the Sea of Galilee and would have known how close they were to shore.
- Second, there are no sandbars jutting out far from shore on the Sea of Galilee.
- And third, if Jesus was really NOT walking on water He was totally dishonest in allowing the naïve disciples to go on thinking that He had been!

I believe that the best explanation of what happened is the explanation Mark gives us. It is a miracle. Jesus was walking on top of the waves. And that explanation alone explains the response of the disciples, which we will see in a minute.

Verse 48 ends with a provocative phrase, ***“And He intended to pass by them.”***

What in the world does THAT mean?

Intentionality

Some have suggested that a better way to translate the phrase from Greek would be, *“And He intended to pass their way.”* Well, it does sound friendlier, but it is, quite frankly, not a better way to translate the phrase. It is actually an inferior translation.

What we have is a fine translation - ***“He intended to pass by them”*** - but it doesn't mean that Jesus was attempting to ignore His disciples as He scooted by.

In Exodus (33:19) we read that God ***“passed by”*** Moses on Mount Sinai. In 1 Kings (19:11) God ***“passed by”*** Elijah on Mount Horeb. In the same way, here, Jesus ***“passed by”*** His disciples.

By the way Mark phrases what he tells us here he is making it clear that Jesus is manifestly God. This is a theophany, an appearance of God Himself!

In the book of Job, God is the One who walks on water (9:8; 38:16; also Isaiah 43:16). Jesus is walking on water, showing that He is God in the flesh. He walks where only God walks.

As with forgiving sins and as with His power over nature, Jesus walking on water identifies Him as God.

So, He was making better progress than they were, with all their muscle. He was walking faster than they could row. He caught up to them and was about to *“pass by them”* when they saw Him - or, they saw something.

Terrified Disciples (vv. 49-50a)

[49] But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; [50a] for they all saw Him and were terrified.

What they saw - an unidentified figure walking on the surface of the sea!

It is very important here that we read carefully. The disciples were not frightened at the sight of Jesus. It was dark. They couldn't make out WHO or even quite WHAT they were seeing.

These guys were completely familiar with the Sea of Galilee. It was their place of work and they were as comfortable on the sea as you are at your place of work. They knew what to expect on the sea - and whatever it was they were seeing, THIS wasn't expected!

They saw an unidentified and unidentifiable figure WALKING toward them. They jumped to the same conclusion that you or I might have in similar circumstances. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

What they thought - a ghost!

The word in Greek is “phantasma.” Due to the impossibility of what they were seeing - someone walking on water! - it HAD TO BE a ghost, a water spirit.

And they were terrified.

What they felt - terror!

Let's not take the easy road and make fun of the disciples and call them “chickens on the sea” or something like that.

Let's just ask ourselves how we would feel if something like this happened the next time we're night fishing on Canyon Lake? I know that I would be scared out of my mind!

So their response to what they saw was completely understandable and reasonable. Jesus got it. And Jesus spoke words of comfort and reassurance to His terrified apostles.

A Reassuring Lord (vv. 50b-51a)

Reassuring words (v. 50b)

[50b]...But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, “Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid.”

“It's me, Jesus!”

He spoke - they would have immediately recognized His voice - and told them that there was nothing to fear.

They were to not be afraid precisely because it was Him who had walked out to them on the water.

But the way He self-identified is fascinating.

“It's me, the Lord God Almighty!”

He said, *“It is I”*. But another way to translate His words would be, *“I am.”*

It is the way God introduced Himself to Moses at the burning bush, **“I AM.”** (Exodus 3) It is the same way Jesus would later make His clearest claim to be God when He told His Jewish audience, **“Before Abraham was born, I AM”** (John 8:58).

So Jesus has sought to comfort His disciples by letting them know, *“Hey, it’s Me, Jesus!”* while also letting them know, *“Hey, it’s Me, Jesus, the Lord God Almighty!”*

Having reassured them by His words, He reassures them with His calming presence.

Reassuring presence (v. 51a)

[51a] Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped

The dramatic scene ends with Jesus stepping into the boat as the wind stopped blowing, allowing the disciples to resume their rowing and to get to the land at Bethsaida.

But the story’s not over.

In fact, if the point of the miracle is to show that Jesus is God in the flesh, the point of the end of the account is to show something else altogether about the current state of the faith of Jesus’ band of followers.

What Did They Expect? (vv. 51b-52)

Ugly Astonishment! (v. 51b)

[51b]...and they were utterly astonished,

Taken by itself, that phrase is morally neutral. The twelve were astonished. Who can blame them? They have just had an astonishing experience!

They were, first, exhausted from fighting the contrary winds for hours on the open sea. Then they were confronted with what they had first thought was a ghost walking on the water.

Small wonder that they were astonished. And there’s nothing wrong with their astonishment, right?

Well, it turns out that Mark wants us to understand that there are times when astonishment is NOT morally neutral. And there was, in fact, something wrong with the disciples’ astonishment.

Listen to what he goes on to say.

No Insight (v. 52a)

[52a] for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves

It turns out that the feeding of the five thousand wasn’t just a marvelous event. It wasn’t just a neat party trick. It was more than a miracle.

There was insight available to the disciples from the feeding of the five thousand. The miracle of the loaves should have caused them to see things in a whole new light. But they didn’t gain any insight.

The disciples certainly realized that the multitude had been fed with five loaves and two small fish. They knew that Jesus was behind the miraculous feeding. But, they had failed to grasp that this event pointed beyond itself to the true identity of Jesus.

They had yet to allow their worlds to be rocked with the truth that Jesus - the One who forgives sins and heals sicknesses and cast out demons - was God. If they had grasped that truth their response to His walking up to them on the water would NOT have been astonishment.

Worship? Sure. Praise and gratitude? You bet. Joy and delight? Yep.

Anything but astonishment.

If they had grasped who He was - and they could have from the feeding of the five thousand - they would have recognized Jesus as the Sovereign Lord, the One for whom walking on water was no big deal.

No bigger a deal than a flower that can bloom or a dog that can play fetch, or you handling your smart phone with and all of its apps with ease.

And the diagnosis of their spiritual condition that led to this terrible lack of insight is given in Mark's final words.

Hard - non-Expectant - Hearts (v. 52b)

[52b]...but their heart was hardened.

Mark is the only one of the Gospel writers who explains that the disciples' failure to gain insight into the miracle of the loaves and fishes was hard-heartedness.

To have a "hard heart" is a serious matter. In fact, to this point in Mark's Gospel, the only people identified with hard hearts were the Pharisees who had objected to His healing a man with a withered hand on a Sabbath.

So far, hard hearted people have been outsiders. Now we see that hardness of heart is something that can afflict apostles.

This is very strong language.

We might be tempted to chalk up the disciples' astonishment to the to-be-expected difficulty of adjusting to life with the extraordinary Jesus. Mark tells us that people of faith should be quicker to "get it" than the disciples were.

Up to this point the disciples have been portrayed as the privileged recipients of special revelation.

From here forward, there is a new and ominous note, and a much less flattering view of the twelve. We will see them as willfully uncomprehending and unbelieving.¹¹

Conclusion:

So, here's how the story unfolds, from back to front.

Hard hearts lead to lack of insight. And lack of insight results in astonishment at all the wrong things.

And that hard hearted lack of insight also leads to a way of dealing with Jesus that doesn't expect Him to do outrageous, out-of-this-world, only-God things.

The trap into which the twelve apostles fell is a potential trap for any one of us today, too.

Faith-filled followers of Jesus in 2011 have softened our hearts to let the truth of who Jesus really is wash over us.

We embrace the idea that Jesus forgave sins. He healed lepers and lame men. He raised the dead. He fed multitudes. He walked on water.

So, when He changes hearts or saves souls or heals the sick today, we are quick to worship, quick to give thanks, quick to rejoice.

But astonished? Nope. These are exactly the kinds of things that we expect Jesus, the God-Man to do.

In fact, faith-filled disciples in 2011 are praying that Jesus will do the kinds of earth-shattering only-God things that will bring Him glory.

So...

what marvelous things are YOU *expecting* Jesus to do, *asking* Jesus to do, in these days?

¹¹ The incomprehension of the disciples is a theme that Mark emphasizes more than the other Gospels do.