

Our Vulnerable Point

Rev. Bill Hyer

Mark 6:45-52 (ESV)

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ 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, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, ⁵⁰ 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." ⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

Recently, the Reverend Dan Wolf and his wife, Carrie, spoke in the Sunday School class I lead about their ministry in Portland, Maine, which is one of most secular cities in the United States. Dan illustrated this by saying that, whereas in our culture here in Charleston, the second question we might ask someone we meet is, "Where do you go to Church?", in Portland it might be the 50th, if it is even asked at all. As Dan shared about this spiritually desolate culture, David Richardson asked, "What do they do with death?" - in other words, who do they go to when someone dies? In response, Carrie, a pediatric ICU nurse, shared about ministering to parents whose child had died, and how God met them at such a tragic and heartbreaking time. Hearing this, David Richardson observed, "God meets us at our most vulnerable point"

One of the most significant declarations by God is, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.*" Truly, God's ways are not our ways, for the way we most naturally look at and think about our lives and the things that happen in our lives, is not the same as the way God looks at and thinks about the things that happen in our lives. This is especially true in times of suffering and pain, when the winds of life are blowing against us. How often in such times do people ask, "Where is God? "Why is this happening to me?" "Why has God allowed this to happen?"

While in many ways, the Bible the answers to these questions are complex and even beyond our comprehension, God has made known one answer. It is that He allows trying times to bring us to a vulnerable point so we can meet Him and come to know Him in ways we have never known before. That's what's going on in this passage in the Gospel of Mark.

Now on the day before, Jesus had miraculously fed over 5,000 people from 5 loaves of bread. After that, He tells His disciples to get into a boat to go ahead of Him while He goes up on a mountain to pray. Hours later, His disciples encounter a trying and vulnerable situation as a fierce wind is blowing against them and they are literally in pain staining at the oars. Then, suddenly, in the darkness of the early morning hours, out of nowhere they see something passing by them, walking on the water, and cry out in terror, "Look! What is it? It's a ghost!" Unexpectedly, the ghost speaks, "*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*" What? It's Jesus! And as He gets into the boat, the wind stops. Experiencing all of this, the Bible says the disciples were "*utterly astounded,*" and we read the divine commentary "*for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.*"

Now when I read this, three things, at first, seem strange. First, Jesus sees His disciple in pain, straining at the oars and yet the Bible says He “*meant to*” or intends to “*pass by them.*” Why would Jesus walk so near, see them in pain, and intend to pass by, like the priest and Levite in His parable of the good Samaritan who passed by the injured man?

Second, when Jesus shows up, it’s not what they would have expected, or even wanted. Far from recognizing Him, they’re terrified, thinking He is a ghost.

Third, there is the seemingly unrelated divine commentary about the disciples “*for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.*” What do the loaves and the feeding of the 5,000 have to do with the disciples’ utter astonishment at Jesus walking on water? And why does it say their hearts were “*hardened?*” What’s going on?

What’s going on is that in the providence of God, the disciples have come to a vulnerable point. While obeying Jesus’ direction to go to the other side of the sea, a fierce wind has arisen against them, and being in pain, they are at a vulnerable point so they can come to know Him in their hearts in a way they have never known before.

The Bible says our heart is the innermost core of our being, essentially who we are. Everything we do flows out of what we are and what believe in our hearts. And what we actually believe in our hearts is the basic trouble we have in our relationship with God. The reason for this is because of what the Bible describes as a “*hardened heart,*” for there are places in our hearts where we not only have difficulty but really don’t understand and believe in Jesus for Who He truly is.

And that’s why there is the divine commentary about the hardened heart of the disciples. Far from being unrelated, that is the point. The disciples are utterly astonished because, even after all the miracles, such as feeding 5,000 people with the 5 loaves, they still don’t understand and believe the truth about Who Jesus is. Their hearts have to be transformed to understand and believe Who He truly is

How does God transform hard hearts? This question is relevant not only for non-Christian unbelievers but for all of us, for this event takes place in the lives of the disciples, the most committed followers of Jesus. First and foremost, it is by His grace through the power of the Holy Spirit. But what this passage also shows is that God brings us to a vulnerable point so that we can meet Him and come to know Him in ways we’ve never known before.

And that is what is happening with the seemingly second strange thing, that when Jesus shows up, He makes Himself known in a way they never would have expected. Certainly, no one would have expected, let alone even conceived of Jesus showing up literally walking on the water. And when He does show up, far from recognizing Him, they’re terrified. Yet, it’s because they are now at this vulnerable point that they can come to know Him in a way they’ve never known before.

And that brings us to the first, and what might seem to be the strangest thing about this passage, that when Jesus sees His disciples at this vulnerable point, He intends to pass by them. On a superficial reading, we can understand this to mean what the disciples accused Jesus of at an earlier time when a storm was flooding their boat, and they cried out, “*Don’t You care that we are going to die?*” On that occasion, Jesus had told His disciples to get into a boat and go to the other side of the sea, and was in the boat with them. Then such a violent storm arose with waves flooding their boat that they were terrified, fearing they were going to die, and Jesus is sleeping on a cushion in the back of the boat. In this desperate, life-threatening circumstance, they wake Jesus up saying, “*Don’t you care that we’re going to die?*” Jesus gets up, rebukes the storm saying, “*Peace, be still,*” and immediately the wind and waves stopped in a serene peace. Then,

the Bible says, they become even more afraid. As someone said about this, “It’s one thing to have the waves in your boat. It’s another to have God in your boat.”

That is what is taking place is now. Jesus is revealing Himself to them as the Son of God in a greater and fuller way than they had ever known before. And there are two things in this account that make this known.

First, the Bible says Jesus meant to “*pass by them*” – not pass them by, but “*pass by them*.” The words “*pass by*” are a literal reference to Exodus 34:6 of how God revealed Himself to Moses in answer to Moses’ prayer, “*Show me Your glory.*” What is significant about when Moses prayed this is that Moses had already seen God in the burning bush, in the 10 plagues, and met Him on the mountain when He gave Moses the 10 commandments, and yet now he prays for even fuller and greater revelation, “*Show me Your glory.*” In answer to his prayer, the Scripture says, “*The LORD passed by in front of Him*” proclaiming His name, meaning Who He is. The Lord made Himself known to Moses in a way Moses had never known before, in greater and fuller glory. That is what Jesus meant to do, and literally did - pass by in front of them to reveal Himself in a way they had never known before.

Second, when Jesus speaks to them, He identifies Himself with God’s name. While the English translation says, “*It is I,*” the Greek literally says, “*I am.*” This is the very name God revealed to Moses when God appeared to him in the burning bush and, in answer to Moses’ request, “*What is Your Name?,*” God said, “*I am Who I am.*”

That is what Jesus is making known to His disciples, Who He is, that He is the Son of God. And it’s because they are at a vulnerable point that they can meet Him and come to know Him in a way they have never known before.

Recently, I heard a message by R. C. Sproul who shared about his uncle named Tom who completely rejected Christ. R. C. described him as a rough, tough man, who, when R. C. told him God had called him into ministry, made fun of him and mocked him. In the providence of God, Tom contracted a fatal disease, yet even with this death sentence, he still retained a hardened heart, rejecting Christ and making fun of R.C. But then, when death was near and he was in extreme pain, R. C. visited him in his bedroom, and asked him, “Are you ready to meet God?” All the joking stopped, as Tom looked at him and said, “No.” And as tears came, he said, “But I wanna be, tell me about it.” R.C. then shared the gospel with his dying uncle, and prayed with him to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior. At his most vulnerable point, Tom met the Lord, and soon afterward died, going on to meet and know Jesus in greater fullness and glory than he had ever known before.

Truly, in the good providence of God, He will bring us to a vulnerable point so that the places of our hard hearts can be transformed as we meet Him and come to know Him in ways we’ve never known before.

Let us pray that the Lord will give us His grace that when we encounter Him in ways we never expected, we will, by revelation from the Holy Spirit, not only be utterly astonished at Him but worship and adore Him for Who He truly is.

And may we always remember, that despite our hard hearts, He will come to us at our most vulnerable times, and say, as He did to His disciples, “*Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.*”