

Mark 6:34-52 ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹ Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. ⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And all ate and were filled; ⁴³ and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. ⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. ⁴⁹ But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ⁵¹ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Mark 6:34-52

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“Against The Wind”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“Wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then”. Most music critics seem to think that is the quintessential line in Bob’s Seger’s hit “Against the Wind” from the album by the same name released in 1980. I think they’re probably right. Although it’s been used in about a half dozen other pop songs, and may actually owe its creation to Glenn Frey of the Eagles, with whom Bob Seger was good friends from their youth in Detroit, the line captures mature regret – that adult awareness that not every dream comes true, that even love can’t save every relationship, that things happen that we never saw coming, and it changes us. If we live long enough, all of us will have things we wish we didn’t know, scenes we wish we hadn’t seen, experiences that taught us something, but it’s knowledge we’d just rather not have, right? Life is hard. That’s Seger’s point, and there are certainly times when all of us feel the wind is against us.

That image comes from sport. The wind can be a real factor in any sport played outside – running, sailing, biking, rowing. Even in football, teams change ends of the field each quarter so that no kicker or quarterback is always kicking or throwing into the wind. And in baseball, the wind has carried balls to a homerun that wouldn’t have been otherwise, and has kept hits from being homeruns that by all accounts should have been. Even pitchers take the wind into account when they wind up on the mound. Wind is one of those unpredictable variables that good athletes learn to evaluate and adjust to on the fly.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Mark tells us that the disciples were out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind. But before we dig into this, let’s put the lesson in context. As we’ve been reading along in Mark the last several weeks, Jesus has been rejected in his hometown. Thus, he’s gone out about the countryside preaching and healing, and he’s gained quite a reputation. Jesus heals the sick and the possessed. He denounces corrupt leaders.

He's popular! To help spread the gospel and the work, he sends his disciples out in pairs, and they have some incredible successes, and also face some harsh rejection. They return to Jesus when word comes that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist has been captured by King Herod and beheaded. That shakes them, you see. That's the first time they realize there could be a real cost to what they're about. Last week, we read that Jesus seeks to take them apart for a while – to rest, to pray, to remember who and whose they are. But the crowds are sort of like today's paparazzi: completely unwilling to back off and give them a break. That crowd is needy for healing. They're hungry for sustenance and for meaning. Jesus recognizes that and acts with compassion. But that crowd is also greedy for entertainment. And they may even be ripe for rebellion against Rome. I suspect Jesus recognizes that, too.

This lesson opens up a lot of questions for me. My first is this: Why doesn't Jesus take the disciples up the mountain with him to pray? He told them immediately before this lesson opens that they needed time to rest. So why not take them? I don't know the answer to that. Maybe Jesus needs alone time. Maybe they're a distraction to his prayers. Maybe there's some other reason that Mark doesn't tell us. What he does tell us is that Jesus wows everyone by feeding 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. And then, as soon as everyone has eaten, Mark tells us that Jesus MADE the disciples get in the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida while he dismisses the crowd. So maybe it's a tactic for getting the disciples some relief from the crowds. I really don't know.

But the text does report that as Jesus finished praying, he looks up and he sees the disciples far out at sea, straining against an adverse wind. And in the early, pre-dawn hours, he comes walking on the water, intending to pass them by. Which brings me to my second question: Why is he going to pass them by? He sees them struggling, and I'm assuming that he's also heading for Bethsaida just as they are, and yet, he's just going to walk on and leave them? That is baffling. But of course, his disciples see him. Or rather, see something. What can walk on water? Well, a ghost can I guess, and so they're terrified. Apparently, even after seeing Jesus heal diseases and multiply bread, it doesn't occur to them that the Lord of Creation might be able to walk on water. Not that I blame them. That's quite a leap to make. But understand something. There's a lot of straining going on here. Their muscles are strained from rowing against the wind. Their spirits are strained with the realities of what it means to serve God in the current political climate. And their faith is strained, because for all their hopes and dreams that a messiah would come and deliver them, they're maybe discovering that they wish they didn't know now what they didn't know then. God's deliverance isn't going to be simple and easy. It's going to be costly. It's going to strain their concept of what's possible, what's necessary, and what's divine. No wonder they're terrified.

Jesus speaks to them. Take heart. I am. That's the accurate translation, which hearkens us back to Exodus 3 when Moses encounters God at a burning bush and wants to know God's name. The answer: I am. Yahweh. Tell them "I Am" sent you. Jesus follows that with "Don't be afraid", which is not an uncommon response for a messenger of God to begin with when God's presence is discovered among us. Then he gets in the boat, calms the wind, and the disciples are astounded. But not just because Jesus has crossed the water on foot. They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. What is the connection between Jesus walking on water and the multiplication of the loaves? There's a question I can answer. But first, let's deal with the hard hearts. You know who else had a hard heart? Pharaoh, even after 10 plagues were visited upon his people, his heart was hardened, and we would not give the Israelites their freedom from slavery. It's an expression of stubbornness; of refusal to believe what they're seeing.

Beth Quick writes, "I keep coming back to this phrase, "Jesus intended to pass them by." None of the other gospels include it, only Mark, which makes me wonder if even the other gospel-writers weren't sure what to make of it. And also missing from other accounts of this event – the connection with the feeding of the 5000. Mark is the only one who ties Jesus calming the storm with the disciples not understanding the miracle of feeding the crowds. This language of "passing by" occurs in a few

other places in the scripture, most notably in relationship to Moses and Elijah, who throughout the New Testament are the two figures who represent the law and the prophets – all that Jesus comes to fulfill.

“In Exodus 33, just as Moses is about to start the final stretch, leading the Israelites toward the promised land, after such a long journey in the wilderness, Moses asks, begs of God: Promise that you’ll go with us. That you’ll be with us. That we’re not sent out alone. And then Moses says, “Show me your glory, I pray.” That’s a pretty bold request, isn’t it? And God replies, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The Lord.”” And while Moses is tucked into a cleft of a rock, God *passes by* him, and Moses is allowed to gaze on God’s back, God’s face being too much, *too* full of glory for a mortal to see.

“In 1 Kings 19, we read about the prophet Elijah, who is being chased by those who would like to kill him for the prophecies, for the truths he’s been bold enough to speak. Elijah is ready to give up, and, after a time in the wilderness, he spends another night in a cave, when God tells him: Go and stand out on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. The text says, “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” And that’s when Elijah steps out to speak with God.

“These passages are known as theophanies. A theophany is one of those fancy church words that means a simple thing: A God-appearance, where the glory of God is revealed in a particular act or moment. You know the word epiphany – when something is revealed suddenly, when we have sudden clarity; a light bulb moment. A theophany is when the presence of God in our midst is revealed. So when God *passes by* in the scriptures, it isn’t a sign that God is passing us by and moving on to something better, too busy to stop for us. No, in the scriptures, God passing by means God revealed. In Jesus, we encounter the ultimate theophany – the ultimate revealing of God’s presence. In Jesus, we aren’t looking just at God’s back, or hearing God only in sheer silence, but encountering God face-to-face. God-with-us.

Jesus passes by the disciples. He reveals himself in doing the things the Hebrew people expect God to do. He provides Manna, bread in the wilderness. He controls the Sea and the storm. The disciples should know that these are acts only God could do – and still, even though God is revealed, they don’t get it – yet. They’ve been longing for the Messiah, for the Savior. But what the disciples miss – both in the feeding of the 5000 and in Jesus calming the storm – is the impact of what they’re seeing: a theophany; God revealed in Jesus. [4 ¶s adapted from <https://bethquick.blogspot.com/2013/11/sermon-immediately-jesus-on-water-mark.html>.]

In the 9th chapter of Job, Job offers an interesting lament. He says this of God: "He alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea; He made Ursa Major and Orion, the Pleiades and the star chambers of the south; He does great things beyond understanding, and marvelous things without number. Look, he passes by me, and I do not perceive him."

The disciples could offer the same lament. Jesus reveals himself for who he is – God made flesh. And they miss it. And not only do they miss it, but their hearts are hardened by fear of what it might mean for Jesus to truly be Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Now all of this is good exegesis, I suppose, but at the end of the day, it does beg the question: what are you and I supposed to do with all this? What does it mean for our life when worship ends and we head out into another week. I owe you something, so let me offer a few insights.

The first is this: Jesus sent those disciples out into the storm. Did you notice that. He makes them get in the boat and row against the wind. I asked earlier why he didn’t take them with him to pray. And I still don’t know. But wind is a pretty powerful symbol in scripture for the Holy Spirit. Maybe they needed to learn the futility of fighting the wind; fighting the Spirit of God. I don’t know. But I do know that sometimes Jesus sends us out into the storms, too. Like Martin Luther, who stood before the arrayed might of the throne and the church at the Diet of Worms in 1521 and refused to recant his words

against the corruption of the church. "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me!" And he changed the world. Or Martin Luther King Jr, who faced down firehoses, dogs, and prison for the sake of equal rights for blacks. And he changed the world. Your storm may look different, feel different. But there are times when we're called to speak truth to power, to stand for what's right against our friends and family, to stick to our moral principles when it would be so easy to lift cash from the till, or give into that affair, or laugh along with everyone else at the joke made at another's expense. And when we accept the fact that our faith calls us into the storms of life, we may change our corner of the world too. Sometimes God calls us into the storm. Sometimes the way of faithful living is difficult. Sometimes we strain at the oars, feeling like all our resources are depleted. Sometimes we are rowing against the wind. And sometimes it feels like we're alone in all of it. We're not. God never promises easy.

But the second lesson I take away is this: Even though the disciples got it wrong. Even though they missed the revelation of God in their midst, even though their hearts were hardened with fear and uncertainty, nevertheless, they were never out of God's sight, God's reach, or God's care. God may not promise easy, but God does not abandon us. There is nothing that can keep God from coming to us. He walks across the waters, through the chaos, amidst the tumult of life in order to reveal himself to us.

Tony Campolo tells a wonderful story about a time he witnessed God's care. He was leading a worship service where one of the men in the congregation lifted a very heartfelt, deeply concerned prayer for a friend.

"Dear Lord," the man prayed, "you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. He's leaving his wife and kids. Please do something to bring the family together." Amazingly, as the man prayed, he repeated the location: "the silver trailer down the road a mile." Tony wanted to say, "Knock it off, fella. Do you think God's asking, 'What's that address again?'"

"After the time of prayer, Tony preached, and then left to drive home. On the turnpike he noticed a hitchhiker and because Tony Campolo has apparently never watched an episode of *CSI*, *Blue Bloods*, or *Criminal Minds*, he decided to give him a lift. "My name's Tony," Campolo said, "What's your name?"

"Charlie Stoltzfus," the hitchhiker said.

"Campolo was dumbfounded. It was the young man for whom the prayer had been offered. Campolo got off at the next exit.

"Hey, where are you taking me?" asked the hitchhiker.

"Home," Campolo said.

"The hitchhiker stared in amazement as Tony drove right to the young fellow's silver trailer. [7 ¶s from "You Can Make a Difference." *Today's Christian Woman*. Nov./Dec. 1988; as used in "Who Can Answer Jesus' Prayers?" by King Duncan, <https://sermons.com/sermon/who-can-answer-jesus-prayers/1347269#!>]

I don't always like to tell stories like that. A lot of people write it off to coincidence. And most of the time, things don't go that easily or that smoothly in God's service. But I like it because Tony was open. He was prepared to let God move. A lot of Charlies go missing. A lot of Charlottes fall between the cracks. A lot of people never know how much God cares. And like Job, and like the disciples, a lot of us miss it when God reveals Godself in our midst. And a lot of us fail to be God's hands to another in need. But the work of revelation is ongoing. It's never too late to lift your head in the midst of rowing against the wind. It's never too late to see God with us. And yes, it can be scary. God is not cute or warm fuzzy or even necessarily gentle. God is God. But God is full of grace and compassion. God has the power to give you peace in the storm and courage and strength even when the winds are against you. And if this lesson tells us nothing else, it's that God is always with us, even when you wish you didn't know now what you didn't know then. Amen.