

***Hard Hearts and Minds***  
**A Sermon on Mark 6:45-56**  
**Proper 12**  
**July 25, 2021**

**Introduction**

How should we understand miracle stories today? The Feeding of the 5,000 and Walking on Water are Jesus' two greatest miracles in the Gospel of Mark.

The issue is not whether the miracles happened. Nearly everyone in the first century believed in miracles and believed that they really happened. There are stories of miracles in Greek and Roman literature and in ancient cultures in the Near East. The key issue then and now is what did the miracle stories in the gospels mean and what do they say about the identity of Jesus. What do the miracles point to?

**First Move: An Epiphany on the Sea**

Jesus and the disciples have just fed the 5,000. It is late. Jesus has been teaching all day.

Jesus commands the disciples to get in the boat and sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples are already dead tired. Remember, they just returned from the mission to go two by two to all the villages in Galilee. Now Jesus wants them to row eight miles at night on choppy waters. Jesus is encouraging them to be independent. He wants them to go do ministry on their own. Commentators often compare the disciples in the boat to the church, continuing the ministry of Jesus after he has been resurrected.

Jesus stays behind and dismisses the crowd. Then he goes away by himself on a mountain to pray.

Human beings pray; divine beings do not. As Mark prepares to present an epiphany in which Jesus appears at his most divine, Mark first presents Jesus as a human who prays to God.

Mark is continuing with the Exodus imagery that he used in the Feeding of the 5,000. Just as Moses left the people behind to ascend Mt. Sinai to commune with God, Jesus sends the disciples away so that he can climb the mountain to be with God.

It is the middle of the night; Mark says it is the fourth watch. The Romans divided the evening into four watches for guard duty. Each watch was three hours

long. The watches start at 6 p.m. and end at 6 a.m. The beginning of the fourth watch would be at 3:00 in the morning. It is approaching dawn, when God's light breaks into the darkness.

Mark starts using language that describes Jesus as God. This is as close as Mark comes to saying that Jesus is God.

Jesus demonstrates supernatural vision. He sees the disciples in the boat, eight miles away in the middle of the lake in the dark of night, while he is at the top of a mountain.

Jesus sees that the disciples are distressed. The Greek text says that they are tortured in their rowing, struggling to make progress into a strong wind. Mark's community may have identified this with the distress they were enduring during the Jewish War.

The stormy sea was linked with death in Jewish apocalyptic literature; it is imagery of the chaos of the end-time.

Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the sea. This is usually translated as Jesus was walking on water. The Greek actually says that Jesus was walking on the sea.

Mark often compares Jesus to the prophets, Moses, Elijah and Elisha, but none of the prophets could walk on water. Only God has power like that. Job 9:8 says that God alone stretched out the heavens and walked on the waters.

Mark says that Jesus wanted to go by the disciples. This is an allusion to Exodus 33. Moses is talking to God on Mount Sinai. Moses asks to see the glory of God. God says, "You cannot see my face and live. But I will pass by you. You must cover your eyes and only after I have passed by will I allow you to see my back."

God also passes by Elijah in the passage in 1 Kings 19:11 about the still, small voice. To pass by becomes almost a technical term for a divine epiphany in the Old Testament. Jesus wants to pass by and go before them in a New Exodus, just as Yahweh led the people from Egypt.

When the disciples see Jesus passing by, walking on the sea, they cry out. They are afraid, which is a stereotypical response by humans to an epiphany. They think they are seeing a ghost. The Greek word is φάντασμα. The disciples have been with Jesus from the first day of his ministry. They have seen all his miracles, all his healings, all his exorcisms. Yet they are afraid.

Jesus says things that only God and angels of the Lord say in the Old Testament. "Be courageous. I am. Fear not." Some translations say, "It is I," or "Here I am." Both meanings are possible. Mark may have intended both meanings. The Greek words are, ἐγώ εἰμι. It is an usual construction; it jumps out at you in Greek.

It means, “I am,” with emphasis on the *I*. We usually hear it from the mouth of God in the Old Testament. These are the words that God uses at the burning bush when he tells Moses his name, I am what I am, or I am the one who is. I am the ultimate authority. I am perfectly free to do what I believe is best.

Mark is showing us how dense the disciples are. He is all but hitting us over the head with a club, saying that Jesus is God, and the disciples can't see it. They still think he is a ghost not God.

Then we have one of the most unusual verses in Scripture. “For they did not understand about the loaves, but rather the heart of them had been hardened.” The reason that the disciples are afraid of Jesus’ walking on the sea is that they don't understand about the loaves. When Matthew and Luke retell this story in their gospels, they leave out this verse. Matthew even softens and has the disciples say instead, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

You will remember that last week Jesus had pity on the crowds. He thought they were like sheep without a shepherd. They had no leaders. The disciples had a different reaction. Instead of having pity on the crowds, the disciples wanted to send them away. Jesus said, “No, you give them something to eat.” The disciples want to be leaders, but they don't have the right attitude. Leaders should have compassion for the people they serve. Their guts should be stirred.

Mark contrasts the faith of the disciples with the faith of the crowds. When the boat lands, the crowds immediately recognize Jesus. The disciples think Jesus is a ghost, but the crowds recognize the true nature of Jesus.

From the moment that Jesus lands, the same supernatural power that he has displayed in walking on water begins to radiate out and stir up the entire countryside. The crowds rush about the whole land and begin bringing sick people on pallets. Wherever Jesus went, into villages or cities or fields, the people brought the sick to him and begged that they might be allowed to touch the hem of his garment.

This reminds us of the woman with the flow. She approached Jesus in the crowd and said to herself, “If I but touch his garment I will be made well.” Now there is a progression. The people want to touch only the *hem* of his garment. Sam Cooke had a gospel song about this. I wish it was in our hymnal. “If I could just touch the hem of his garment, I know I'll be made whole.”

Mark also is showing that Jesus is an observant Jew, even to the tassels on his garment. Jewish men wore robes with fringes on all four corners of their robe. It was intended to remind them of God’s commandments.

## **Second Move: The Disciples Can't See the Kingdom**

Why is Mark so hard on the disciples? He says that their *heart* was hardened. Mark often treats the disciples as an undifferentiated group; here he describes their heart (singular) as being hardened. Hardening the heart is usually reserved for Israel's enemies, like Pharaoh. We think of the heart as the seat of emotion, but in the first century people thought the heart was the seat of understanding. The disciples' heart keeps them from understanding. Today we would say they have closed minds.

To understand is to receive a divine gift. The hardening of their heart is in the perfect passive voice, which is used in Scripture to describe the action of God. The disciples' heart had been hardened by God. That sounds troubling to us today. We could interpret it as people having their hearts hardened by forces outside themselves, like assumptions they pick up from the culture. We need to look outside ourselves to break our settled assumptions.

The disciples don't understand that Jesus is leading a New Exodus. Jesus repeats God's greatest miracles in the wilderness: feeding the people with manna and dividing the sea to lead the people to freedom. The disciples exhibit the murmuring of the people in the wilderness. Their faith is lacking. They are like the second type of seed in the Parable of the Sower: the seed that falls on rocky ground. "When they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away."

I keep coming back to that haunting line: "The disciples didn't understand about the loaves." This is Mark's eucharistic theology. Jesus miraculously makes himself present to the disciples in the sea, just as he did in the breaking of the loaves in the Feeding of the 5,000. The disciples were fearful because of their separation from Jesus, but Jesus sees them in distress and comes to them, just as he comes to us each week in the Eucharist.

What these miracles point to in Mark is that the eschatological age is dawning in the person of Jesus. In Jewish apocalypticism, miracles were seen as divine intervention to vindicate God's people and establish God's kingdom. In Judaism, miracles were understood as manifestations of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is breaking in, and the disciples can't see it.

## **Third Move: Many People Today Can't See the Kingdom**

Disciples of Christ began as a restoration movement. Our founders wanted to go back to the ideal of the New Testament church. Mark wants to go back to the ideal of the covenant community on Mt. Sinai. Jesus is establishing a new covenant

community. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Mark portrays Jesus as the supreme interpreter of the law.

Jesus is building the kingdom of God around him. And the disciples don't get it. They still think the kingdom is about glory, sitting at the right hand and left hand of Jesus when he returns in power.

In Mark, the kingdom is about the cross. It is about having pity on the crowds. It is about healing people.

A lot of folks who consider themselves good Christians today still don't get it. They don't get past the surface level of the miracles. They think that the meaning of these two miracles is that Jesus is a Superman, that Jesus has the supernatural power of God. Jesus can save us and give us a ticket to heaven if only we believe in him. The kingdom is equated with heaven. The goal of the faith journey is life after death in heaven. The good people get in and the bad people spend an eternity in hell.

Jesus never talked about heaven like that. Jesus taught about the kingdom of God more than anything else. The kingdom is a time here on earth, when heaven comes down to earth. All people are fully responsive to God. They live in covenant with God, just as God intended to live in covenant with the people of Israel at Sinai.

Only half a dozen churches in Edmond are moderate to progressive theologically. We share a minority view that the kingdom here on earth was the core of the good news that Jesus proclaimed. Mary and I pray each week in the Invocation for the coming of the kingdom. We as a congregation pray the Lord's Prayer each week: thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. On earth. Congregations that pray for the kingdom are becoming the faithful remnant of Christianity.

The triumphant theology of most evangelical churches has disastrous effects on their anthropology, which is a seminary word that means their understanding about people and the culture they create.

We will talk about it this fall with our next book on Wednesday nights, *Jesus and John Wayne*. Copies of it are on the table in the back of the sanctuary. It is about a toxic masculinity that has emerged in evangelical culture in the past 75 years. Last year we read *White Too Long*, which was about white supremacy in the church. *Jesus and John Wayne* is a perfect complement; it is about male patriarchy in the church.

Best-selling evangelical authors have rejected the Jesus that you learn about in Sunday School, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. That is a feminine Jesus. They prefer Jesus the warrior, riding on a white horse in oceans of blood in Revelation. They embrace militarism; they were staunch supporters of the Cold War as a clash between good and evil. After the Soviet Union fell, they had an expanding view of

the other as evil that must be contained, by holy war if necessary. The enemies became Muslims, immigrants and liberals. These evangelicals believe that we are in a fight for survival and that the country needs to be protected from its enemies.

*Jesus and John Wayne* is written by Kristin Du Mez. She is an evangelical scholar in church history and gender studies. She grew up in evangelical circles and understands evangelicals. She looks at the last 75 years in evangelical culture through the lens of gender. It is not a pretty sight. Her thesis is that the white supremacists in the evangelical movement responded to the civil rights movement in the 1960s by doubling down on traditional gender roles. They articulated a doctrine of complementarianism. It is a religious view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious leadership. That sounds good on the surface, but those roles mean that men are the leaders in the home and in the church and women are the helpers, whose role is to submit to the servant leadership of men. Women cannot be ordained as ministers or lead worship. Homosexuality is an abomination because men voluntarily assume the role of the weaker sex. They give up their masculinity for femininity.

We have been asking how to bridge the partisan divide. It seems like evangelicalism is becoming a separate religion with people who embrace this vision of toxic masculinity.

What gives me hope is that *Jesus and John Wayne* is creating a stir in evangelical circles. Du Metz has been talking to packed houses in evangelical churches, and evangelicals are acknowledging that there is truth in what she writes. Her book was just released in paperback and it has shot up to Number 4 on the best-seller list. Evangelicals are willing to listen to one of their own, and she has helped the scales fall from their eyes.

## **Conclusion**

Mark asks us to embrace a theology of the cross instead of a theology of glory. The disciples don't get it, but the crowds do.

We are in the middle of a culture war today with conflicting visions of the common good. Our challenge is to be faithful disciples of Christ and to pray for God to give us the gift of understanding.

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