

FROM OBSTACLE TO OPPORTUNITY

Mark 6:45-56

As we come to the Word of God this morning, I think it would be helpful for us to first consider those things in our life at the moment that we might consider an obstacle or adversity. An obstacle being whatever is contrary to what we would really want to do or what we would really like life to be like. Whatever trial-some circumstance keeps constantly buffeting us or making us feel hopeless. Maybe it's something involving work like unemployment or a hard to get along with coworker, a suffering relationship because of abandonment or betrayal, an addiction, a health issue we're dealing with (maybe that won't seem to go away), the loss of a loved one and loneliness.... Whatever it is, let's take it to the Word of God this morning.

We're in Mark 6:45 through the rest of the chapter:

“Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away. After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray. When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land. Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass them. But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, “Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid.” Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished, for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

When they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. When they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, and ran about that whole country and began to carry here and there on their pallets those who were sick, to the place they heard He was. Wherever He entered villages, or cities, or countryside, they were laying the sick in the market places, and imploring Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were being cured.”

So if you remember from last week, Jesus has just performed one of the greatest miracles recorded in the Bible. But what was different about this miracle is that the disciples were heavily involved in it. Every other miracle Jesus did in an instant without them but this one wasn't. It was a hands-on miracle for the disciples and that's because the main thing on Jesus' ministry agenda right now is to train these men to take over the ministry. And what the miracles taught them was that **disciples of Jesus Christ are to have this dependent-trust in Him at all times to supply what they need** to actually do ministry and live for Him.

And today's text is teaching us a similar lesson. It's a lesson in faith, or trust in Christ. **He wants to develop within them a trust in Him that's unwavering, based upon who He is.** I mean, if they're going to be one of the few in this life who truly entrust every part of themselves to Him, and live for Him, taking His gospel to the ends of the earth, it's going to require trusting Him. Really, if you want to describe the Christian life in one word it's **trust**. Our most urgent and supreme need is life is an uncompromising trust in Him and His love for us. We need trust more than we need clarity. And nothing delights God more or gives Him more pleasure than a childlike heart which trusts Him. If you think about it, He finds our trust in Him so valuable and so pleasing that He died for the love of it.¹ **So to increase the disciples' trust in Him, He sends them across Galilee without Him.**

I. JESUS SENDS THE DISCIPLES AWAY ACROSS THE SEA. (VV. 45-48)

After Jesus fed the 5,000+ multitude (around 10-15,000), Jesus has His disciples go on ahead of Him and cross over to the other side of the lake while He stays in that area to pray. And Bible critics always want to try and point out a contradiction here between Mark, who says He sends them to Bethsaida and John who says He sends them to Capernaum. But like we saw a few weeks ago, these the gospels are not contradicting each other – they’re complimentary. That’s an interpretation principle worth repeating so that we remember it. Whenever the gospels say two different things, they’re just giving further details and further perspective.

❖ **Interpretation Principle – not contradictory, but complimentary.**

To get to Capernaum, they first had to go west from where they were, to get their boat, to go past Bethsaida and onto Capernaum. They would have likely rowed somewhere along the shore.

Now, normally Jesus travels with the disciples but He doesn’t here because for one, and this is kind of a joke, but **1) He not concerned about missing the boat!** If you can walk on water, you’re not really concerned about getting left behind and missing the boat, are you? **2) He needs some time pray and commune with the Father. That’s a priority in His life.** It couldn’t not be. He had to have solid communion with the Father through prayer. And hopefully that’s the same way with us. That if we don’t get our time in prayer to commune with Him, we would long for it and make time for it. **3) He knows the incredible opportunity this is going to create for Him to increase their trust in Him.** And **4) John records that He wants to get away from the crowds that having witnessed His miracle, want to make Him their political-revolutionary king who will just put an end to the Roman occupation in Israel.** John 6:15 says, “Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.”

And if you read on in Mark, what you discover is that the disciples’ ideas for Jesus are very similar to the crowds’ idea for Jesus. They don’t understand totally who He is and that He’s heading to the cross. In Mark 9, they’re still arguing about who’s the greatest among them and who should sit at the right or left hand of Jesus’ throne when He establishes His kingdom. So it’s just time to step away from this crowd that was developing.

But **what do think He prayed for while He was up there?** I don’t think there’s any doubt He prayed for the disciples. If His prayer here was anything like what we read about in John 17, He may have praying for their protection from the evil one (17:15), for their knowledge of the truth to increase, for their sanctification(growth and development)(17:17), and for their faith in Him to be increased (17:8) – that they might see the glory of the Father in Jesus, His divine nature would be manifest to them (John 17:6). Those are things He prayed for us too. In John 17, His high priestly prayer, *Jesus mentioned us* in verse 20: “I do not ask on behalf of these alone [referring to the 12], but for those also who believe in Me through their word [us]...” **How comforting is it to know that Jesus prayed for you and intercedes for you** like He did for His disciples.

And not only does He pray for the 12, notice that **He sees them. And He sees them straining at the oars while they row across the sea of Galilee.** And the question arises, does He see them with His human eyes from a distance because it’s a clear night and the moon is bright that He can see them from the high ridge where He is? Or does He see them with His divine eyes as God, who sees everything? Like He supernaturally saw Philip under the fig tree before He even met Philip (Jn. 1:48-49)? We can’t say exactly but since they’re 3-4 miles away and it’s dark, I’d say it’s supernatural. We would have a hard time seeing them strain in daylight from that distance with binoculars. **But what’s important is that He saw them... He saw them in their distress.**

A. 1st Mark of Christ's Divinity – Jesus is all-seeing.

- Matthew 14:24 says, they were *distressed* by the waves. This isn't a stormy, thundering night, but just a steady wind that is slamming wave after wave after wave against the boat. They're rowing into these waves and if you've ever done this you know it's hard to keep the oars in the water because you're rocking up and down. Not to mention the cold, spring time water (maybe 60 degrees) breaking over the boat and drenching their backs. It doesn't sound like a fun time.
- Mark 6:48 describes them as *straining* at the oars, for *the wind was against them* (or *contrary to them*).
- John 6:18 says, the *waves were rising* against them because of *a great wind*.

Notice the conditions: again, this is not a solitary storm squall winds like last time they were on the water with Jesus and He woke up and told it to cease. This is strong, constant, buffeting winds, something this lake is known for.

Notice the timing: It's not a brief storm but a long struggle... they were fighting against this wind **until the fourth watch of the night** it says (v. 48). The fourth watch of the night, in Roman time, would've been 3am to 6am. 6pm-9pm is the first watch, 9pm-12am the second watch, 12am-3am, the third watch, and 3am-6am the fourth watch. So **they've been out there for around 9 hours probably, struggling in this wind.**

Notice the distance: John 6:19 says they've rowed **3 to 4 miles** in 9 hours and they're out in the middle of the lake. They don't even seem to be on course anymore; blown off course.

So these guys are exhausted from rowing. They're probably dripping wet with freezing-cold water. A little frustrated. They're tired again. They never got that rest they wanted which is the whole reason they went to that area. They don't even get sleep at night! Things just aren't going as they wanted. *Maybe you can relate...*

If you can relate... I think the Word of God wants you to know this morning that it's not because He doesn't see you. Jesus saw them and He sees you too. He is God and God always sees us. And I probably don't know what your constant, buffeting wind may be in your life right now... but know this: *God does. He sees you. There's nothing that He doesn't see.*

I feel so bad for people who don't understand this about God. Many think if there is a God, He's not personal and active in this world, or some impersonal force created the world and there really is no God... what a lonely and helpless and hopeless feeling to think that only you really see what you're going through. What a hopeless thought! But it's not reality. The reality is that there is a Personal God who sees you and He knows your thoughts and He knows your heart at all times. You can't hide anything from Him. He knows your true self (Matt. 9:4; Lk. 9:47). But know this as well: His love isn't afraid of that. God knew your innermost being, your worst thoughts, your bizarre dreams, your selfish ways, and it didn't stop Him from dying for you. If you want to grow in trust, you need to realize how much He knows about you and still has unwavering love for you. 1 John 4:16 says, "We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us." Then He goes in to that famous say, "God is love." If you really understand His love, it casts out fear – all kinds of fear – fear of not measuring up, fear of death, fear of losing salvation, fear of

having to impress and please everyone, fear of responding to His commands... you name it. He sees your true self and still loves you knowing it.

One of my favorite names for God for several years now comes from Genesis 16 (& 21) – the name is *Beer-lahai-roi*. It even came up in my devotional this week. It means “You are the God who sees”. Hagar was treated harshly and wrongly kicked out of her home after doing exactly what her mistress Sarah said to do, and she’s out in the wilderness alone, weeping. Well, even out in the middle of nowhere, God sees her and comes to her and comforts her.

The fact that God is all-seeing is a big deal for us because God couldn’t really meet our needs if He wasn’t. Based on Scripture, you could actually make the case that if He stopped seeing you or thinking of you, He’d cease to exist. If He’s all knowing and not a sparrow is forgotten in His sight like Luke says (Lk.12:6-7), and the hairs on your head are numbered, then God, by definition of Himself, does think of you. **Him being all-seeing is required for Him to have a personal relationship with you.** It’s also important because it means that whatever you’re going through that is buffeting you, isn’t just because He doesn’t see it. He sees it. Just like He sees these disciples straining. So if we’re praying and it’s not going away, it means God has other plans in mind, right? **Other plans being, maybe, an opportunity to display trust in Him.**

A lot of people who experience difficult crisis and trial-some circumstances become frustrated and hardened against God. But what **God actually intends these crises and trial to grow us and develop us. It’s through these things that this unwavering and uncompromising trust is developed.**ⁱⁱ

Jesus did command them to go to the other side right? And in obedience to His commands, they found themselves in this situation, right? This situation isn’t just an obstacle. It’s a divine opportunity, a test.

❖ **MAJOR PRINCIPLE: Obstacles are not God’s opposition, but God’s opportunity.**

Like Scott Mathis said in his devo this morning, they **not for our detriment but for our development.** I think that’s exactly why many of our prayers aren’t answered – it’s because God wants to use them as opportunities for you to grow in your faith in Him and display faith in Him and for other people to see that and see that God is real. **Having Jesus in your life really can a difference if we are willing to grow in through the obstacle. If our hearts are open to it.**

So be careful how you interpret life’s “obstacles” because they may just be opportunities. I also want to emphasize that the obstacle is NOT God’s opposition – as if God is against you. Jesus is the one who sent them across this sea in that wind. **He wasn’t against them. He’s training them. Developing them.** Following Jesus’ commands will sometimes mean you run into obstacles at His command and it’s because He’s for you. The “always rejoicing” apostle Paul or Peter will tell you, sometimes following Jesus brings sorrows, but we can be glad in them knowing God is working in them to mold us into Christ’s image.

These disciples were exactly where He wanted them to be. He wanted them to know this struggle so that through it He would teach them more about who He is – that He is God and needs to trust Him whether they can see Him or not because He sees them!

And eventually He comes to their rescue!

II. JESUS COMES TO THEM WALKING ON THE WATER. (VV. 48-50)

He comes to them and it says He intended to come along-side them – to “pass them by”. It kind of reminds us of the OT Jehovah God who “passed by” Moses and Elijah and manifested His glory to them. That’s exactly what He’s doing here too. That same Jehovah God of the OT is Jesus Christ of the NT and He is intending to pass them and manifest His divine glory to them, to comfort them. It’s like another OT theophany happening here. But instead of it comforting them, it actually startles them, which reveals that they didn’t learn much about Him when He fed the multitudes (v. 52).

You probably noticed verse 49: they see Him as He’s walking their way and they think He’s a “ghost”! The Greek word is *phantasma* – reminds us of a phantom, or an apparition; a strange supernatural presence walking towards them. So they cried out, and it’s a cry of fear. They’re terrified of who is walking their way – so they’re not terrified of the wind or waves but of Jesus!

But this is so like Jesus. When people are terrified of Him, He says things like, “Take courage [*or be of good cheer!*]; it is I, do not be afraid.” He corrects their disillusioned fear by letting them know it’s Him. Remember that in your trials – it’s Him! “Be of good cheer” some translations say. *Take courage* here, is the word *tharseo*, **meaning to stand firm and resolute, even in the face of danger or adverse circumstances.**

And this phrase “It is I” is a familiar phrase isn’t it? I guess this phrase could be taken as a normal statement of identity but I think **it possesses greater significance than that: just the way the word “I” is being framed and emphasized is like the NT way of saying “I am that I am” which is the OT name for Jehovah/Yahweh.** God told Moses His name is “I AM” – the self-existent One. And His walking on the water proves that. That’s the second divine attribute of Christ we see.

B. 2nd Mark of Christ’s Divinity – Walking on water.

Notice, Jesus isn’t being tossed by the waves or struggling to walk in the wind. The text seems to indicate that He’s not even getting His feet wet by walking on it. He’s walking on the water, through the waves, like He’s walking on flat pavement.

A lot of men today claim to be able to perform miracles and do miraculous things, but I’ve seen them claim to be able to walk on water. A lot of men today would say Jesus is only a prophet, but we don’t have any other record of prophets walking on water. Only Jesus. And Peter, when Jesus was there in this moment doing this, but there’s no record Peter ever walked on water again.

Only Matthew adds the account of Peter walking on the water. Once Jesus identifies Himself, at this point, Matthew 14:28 adds (compliments Mark by saying), ““Lord, if it’s You, command me to come to You on the water.” And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”” So as long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus, what happened? He walked on water! But then as soon as he took his eyes off of Jesus, and focused on the wind & waves, what happened? He began to sink. It just furthers the lesson for us. In the buffeting trials, we need to fix our eyes and Jesus, remembering He sees us and loves us and He’s got us. He’s not tottering or sinking. He’s in control where we are.

By Jesus walking on water and standing there, He’s proving to them that He is God and He’s sovereign and can be trusted. He sent them out there in this mess to help them understand that and grow in that. **But notice they’ve got to learn to open up their hard hearts to Jesus.**

When it says, “their heart was hardened” it doesn’t mean that their hearts were evil or cruel, but that they really weren’t open to, or taking in what He was really teaching them about Himself.

❖ **Hard-hearted = an unwillingness to grow and develop in faith**

It means their hearts weren’t willing to develop and grow through the lesson being taught them in their obstacles. And I hate to say it, but that’s us more than not and what happens when we do that is our hearts get harder. If we fail to trust Him in the circumstance we can become bitter and angry and controlled by self-pity that leads to depression. That’s what can happen when we take our eyes off Jesus and look at life’s “obstacles” as something to get past rather than an opportunity to see God work.

But if you’ve really bombed a trust test recently, **take courage in the fact that growing trust is a process and God knows that.** If we go through a trial and we don’t express much trust in it, He doesn’t throw us away and start looking for stronger disciples. God is more gracious than that and He is more patient than that. He thinks long term. Notice **Jesus doesn’t rebuke the disciples for their hard hearts. He doesn’t get mad or just keep walking on by to go find some other disciples, you know, some “stronger disciples”. He doesn’t do that. He doesn’t give up on them.** He doesn’t leave them hanging. He’s in the process training them.

III. **JESUS & THE DISCIPLES ARRIVE AT SHORE. (VV. 51-56)**

After Jesus gets into the boat, Jesus continued to prove His deity, the fact that He’s God. As soon as He gets into the boat, the wind stops. I think we should learn from that that if He can control this training session involving the weather, He can be trusted. You can trust a God like that.

C. **3rd Mark of Christ’s Divinity – Control over the conditions.**

John also mentions something interesting, “So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.” I believe that’s a reference to another miracle.

And then we won’t spend much time on verse 53-56 because we’ve covered similar passages in our way through Mark. Mark just keeps pointing out all that Jesus was doing through healing.

D. **4th Mark of Christ’s Divinity – He heals the sick in Gennesaret.**

Everyone who came to Him humbly by faith while He was there was being healed. He was proving to them He is God. And He can still heal today. He still does at times. But often times, like we’ve been studying, it’s not always His will because nothing pleases Him more than a human heart that trusts God in disaster, in disappointment, and in detriment.

So let me ask you a couple questions as we come to communion this morning: **Have you trusted Jesus as Savior?** If so, that’s great. That’s a requirement for communion. We’re remembering His death for our sins as the payment we couldn’t pay. But let me ask you this: **Having trusted Jesus, are you still trusting Jesus with whatever you’re going through?** Are you trusting Him and His love enough to obey Him? That’s the second part of communion. We are to examine ourselves, our walk with Christ. It’s here to refocus us on Him and His love and to live for Him. And if we really trust Him, we’ll be growing that area of living for Him. The trusting heart says, “I’ll surrender to Him.”

ⁱ Manning, *Ruthless Trust* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2000), 2.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 9.