

12.6.09 / Mark 6:45-56

This passage contains between one and one and a half stories. The main focus is on Jesus walking on the water, which may or may not be clearly linked to the description of what he does on the other side of the sea.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

There are two obvious questions that stick out in this particular passage. First, Jesus sends the disciples to Bethsaida, but they end up in Gennesaret. Why? Because both are the same place. Gennesaret is a large area that includes Bethsaida.

Second, there's this phrase "because their hearts were hardened". This phrase is a good church phrase, and as such is likely incomprehensible to people with no familiarity with this verbiage. It is used some 17 times in the Old Testament, along with an additional two uses in which the person's spirit is hardened and their heart performs some synonymous action. Notably, most of these people involved are kings, and the verb may also mean "strengthen". This suggests that it may have connotations of arrogance, that a person says, "I'm the king, I do not need to listen, I am strong in my own right." (The actual translation "harden" is preferred, being used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew done by fluent Hebrew speakers before the time of Christ. However, translation is necessarily imperfect, and the Hebrew word has additional side-meanings not captured in the English.)

Whatever the case, 15 of the uses of the phrase refer to Pharaoh opposing Moses in Exodus. Another mention refers to that story, but as a long-past historical incident. The usage of the phrase has, then, some very specific value as a reference, much as someone today could intone, "I am your father," in suitably deep tones and bring Star Wars to mind.

Returning to the story we see that Jesus does now dismiss the crowds. He was not willing to do this before, which suggests that His work there was done. What's more, the original plan of getting some rest seems to reappear. The disciples spent most of the day in a boat, working, true, but away from the crowds. Jesus, meanwhile, spends time in prayer on the mountain. Jesus prays often in the New Testament, and many mentions are like this one. It appears that he prayed for several hours, but we get only an offhanded mention. However, Jesus certainly models for us a life of prayer, both within the weave of his daily life and within specially set-aside times.

Sometime in the evening Jesus sees that the boat is struggling across the sea. This is a serious struggle, because the fourth watch of the night, when he actually comes across them, starts around 3 am (although, in the absence of accurate timepieces, these are still rough estimates).

Something interesting crops up at this point. The disciples think Jesus is a ghost. While this may be a very abstruse note it's worth mentioning that this seems to support the idea that devout first-century Jews believed in ghosts. This is not the only incident where Jesus is thought to be a ghost at first, in fact. In one of his post-Resurrection appearances he eats some fish to prove that he is, indeed, flesh and blood. The disciples' reaction to what they perceive as a ghost is naturally less than happy.

Jesus responds to their fear with a sentence that includes an extremely common phrase in divine and angelic appearances: "Do not be afraid." He then gets in the boat with them, reinforcing who He is and that He is with them. This also appears to cause the wind to stop. The force opposing the boat ends when Jesus joins them.

We then have an authorial note that tells us that the disciples are a bit dense to be so surprised here, since they had just seen Jesus feed more than five thousand people on what amounted to a meal for a single family.

Having crossed over the sea, Jesus continues to heal miraculously, again gathering the sort of crowds that apparently prompted Him to take the disciples off by themselves for a bit earlier.

So what does this all mean? There are definite Moses themes here, too. There's a sea. It's really more of a lake, but it's repeatedly called a sea. Jesus triumphs over the sea, walking over it, but over and through are not so different. There are hardened hearts, this time in Jesus' camp, and not in the opposition. Unlike the Moses story, though, this is a story where Jesus doesn't do much to kick-start the miracles. Instead He just acts, and miraculous things occur. He is in this way much more like God accompanying Moses than Moses himself.

A couple questions to consider in addition to the weekly application questions for this passage:

- 1) What would have been a better response from the disciples?
- 2) Why might Jesus want to reference Moses at all? What might this be setting up?