

“Traveling in the Dark”

Mark 6:45-56 ¹

One of the things we enjoyed about living in Bristol, TN/VA was the spectacular beauty of God’s creation. The area has lovely mountain lakes and gorgeous mountain vistas, and the area around Roan Mountain is reputed to be the most beautiful part of the entire Appalachian Trail.

Elizabethton, Tennessee, about twenty miles from Bristol, is the gateway to the high country in that part of the world, and Matt and Anna served a Presbyterian congregation in Elizabethton for several years. On one occasion, Jill joined them for a hike to Laurel Falls, a famous destination outside of Elizabethton. The falls were gorgeous, but they had failed to take into account how far they would have to walk in relation to how much daylight was left.

So it was that they had to make most of the return trip in the dark, without flashlights. This was a problem, because portions of the path ran along steep cliffs. Fortunately, our Border Collie, Gypsy, was with them on this adventure, and Gypsy somehow knew that danger. Jill was both impressed and grateful that Gypsy walked between her and the edge for the entire trip home in the dark.

Now while much of our life journey is, like Laurel Falls, splendid and beautiful, the portions of the journey that take us from “glory to glory” sometimes run through darkness and danger. I’ll bet you’ve noticed this. This morning, our text in Mark gives us a chance to consider how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, “walks between us and the edge” in those times. ²

As we return to Mark’s chronicle of Jesus’ ministry, you’ll remember that John the Baptist had just been executed by Herod and that the Disciples had just returned from a preaching mission around Galilee. All of them needed rest and renewal, and Jesus had taken them across the Sea of Galilee to a quiet place, expecting some R & R.

The people in town saw the group get in the boat, correctly guessed their destination, and somehow managed to arrive at that remote area before them. Although R & R was now out of the question, Jesus had compassion on the crowd, taught them all day, and then miraculously fed all ten thousand and more of them. Then, as evening fell, Jesus went up into the hills to pray.

Jesus prayed for a long time, and the Disciples eventually gave up waiting for him. They got back in the boat and headed back across the lake for home. A number of them were fishermen by trade, and they were likely in Peter’s own boat, so such a jaunt in the dark wasn’t really a big deal. They fished at night all the time.

But, as we’ve seen before, the Sea of Galilee is 650 feet below sea level and is subject to sudden and violent storms. Such a gale now swept down on the disciples from the hills as they

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 25, 2017. Parallel passages are Matthew 14:22-36 and John 6:15-21.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² There is a similar story in the chapter “The Unwelcome Visitor” in C.S. Lewis’ *The Horse and His Boy*, one of the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

rowed home in the darkness (as often happens when we set sail without Jesus), and the storm was so severe that they knew they were in real trouble.

The disciples were afraid of the storm, but they were terrified when in the wee hours of the night they saw someone walking toward them on the surface of the water. They thought it was an evil spirit who had come to destroy them.

Now it nearly always happens that when persons in the Bible are aware of encountering spirit beings such as angels—or when they experience Jesus’ divine power—the first thing that has to be said is “Don’t be afraid.” So it was with the disciples in this midnight encounter. “*Have courage!*” Jesus said. “*It is I. Don’t be afraid*” (Matthew 14:27).

Once Peter knew that the figure on the Sea was Jesus, he boldly asked Jesus to allow him to walk on the water also, which Jesus invited him to do. Peter’s adventure went very well . . . until he took his eyes off Jesus and began to focus on the sea rather than on the Savior. Jesus reached out and pulled Peter up, and as the two of them got into the boat, the wind suddenly became calm. The disciples were amazed, as we would have been, had we been there!

As we reflect on this one amazing day, there are two things I encourage you to remember. First of all, as you remember the young boy and his lunch, remember that you and I frequently limit what God does in and through our lives by making assumptions about what is or is not “possible.” The message of “the feeding of the 5,000” is that if we put what we have in the hands of Jesus, what we have is enough. And second, no matter what storms, what decisions, what dangers, or what uncertainties come into our lives, the important thing is to focus on the Master, not on the storm.

With this introduction, I’d like to think with you for a few minutes about today’s Scripture using a four-part outline: *Jesus Sees. Jesus Comes. Jesus Helps. Jesus Brings Us Safely Home.*

Jesus Sees. Mark tells us that Jesus saw the disciples straining at the oars when they were “in the middle of the sea.” This means that they were several miles away from Him, and from a human perspective, Jesus would have had to have a night-vision telescope to see anything of the sort. As God in human flesh, of course, such vision would not be difficult. We do well to bear in mind that Jesus of Nazareth is the same God who came to Hagar in the wilderness, whom she called “*The God Who Sees Me*” (Genesis 16:13).

This is the same God of whom Job said, “*He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens*” (Job 28:24). And this is the same God “*who sees every secret thing*” (Matthew 6:1-8). As the Psalmist put it, “*Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light around me will be night—even the darkness is not dark to you. The night shines like the day; darkness and light are alike to you*” (Psalm 139:11-12).

So, although we may sometimes be unaware of God’s presence with us, there is never a moment in which we are not seen, known, and loved by God. As it is written, “*the eyes of the LORD roam throughout the earth to show himself strong for those who are wholeheartedly devoted to him*” (2 Chronicles 16:9). And that is Good News indeed!

Jesus Comes. Mark tells us that it was very early in the morning when Jesus set out toward the disciples and their troubled boat, walking on the surface of the water. The disciples, knowing themselves to be far from land, were terrified by what they took to be an apparition, some sort of evil spirit.

When Jesus spoke to them and they recognized Him, Peter—good old impetuous Peter!—asked permission to approach Jesus on the water, walking on its surface as Jesus was doing.

Jesus welcomed such faith, and all went well so long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus; but when Peter turned his gaze to the stormy seas, his faith wavered and he began to sink. Jesus pulled Peter up and helped him into the boat, and according to John's account, "*at once the boat was at the shore where they were heading*" (John 6:21).

Jesus Helps. Jesus' rescue of Peter brings me to the third point, "Jesus Helps." And, while it is in fact the case that Jesus "walks between us and the edge," as Gypsy did for Jill, the help God offers us in our various trials is not always what we expect, and sometimes it's not what we think we want.

Ben Zobrist, second baseman for the Chicago Cubs and the Most Valuable Player in last year's World Series, has noted that many people, including many athletes, claim Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"—as a "Superman" mantra that claims God's power for whatever it is they're trying to achieve. "But when you really look at it," Ben said, "Paul is saying, 'I can even do jail, and misery, and weakness through Christ who strengthens me.'"³

When Peter and John were hauled into court for preaching about Jesus, they prayed for God's help like this: "*And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that your servants may speak your message with all boldness*" and when they had prayed, "*the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God boldly*" (Acts 4:29-31). That's one kind of help.

After Billy Graham, John Stott was one of the most famous preachers of our time. Many years ago, he was preaching a revival in Sydney, Australia when he got the news that his father had died. On top of that, he was starting to lose his voice. But because they had come to the final day of the meeting, he felt that he had to preach the last service, no matter what.

Friends gathered around him and read these words from 2 Corinthians before praying for John's ability to speak a clear word for God: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). John did preach, even though he could barely speak and was overwhelmed with grief. Although the preaching was not dynamic, it was anointed, and at the end of the service, there was a huge response. Dr. Stott tells that for years afterward, he often met people who told him that they were converted that night.⁴ That's another kind of help.

Going back to the stormy sea, our Navy has lost two nuclear submarines, the *USS Thresher* (SSN-593) and the *USS Scorpion* (SSN-589), when equipment failures caused them to sink below crush depth—about 2,500 feet below the surface. When special rescue vehicles finally found the *Thresher's* remains at a depth of 8,400 feet, they marveled to see fish swimming around easily under a pressure of 3,600 pounds per square inch.

The reason the fish could do this, of course, is that the pressure within their bodies was equal to the pressure outside, so they were "crush proof." And that's what the apostle John was talking about when he wrote to the early churches who were being persecuted, "*You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because **the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world***" (1 John 4:4). That's a third kind of help.

Jesus does not always save us from pain, disease, disappointment, or persecution. But He does give us the spiritual resources we need to withstand whatever comes. Dallas Willard put

³ Collin Hansen, "Pride, Pro Baseball, and Perspective," *The Gospel Coalition* (9.22.15).

⁴ Michael P. Knowles, editor, *The Folly of Preaching* (Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 137-138.

it memorably when he said that “**For those who love God, nothing irredeemable can ever happen to you.**”⁵

And you’ll remember that Paul wrote, “*Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us!*” (Romans 8:35, 37).

Jesus Sees. Jesus Comes. Jesus Helps. Finally, **Jesus Brings Us Safely Home.** Once Jesus and Peter were in the boat, the disciples suddenly found themselves at their destination. On this point, there is a reason why the 23rd Psalm is probably the favorite Bible passage of more people than any other. The 23rd Psalm has to do with traveling in the Dark, and it has to do with arriving safely at our Destination. Let’s say it together as we learned it long ago:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul: he leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

That’s a wonderful picture of being brought safely Home, isn’t it? He who is the Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep, and it will be so for us (John 10:1-18). If we are in Christ, nothing irredeemable can ever happen to us.

But the thing to pray for is not a safe, quiet arrival on The Other Shore. The thing to pray for is knowledge of the BHAGS God has for us, together and individually, in our time, and the courage to pursue them (Acts 13:36).

In his novel, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, Alan Paton tells the story of Robert Mansfield, the headmaster of a school in South Africa during the days of apartheid. When Mansfield’s school was barred from competing against a black school, he finally took a stand against apartheid and resigned his post. A friend said to him, “You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?”

Mansfield replied, pointing to heaven, “When I go up there . . . the Big Judge will say to me, ‘*Where are your wounds?*’ If I say I haven’t any, he will say, ‘**Was there nothing to fight for?**’ I couldn’t face that question.”⁶

Friends, as we journey onward, we may sometimes feel that we’re traveling in the dark, but Jesus is always between us and the edge, and He is our Light. “*Anyone who follows me,*” He told us, “*will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12).

Although we are likely to receive some wounds along the way, Jesus will bring us safely home, after our battles are fought, and not before. You and I, individually and together, are called to push back the Darkness in this time—in our time. We have work to do!

Let’s roll!

⁵ Philip Yancey, “Where Is God When It Hurts?” *Christianity Today*, June 2007, 56.

⁶ Alan Paton, *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (Scribner’s, 1996), pp. 66-67.

