

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Eleven – Mark 6:30-56

Mark 6:30-32 - *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.*

The Apostles have returned from their mission to the surrounding villages, and they seem to have met with some success, so much so that once again, the crowds have made it impossible for them to even get a bite to eat – a favourite complaint of Peter. The context of the passage sounds as though they have returned to Capernaum, Jesus’ ministry base.

Jesus suggests they find a quiet place outside the Capernaum city walls to get a break from the crowds. They take a boat to get there, which indicates that the destination is by the shore, but a part of the coastline not heavily populated. We know Capernaum and Magdala to be large population centres, numbering in the thousands; would a quiet place be found between them?

Mark 6:33 - *But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.*

The crowds are not fooled. They follow the progress of the boat along the shoreline, and run to keep up – an indication that it wasn’t very far, and that rather than crossing the wider part of the lake, the boat skirted the shore. The traditional location for the landing spot is called Tabgha, once known the Heptapagon, meaning “seven springs;” there are springs which feed the lake in this area. It is about a 45 minute brisk walk from Capernaum.

Mark 6:34 - *When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.*

This event, and the way Mark reports it, is rich with imagery from the Old Testament. “Sheep without a shepherd” would immediately bring to mind the worry expressed by Moses, when God told him he would not be leading the people into the Promised Land. Moses said, “May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring

them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:15–17). Linking this passage together with this event, Mark is picturing Jesus as Moses' successor, who would lead the people into the promised Kingdom.

Mark 6:35-36 - By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

Note the contrast between Jesus, who had compassion on the crowd, and the disciples, who want to send the people away. Fair enough – the whole point of this exercise had been to find a quiet place to rest and to eat, and now they're in a mob scene once again – with 5000 people! I can't bring myself to blame the disciples for wanting a break.

Mark 6:37 - But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish."

The disciples had just returned from travelling from village to village, relying on the hospitality of others. Now Jesus turns the tables on them – they're to feed the villagers! A half-year's wages – 200 denarii – would have been well beyond the means of the disciples, not to mention the logistical difficulties of obtaining that much food. But Jesus never was much troubled by logistical difficulties.

The disciples are reflecting a common OT complaint: Moses objected when God told him to feed the people (six hundred thousand soldiers) for a month: **"Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"** (Num. 11:22). When Elisha asks his servant to feed the company of prophets, he balked, **"How can I set this before a hundred men?"** (2 Kings 4:43a). Would Jesus prove to be greater than Moses and Elisha?

The remote place, the crowd, the hunger, and now the miraculous provision of food bring many images to mind – two of the most famous being from the Numbers and 2 Kings passages quoted above. Facing an impossibly large and hungry multitude, God says to Moses, **"Is the LORD's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you"** (Numbers 11:23). Elisha, speaking for God, says to his servant, **"The LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over' "** (2 Kings 4:43b).

Mark is also recalling his favourite Messianic prophet, Isaiah, and this vision of the heavenly banquet (Isaiah 55:1-2):

**“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; (the Seven Springs?)
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! (We don’t have 200 denarii!)
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. (or, in this case, bread and fish)**

Of course, the feeding of the multitude also brings to mind the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and their being miraculously fed in the desert – or “remote place” - with Manna. Like Moses, Jesus feeds the people with teaching and with miraculous food. But in Jesus’ case, there are 12 baskets left over – sufficient for all 12 tribes of Israel!

Mark 6:39-44 - Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. 42 They all ate and were satisfied, 43 and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. 44 The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Not as obvious, but woven throughout this passage, are parallels to Psalm 23, “The Lord’s My Shepherd.” Jesus looks upon the people with the compassion of a shepherd; he brings them to green pastures (the area is described as “green grass”) and waters (Heptapagon!). He feeds them so they “shall not want;” in his teaching, he “restores their soul,” and “guides them in the right path.” In providing an echo of the heavenly banquet, he “prepares a table before me.” With so many leftovers (12 baskets), the “cup runneth over!”

There is another passage called to mind. Here, Mark writes, ***“looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples...”*** Later, at the Last Supper, Mark writes: ***“Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples.”*** The Communion feast echoes this compassionate miracle of provision for all.

A final note – ***“The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.”*** This, and the instruction to seat the group in hundreds and fifties, sounds very military – another echo to Rome, as in the “Legion of Demons” story, and the superiority of Jesus over Rome – rather than destroying, he feeds and cares for his spiritual legions of people.

Mark 6:45-46 - Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

“Immediately” – one of Jesus’ favourite words – the disciples are sent to Bethsaida, about 8 km due east. The hour is late; the crowd is dismissed. Jesus, needing time alone – it has been a very busy day! – “went up a mountainside to pray,” and perhaps “recharge,” if the miracle took considerable spiritual energy. Perhaps this is the Eremos cave, up the side of the Mount of Beatitudes.

Mark 6:47-50 - Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. 48 He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, 49 but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, 50 because they all saw him and were terrified.

About the fourth watch of the night (literally, between 3 and 6 am) he went out to them, walking on the lake. Mark depicts Jesus as walking on the sea (not along the shore!). The scene is intended to hark back to Old Testament images of God as one who tramples the waves, as in the “stilling of the sea” passage. Jesus is more than a successor to Moses who fills up bread baskets in the desert; he is God with us.

Curiously, it says, “He was about (literally, “wanted”) to pass by them.” What’s going on here? Why not rescue them from their peril? Don’t confuse this passage with the “deadly storm” passage. There’s no fear of drowning in this account, only a delay due to high winds – the disciples aren’t in danger, they are merely “straining at the oars,” and had been for some time. There are two Old Testament passages which explain:

Exodus 33:19-20 - And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

In 1 Kings 19:11-12, the Lord tells Elijah to stand on the mountain, ***“for the LORD is about to pass by.”*** When Jesus wants to pass by his disciples, he wants them to see him as a divine being and to give them reassurance. God cannot be fully seen, but Jesus can. The one who comes to them on the sea is not simply a successor to Moses, who fills baskets with bread in the desert. Only God can walk on the sea. The Transfiguration is still to happen; this is a foretaste.

Mark 6:49-52 but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, 50 because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” 51 Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, 52 for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Understandably, the disciples, seeing someone walking on the water, thought it was a ghost, and were terrified. Jesus calls out, ***“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”*** “It is I,” can be better rendered, “I am!” Remember, the proper name for God, revealed to Moses, is “I am.” The theophany – a vision of God – is complete. Only God can walk on the water – and only God refers to himself by that name.

The divine nature of Jesus is further emphasized by the sudden calm as he enters the boat, replaying the storm scene of Chapter 4 in a single verse. But they still don’t fully understand who Jesus is, despite the miraculous provision of food and the walking on water. “Hardened hearts” refers to disobedience, dullness, and obstinacy, and used to Jesus’ opponents:

Mark 3:5 - He looked around at them (his accusers) in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts (same word)

Mark 8:17 - Do you (the disciples) still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?

For Mark, the Gospel account is a gradual revelation of understanding for the disciples – and for the readers. The difference between the opponents of Jesus and the disciples is that the opponents reject Jesus, but the disciples struggle on and flow in the midst of their lack of understanding and doubt – a lesson for all who were to follow. Our failure to fully understand Jesus does not change who he is.

What about Peter walking on the water? Good question! Mark does not include this important part of the story, and if this is Peter’s account, surely it would include it! So why not? A couple of contradictory answers spring to mind:

- 1) It makes Peter look too good, as the only disciple to have such faith as to give it a try, while the others stayed in the boat. The Gospel of Mark paints a picture of a Peter who is bold and brash, but also self-effacing – even when he looks good, as in the Confession at Caesarea Philippi (You are the Christ!) he soon looks not so good (Get behind me Satan!). Peter, all too aware of his own failings, is too humble to make himself the star.

- 2) It makes Peter look bad, in allowing circumstances to cause him to fail (starting to sink) even in a moment of triumph. Jesus accuses him of having little faith, and of doubting. Perhaps this was too painful for Peter to recount.

Mark 6:53-56 - When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. 54 As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. 55 They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

They land not at Bethsaida, but at Gennesaret. This is the opposite end of the north shore of the Sea of Galilee altogether! It also says in verse 47 that Jesus encountered them “in the middle of the lake,” rather than close to shore, where the natural route would take them. It looks as though the disciples had strained against the oars throughout the night to little good effect. Is this a lesson that in the absence of Jesus, little can be done?

Mark 6:56 - And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Once again, Jesus is recognised, and great commotion is underway, with people from throughout the region coming for healing. Mark adds a postscript to this passage, which concludes this chapter of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee, with a synopsis of the healing ministry of Jesus. Even to touch his cloak (as per the woman with the issue of blood) was sufficient to provide healing.

Small wonder that throughout the ages, religious “relics” – fragments of holy people, clothing or places – were thought to have great spiritual value. Not so much among Presbyterians today! But we are left to puzzle with verses like this, or even more, this from Acts 19:11-12 – ***“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.”***

Next week – Mark Chapter 7 – the whole thing!