

# SAVIOR IN DARKNESS

Mark 6:45-56

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 25, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 6, verses 45 through 56. In this gospel lesson, Jesus comes to his disciples, who are lost and blind in darkness. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 6, beginning at verse 45, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>45</sup> Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>46</sup> And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>47</sup> And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. <sup>48</sup> And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, <sup>49</sup> but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, <sup>50</sup> 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.”** <sup>51</sup> And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, <sup>52</sup> for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

<sup>53</sup> When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. <sup>54</sup> And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him <sup>55</sup> and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup> And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

We are by nature sinful and unclean. We are hostile to God. We are blind to him. Jesus could come and stand right in front of us. He could raise the dead before our eyes. He could find some crumbs on the floor and turn them into a feast. He could walk on water across a lake. And we would not believe in him unless the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe. “[We] cannot by [our] own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him.” The Holy Spirit must reveal it to us.

---

This miracle occurs immediately after the feeding of the five thousand, which we considered last week. So the crowd mentioned at the beginning of this text is the very same crowd Jesus miraculously fed. The text for today is what happened right after dinner.

Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side of the sea. They had just gotten to this place by boat earlier that day. They were seeking rest, but the crowd saw them and ran ahead of them to meet them there, and they got no rest. Jesus taught the crowd and

fed them. It ended up not being very restful at all. So apparently, Jesus is still seeking that rest when he sends them off.

And we see Jesus' continuing compassion for the crowd when he stays back to dismiss them. He does not abandon them or slip away secretly. But he sends them on their way rightly. He continues to be their shepherd.

Then he went off by himself to pray. This is one of the more mysterious things about Jesus. He prays, and not just for the sake of other people. That is, he doesn't just lead group prayer, but he also prays alone. This might seem like an odd thing for him to do, because he is God. What does he need to pray about? He prays because he is one with the Father. For Jesus not to pray would be like a man and woman getting married and not speaking. Jesus and the Father are one. Therefore he prays. He does not pray in order to become closer to the Father, but he prays because he is close to the Father.

---

Then comes the miracle. When it became late Jesus saw that the disciples were still out on the sea. That is, the Sea of Galilee. The title sea is a bit misleading. It's really more of a lake. At the widest point, it was only about twelve miles across. At other places it's only five to ten miles across. So it's big enough to be dangerous, but in most circumstances, you could cross it in a few hours. But the disciples had not yet reached the other side. The wind was against them. And we should clarify that this was not a dangerous storm. It's not like the storm in chapter 4 (v. 35-41) when Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat. In that passage the disciples thought they were going to die until they woke Jesus and he calmed the storm. This is nothing like that. It's just an inconvenient wind that made their journey difficult.

Finally, Jesus walks on the water to them at about the fourth watch of the night. Night was divided into four watches. The fourth and final watch of the night would be about three to six am. So it's late, and the disciples must be terribly exhausted. The fourth watch is also the darkest part of the night, and this corresponds to the disciples' blindness.

---

Last week we talked about the difference between a miracle and a sign. A miracle is something that transcends the laws God established for the universe. A sign teaches something. So not all signs are miracles, and not all miracles are signs, but most miracles are signs. Or, at least, the miracles we know about are signs. And Jesus' miracles are signs that teach us on two or three different levels. On the most basic level, they reveal his power. At the next level they reveal that he is God in human flesh. Also, they often teach something more specific about his nature or his mission. If a miracle is never witnessed by another person, then it's just a miracle and not a sign.

So Jesus walking on water seems like the closest thing to a bare miracle, because he intended to pass by them. Had they not seen him, it seems like he would have just kept walking and waited for them on the other side. But I don't think that's really what Jesus had in mind. He could have kept himself hidden from them, but he didn't. And when Mark says, "He meant to pass by them" (6:48), he does not say that he intended not to be seen. Mark says that Jesus "came to them, walking on the sea" (6:48). So it's more like Jesus did intend to be seen by them, but then to keep walking.

He stopped because they cried out in terror. And this is the problem. Mark's comment at the end helps us understand the whole thing. He says, "For they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:52). And by loaves, of course, he means the feeding of the five thousand, which they just witnessed a few hours earlier. The disciples did not understand it.

And what did they not understand? They did not understand that Jesus is God, and that he uses his divine authority to serve and protect them. They saw the miracle, but they didn't read the sign. Instead, their hearts were hardened. Had they understood this about Jesus, they would not have thought he was a ghost, and they would not have been terrified.

Think about this with me. Put yourself in their position. Suppose that, just a few hours earlier and a few miles back, you were standing on land with a man who is God in human flesh. That's one of the things they should have understood from the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus is God. Then Jesus sends you on ahead of him, but he's going to catch up with you later. So now you're out in a boat on the water, and you see a figure about the same size and shape as this man whom you know to be God, who is also supposed to meet up with you again. Now this is obviously out of the ordinary, but what is the most logical conclusion? What is this figure you see out on the water? Is it more likely that this is a ghost? Or is it more likely that it's this guy you know who is God? It's the guy who is God, whom you just saw a few hours earlier, and whom was planning to meet up with you again. If they had learned from the feeding of the five thousand, or any of the other miracles before that, what they were supposed to learn, it's a no brainer. The supernatural force is not evil. The supernatural force is Jesus, and he's on your side.

If they properly understood who Jesus is, they would have recognized him, and they would not have cried out in fear. Instead, they would have said to each other, "Hey, look. There goes Jesus." And maybe they would have thought, *He seems to be handling this wind better than we are*, and they would have asked, "Hey Jesus, can you pull us across, or maybe tell the wind to settle down like you did that one time?" The problem was that they still did not understand who Jesus is. They were still in darkness, so they were afraid.

But Jesus keeps teaching them. Walking on water, like the rest of Jesus' miracles, is a sign. It's a sign revealing that Jesus is God, and that he is for us.

On the most basic level, it's an obvious sign that Jesus has authority over the laws of the universe. Solid objects, including human beings, are supposed to pass through water. Liquid disperses so that solid objects can pass through. That's the way God designed it. So when gravity pulls on that solid object, it pulls it down into the water. That's the way God designed the universe to function. So the obvious thing Jesus reveals is that he has authority over these laws of the universe.

And the reason Jesus has authority over these laws is that he is God. The act of walking on water connects with certain Old Testament passages that reveal Jesus to be God. It's not just a random miracle, but these Old Testament passages set the background for it. I'll give you a few verses. Psalm 77:19 says of God, "Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen." And Isaiah 43:16 says, "Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." And probably the clearest Old Testament background verse is Job 9:8, which says, "[God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea." That's referring to creation. Day two was when God "stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea." So when Jesus tramples the waves on the Sea of Galilee, that is, when he walks on the water, he reveals himself to be the God who created the heavens and the sea. It's a sign revealing who Jesus really is.

But the disciples don't get it. They're terrified, thinking he is a ghost, so he says, "**Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid**" (6:50). That middle part, the phrase, "**It is I,**" can also be translated, "**I am,**" which is what the Old Testament name Yahweh means. So Jesus also identifies himself as God by what he says to them.

And then he comforts them, “Do not be afraid.” They were terrified because they thought they saw a ghost. But the reality is actually much more terrifying. There is nothing more threatening to sinful human beings than the righteous and omnipotent God. He is the one “who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). But that is not what Jesus came to do. Instead, he came to deliver us from the wrath of God by suffering it for our sake. When God says to them, “Do not be afraid,” it’s not simply, “Don’t worry; I’m not a ghost,” but it is his declaration that he comes to them in peace. Whenever God says, “Do not be afraid,” it is an absolution. It is a declaration of forgiveness. There is nothing greater to fear than the just punishment of our sins. So when God says, “Do not be afraid,” it is a declaration that he comes to forgive us and deliver us, not to condemn us.

So this sign reveals who Jesus is. He is God in human flesh. And he is not against us, but for us.

---

The funny thing is that this is really nothing new for the disciples. It’s a different kind of miracle, but it’s nothing greater than anything they’ve seen before. They’ve seen Jesus cast out demons, heal the sick, calm a storm, feed thousands, and a few of them even saw him raise a little girl from death. Walking on water is different, but it doesn’t really teach them anything they shouldn’t have already known. So the strange thing is that they still don’t get it. They still don’t really know Jesus. And this teaches us something about faith and the hardness of the human heart.

We are tempted to believe that if we were there, if we witnessed the miracles they witnessed, that we would believe. It seems that faith would be easier if we could actually see Jesus’ power with our own eyes. At the very least, it seems like the disciples had an advantage over us, because they were with Jesus, and they witnessed his power. But that’s not how it plays out. They saw it all, “But their hearts were hardened.”

We are, by nature, no different than the twelve. Sometimes we pick on the disciples for their lack of faith. Really, they pick on themselves. We got this story from them. The disciples told humiliating stories about themselves, because that’s how it happened. But we are, by nature, no different. If there were only one or two of them, and they said and did these foolish things, we might think it’s just them. But when there are twelve of them, and they are unanimous in their foolish unbelief, it becomes a picture of human nature. If we were there, we would react the exact same way.

We are, by nature, blind to God. It’s not even a matter of having enough evidence to persuade us. The disciples had more than enough evidence, but they remained blind. The problem is human nature. We are, by nature, blind to God. No amount of evidence will ever persuade us. Our wills are bound to unbelief. The persistent hardness of the disciples is some of the strongest proof that we are incapable of faith. It demonstrates what Scripture declares elsewhere, that “no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11; Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3).

Faith is not something we produce in our own hearts. It’s not a decision we make. It’s not even something we are persuaded of. Faith has to be created by the Holy Spirit. It is a gift.

This is what Martin Luther taught in the Small Catechism. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith.” Faith is not something we produce in our own hearts. It’s not a decision we make. It’s not even something God persuades us of when the evidence is too great to deny. It is purely a gift of the Holy Spirit.

## SAVIOR IN DARKNESS (Mark 6:45-56)

The disciples have moments throughout the gospels where they get it right. Occasionally they confess that Jesus is the Christ (e.g., 8:29), but it only takes about two and a half verses until they're arguing with him or doubting him. Human nature takes over again, and they forget whatever Jesus had revealed to them. And this continues until Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the giving of the Holy Spirit. On the evening of his resurrection, when he appeared to them and breathed on them the Holy Spirit, that's really the point where faith sticks. Because faith is not something we do. It's not even something we are persuaded of. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

---

So when we confess our sins, we don't merely confess our bad thoughts, words, and deeds. But we confess our nature. We are by nature sinful and unclean. We are by nature hostile and unbelieving. We are blind to God. This is really what draws us away from God. We confess that we are lost and without hope apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

So we pray against ourselves. We pray that God would send his Holy Spirit to overcome our unbelieving hearts. We pray for the Holy Spirit to open our blind eyes and unplug our deaf ears. This is what we pray for when we ask for the Holy Spirit.

And that is exactly what Jesus gives to us, so that we might believe his atoning sacrifice for us and be saved. The disciples really don't have any advantage over us. They saw the power of Jesus with their own eyes, and they didn't really believe. They remained blind. They finally believed when Jesus gave them the Holy Spirit. And this is the same Holy Spirit he has given to you, and me, and every Christian who has been baptized into Jesus Christ.

This should be the greatest comfort to us. Who do you want to be responsible for your faith? You or the Holy Spirit? If any part of our salvation depends on us, we will undoubtedly be lost for all eternity. If it depended on our righteousness, we would never have enough. We would continually be building a greater debt. But it depends on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for our sins. This righteousness of Jesus is given to us through faith. But even this faith is not our own doing. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." This is the gift of God. Amen.

---

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.