

# The Peace of God

Mark 6:45-56 (ESV)

November 10, 2002

“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” When the night is long and the wind is against us, when we have left the Lord behind and are terrified by what we see, these are good words to hear: “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

These are the only words spoken by Jesus in today’s reading from the gospel. Brief as they are, they communicate the saving gospel. They speak to us across the centuries.

“Take heart.” Be of good courage. Face the present and the future with good hope. Despite the darkness and the wind, despite the terrors of the night, we are to take heart. This is what Christians do. This is not a matter of denying hard, visible reality. Instead, it is a matter of perspective, a matter of context, a matter of seeing this reality within the framework of a larger reality. The disheartening aspects of this world do not have the final word. Despite them all, we are to take heart.

“It is I.” Here is the reason to take heart. Here is the reason for courage. Here is the reason for good hope. The presence of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith. Without him, the call to take heart makes no sense. With him, it makes all the sense in the world. With a word, Jesus reassures his disciples that he is with them and for them and that he is not a ghost of which they need to be afraid.

Something more is going on here. While the English translation reads, “It is I,” the Greek original is closer to “I am.” We are tempted to ask, “You are *what?*” But that would be to misunderstand the words. This is not an effort at self-description. Jesus did not end this sentence by saying “I am male,” “I am Jewish,” or anything else. Instead, the sentence is an absolute: “I am.” The words echo what God said to Moses from the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM.” That is, the words indicate that Jesus is making a divine self-revelation. The basis of reassurance is the very presence of God. This is who Jesus is.

“Do *not* be afraid.” This is a reinforcement of the first statement, spelling out the explicit consequences. Take heart *and* put away all fears. Be of good courage *and* put away all discouragements. Be of good hope *and* put away all that holds you down, that holds you back, all that makes you less than God intends. Put it all away.

It is not insignificant that Jesus spent most of the night in prayer. He had taught through the day until it grew late. He fed the five-thousand. He sent the disciples away. Then “he went up on the mountain to pray.” He prayed and prayed

and prayed. As evening fell, the disciples were struggling against the wind. Jesus kept praying. In fact, he prayed through most of the night, not going out to the disciples until almost dawn. He prayed alone, on the mountain, without interruption or distraction (Calvin). I suspect that he was praying for them, though it does not say. But it does say that he prayed. And it strikes me that if Jesus prayed all night long, I need to pray for my whole life! If Jesus, who is close to God, finds it important to pray so long and so intensely, how much more important it must be for me to pray, even longer and more intensely.

Why is it that we find it so hard to pray? We are so eager to *do* something! And yet, we are at risk of neglecting prayer. Jesus prayed first and took action second. Jesus prayed through the night and only then went to the disciples. Action is fine. But it may be inadequate or inappropriate if not undergirded with prayer.

You see, it is as John Calvin realized from this passage of the Bible as well as many others, in what may have been his most important and most characteristic insight: it is God with whom we have to do. In all things, in all circumstances, in all events, it is finally God with whom we have to do. That is, it is God with whom we have to deal. It is God to whom we have to respond. It is God to whom we have to answer. We might think it is just a pesky neighbor. We might think it is the vicissitudes of life. We might think it is the oddities of nature or a fluke of the weather. We might think we are captains of our own destinies. We might think we answer to no one. We might think that it is only the government bearing down upon us. We might think that we can sustain our own lives by our own efforts, by our own strength, by our own wits, resources, and goodness. But to the extent we think any of that, we have misperceived the situation. Finally, we have to do with God. In, through, under, and beyond all things, we have to do with God. Even if we close our eyes and deceive ourselves, we have to deal with God. In the great struggles of nations and ideologies, we have to do with God. In the intensity and closeness of personal relations, we have to do with God. Encountering, facing, dealing with God is what life is all about. So Jesus had it right. He prayed all night long. What appears to us to be inactivity was the source of all his power and authority (Schweizer).

Have you ever had the wind against you? It is not any fun. Once I was in a canoe on open water, a man-made lake so expansive that in some directions we could not see land, and the wind was against us. Waves were breaking over the bow. The canoe was filling with water. The man in the front had to stop paddling so he could bail out the canoe, while I had to keep paddling alone to try to reach the other side and get out of the wind. Another time I was on a large diesel powered boat designed for bottom fishing in the ocean. We headed straight out into the Gulf of Mexico for two hours, and the wind was against us. I would have thought that boat could have cut through the waves, but we simply went up and down over them.

The first time the engines slowed I thought we must be stopping, but the captain was just easing the boat over an even larger large wave. Have you ever had the wind against you? No wonder the disciples “were making headway painfully.”

When Jesus did come to the disciples, he walked on the water, exhibiting the very power of the Creator over the elements of the creation. The book of Job says that God alone “trampled the waves of the sea.” And yet, here is Jesus, “walking on the sea.” That is to say, here is Jesus, none other than God himself.

Still, the disciples do not understand. They are caught in the strange combination of seeing and not seeing. They saw something coming across the water, but they did not recognize Jesus. They needed his help, but they were scared at the sight of him (Calvin). They thought they saw a ghost, until Jesus spoke and identified himself. In fact, they were much more scared of him than they were of the wind (Williamson). They thought they knew what to do about the wind. But what do you do with one who commands the wind? What do you do with the one in whose presence the wind fades away?

How often do we see evidences of God but fail to understand? How often do we receive the blessings of God but consider them to be luck? How often do we receive the grace of God but think that we have made it on our own? We see, and we do not see. We see what we want to see, and we fail to see what we need to see. We need new eyes to see the Lord (Calvin).

When Jesus had fed the five thousand men with five loaves and two fish, each of the twelve disciples was left holding a whole basket full of leftovers. Still, they did not yet understand that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. This same lack of faith and understanding is carried forward into today’s reading. Because the disciples did not understand about the loaves, they did not understand about the water and the wind. Because they did not understand about God’s providence, they did not understand about God’s redemption and peace. Because they did not understand who Jesus was, they did not understand at all what he did. They saw him break the bread and multiply the loaves, but they did not have a clue. They saw him walk on water, but they did not understand. Simply observing miracles was not sufficient to generate faith. Our reading says that this was because their hearts were hardened. It was not yet time for them to believe. It would not all come together for them until after the crucifixion and resurrection. Of course, we live after the crucifixion and resurrection. We do not suffer under the same disadvantages as the first disciples. We have the opportunity to see, to believe, and so to understand.

The disciples’ lack of understanding in no way impaired the ability of Jesus Christ to carry out his work. Despite their fear, or perhaps because of it, “he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased.” The reading says, “He meant to pass by them.” That sounds strange to us, but I do not believe that it means he intended to

ignore them. It already said, “He came to them.” The purpose of his presence was to save them. In passing by, he would have been a beacon of hope, a guide in the night, a leader on the way. It was a gracious sign of the saving presence of God (Williamson). But the fear of the disciples was so great that they needed more than a distant sign. “He got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased.”

Despite the blindness of the disciples, God was merciful to them (Schweizer). The very presence of Jesus Christ brings about the peace of God. And the disciples were utterly astounded. The very presence of Jesus Christ brings about the peace of God. It was true for the disciples. It is true for the church. It is true for us today. It is true for the world. The very presence of Jesus Christ brings peace of God into our lives. Is this of interest to you? Would you like for the wind to stop and the storms to calm? We all need the peace of God which only Christ can bring.

At least someone in today’s reading seemed to understand this. When Jesus and the disciples landed at Gennesaret, the people “immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.” They understood what Jesus could do. They understood not to keep him to themselves. They understood the importance of bringing others to Christ. Here is a wonderful model for the Christian church.

“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” When the night is long and the wind is against us, when we have left the Lord behind and are terrified by what we see, these are good words to hear. Has the wind ever been against you? Could you use the peace of God in your life? Do you think it is good for us to have Jesus on board this ship of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church? Is it good to have Jesus quiet the storms of your life? Do you know anyone else who might be interested in that? Do you know any others who need healing? who need forgiveness? who need love? who need a place to give thanks? who need a place to serve God and neighbor? Can we bring people here to touch even the fringe of his garment and be made well? Are we eager to run and tell the good news?

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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