



Christ Reformed Community Church

161 Hampton Point Dr. Suite 2 | St. Augustine, Florida | 32092 | christreformedcc.com

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Dr. Andrew Smith

“A Walk on Water”

Mark 6:45-52

We're in Mark chapter 6 this morning, as we continue our exposition through this amazingly rich gospel. Mark chapter 6, and this morning, we want to look at an account that is familiar to one we looked at back in chapter 4. This one found in verses 45-52. I've entitled the message simply this: “A Walk on Water.” And I want you to stand in honor of the reading of God's Word, as I begin reading in verse 45, reminding you that this is the authoritative and inspired, inerrant, all-sufficient Word of the living God. Verse 45 begins:

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

This is God's Holy Word. Please be seated, as we ask the Lord to help us as we look at this text.

Our Father, we come before you, Lord, having sang about Your riches and Your grace that has come to us, about Your sufficient work upon the cross of Calvary; the price that was paid to redeem us. We have sung about Your sovereignty in watching over us, Your providential care of us, and now we come to a text of Scripture that I think we all can relate to because of the storms of life that we often face. Lord, we pray that You would help us to walk away from this text not so much by being reminded of the storms we face, but Lord, understanding that in the midst of those storms, the presence of Christ is always there. We pray, dear Father, that we would believe this and see this with fresh eyes for Your glory. We ask thee things, in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

R. Kent Hughes in his commentary agrees regarding Mark chapter 6 in this account that I just read to you, that this story of the disciples in the boat pictures the infant church tossed about. He says, and I quote: “This is a symbol we can all relate to because life is a voyage with many storms and stresses for every soul. It is a symbol, this story is, that gives wisdom for navigating through life's uncertain seas.” Hughes also points out that early Christian art often depicts the disciples soaked wet by the storm, straining at the oars, again, as a symbol in Christian art of

what the church often faces throughout history. In fact, the English word *nave* is a term used to describe the part of the church where they gather to hear the Word of God. It comes from the Latin word for *ship*, and indeed the construction of this pulpit that I’m standing in this morning was intentionally designed to represent a ship’s bow because it is true that as we go through the storms of life, it is Christ who is not merely with us, but it is Christ who is in the boat with us. And it is as Christ speaks His word from the ship of the church that our hearts and our souls are comforted with the gospel, bringing peace and security to our weary souls. This story reminds us of that, but this is a story not merely about comfort. It’s also a story about great fear and trepidation. The account tells us that the fear of the disciples in the midst of the story was overshadowed by the fear of Jesus walking on the sea.

As a matter of fact, there’s no indication in the text that the disciples were all that fearful of the storm, although I’m sure they were, but they were most fearful of what they saw; that is, Jesus walking upon the water. And as we’ll see, this was nothing less than a self-revelation of God Himself, akin to the Old Testament occurrence of Him passing by Moses on Mount Sinai to reveal His glory, or passing by Elijah on Mount Horeb. But what you need to understand is the events of the feeding of the five thousand, which has just occurred, and Jesus walking on the sea are turning point events for the lives of the disciples. In fact, we read from John’s account in John chapter 6 that after He fed the multitudes, the crowd attempted to crown Jesus as King. They wanted to overthrow Rome and forcefully make Jesus King over them. That would have been the Israelites in this crowd. We read in John 6:14, *“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”* You see, Jesus understood that the establishment of His kingdom would first come by spiritual transformation, not by political resolution, and that’s the reason He sends the apostles away, and He Himself goes high on a mountain to pray. He already knew that John was dead. He understood that Herod believed Jesus to be John raised from the dead.

Following the Bread of Life Discourse, many of His own disciples defected. We read about that in John 6:66, and not only that, but there’s somewhat of a crisis going on here because even among the apostles, there is not perfect faith. Mark is honest about that in verse 52 saying that *“their hearts were hardened.”* But make no mistake about it, their hearts were not hardened like the Pharisees because what would strengthen their faith and soften their hearts was the self-revelation of God in the person of Jesus as He walked on the water, which is found in this account. Jesus knows that they need to be strengthened in their faith, and I think that many lessons can be taken in this account regarding both the practical experience, on the one hand, of Christians navigating through the individual storms of life as well as the church itself navigating through the hostility that comes to us from the world. Here you have the infant church with the foundation of the church, the apostles, in a boat in the midst of a storm, and if their faith cannot be strengthened and if they defect like the rest of those that defected in John chapter 6, then there is no hope for the church. It is Jesus that comes to them to strengthen them in the midst of their doubts and their unbelief. It is Jesus that comes to the church today and says what Jesus told the apostles here, and that is, *“Take courage, it is I.”* Take heart. Do not be afraid, for Jesus is with

us and Jesus is in us, and Jesus has revealed Himself to be the Holy One of God, the King of the world.

The world will not change through political revolution but spiritual transformation. It is an inward belief of the heart that yields an outward change in society, and unless Jesus invades the hearts of the apostles, even they cannot see the kingdom of God. We believe it is the power of the gospel. We are not ashamed of the power of the gospel because it is the power of God to the Jew first and also to the Greek, and it is the hard hearts of God’s elect turned soft that ushers in the kingdom of God and the outward rule and reign of Christ in the world. And in order for that to become a reality, the apostles need to be tested in their faith and strengthened in their faith. Jesus can feed the multitudes miraculously from a little lad’s lunch, and if Jesus can walk on water, then He can soften the hearts of the elect from the four corners of the world and establish His kingdom fully. And this account is reminding us that even in the midst of individual trials or corporate trials of the church, Christ is with us. He is in us. He is for us, and let me just say this; He both directs the storms of life as well as stills the storms of life. He is sovereign over all of the rough seas of life.

And so, there are various lessons that can be drawn from this account that we can uncover when we look at these verses; and so, as we go through this text, my prayer is that as we point out these lessons that were true for the apostles, we’ll understand they are true for us as well. They’re true for us as individuals. They’re true for us as the church. Regardless of what you are facing individually, regardless of what the church is facing in the world today, Jesus sees, Jesus knows, Jesus directs, Jesus ordains, and Jesus eventually will calm the rough seas. There are five eye-opening parts to this story as we go through these verses. First of all, we see the first part of the story is revealed in what I want to call the separation, the separation. Verse 45, notice your Bibles, it says, *“Immediately he,”* that is, Jesus, *“made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.”* What you need to see here is the separation was sovereignly executed as Jesus separated the disciples from the crowd. The text says, *“He made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida,”* And not only did He separate the disciples from the crowd, but He also separated the crowd from Himself because the end of the verse says He dismissed the crowd away from Himself.

When it says in verse 45 that He did this immediately, that means He did it right after the feeding of the five thousand when He saw the frenzy of the crowd and He saw the disciples buying into this idea of an inferior physical earthly kingdom that would come apparently apart from spiritual transformation; some sort of welfare state, some sort of “let’s make society better” campaign. And so, notice the very strong language of verse 45. It says that *“He made his disciples get into the boat...”* *Anagkazō* is the Greek word. It literally means “to force or to insist” and I believe that Jesus had to forcefully persuade the disciple to get into the boat. They did not want to go. Why they did not want to go could have been because they saw a storm brewing, but even the disciples’ Messianic expectations were less spiritual and more earthly just like the crowds. And Jesus does not want them to be any more influenced by the crowds; this popular theology concerning the role of the Messiah overthrowing Rome, establishing a welfare state for just the physical good of the physical people of Israel. So, He demands that they get into the boat, that

they separate from the crowds. You remember as late as Acts chapter 1 before Jesus’ ascension that they still had some of these earthly notions of the kingdom coming with great force and power at the beginning.

Acts 1:6, “When they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” And Jesus said on that occasion, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...” In other words, “There’s a lot more work that needs to be done before you can see the fullness of Christ’s kingdom and the world. The Holy Spirit must be poured out. The gospel must go to the nations. You are but the foundation of the church, dear apostles,” is what Jesus is saying in that text. And so, we read here in verse 45 that He forces them into the boat to go to the other side, and verse 45 tells us that He sent them toward the area of Bethsaida. Now, a little bit of biblical geography here. There were two Bethsaidas in ancient Israel; one located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, one located on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. If you remember, Jesus had already sailed from the western side; that is, Capernaum, to the eastern side to feed the five thousand. And Luke chapter 9 tells us that was located near Bethsaida on the eastern side. This would have been Bethsaida Julias. Now, they’re crossing the eastern side going back to the western side. Really, they’re crossing the northeastern side back to the northwestern side to an area near Bethsaida of Galilee located on the western side.

Later, we read in verse 53 that Jesus heals on a plain of Gennesaret, and so we know that this is located close to Capernaum, close to Bethsaida where Jesus is sending them, but the destination is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that He is testing their obedience. As Jesus separated the crowd from the disciples and tells them to go, He then separates Himself from the crowd. The end of verse 45 says, as I already noted, “He dismissed the crowd.” Verse 46 reveals that after He did this, He went high on a mountain to pray, and we’ll look at that in just a moment, but for now, this is what you need to know. Here is the point; the separation was not only sovereignly executed, but it was strategically planned. Jesus is in full control of this situation, the power of the King revealing His full control just as He had directed the crowd earlier to sit on the grass in the midst of that crisis and that panic. He turned that panic into a picnic with His calmness and His order. They sat down in groups of fifty and one hundred. So now, the disciples potentially arguing with Him, Him forcefully persuading them to leave, the crowds wanting to crown Him as king, and somehow—successfully, powerfully, sovereignly—Jesus separates the disciples from the crowd and He separates Himself from the crowd as well because He is sovereign over all things. And, in fact, this would not have been an easy thing to do from a human standpoint because John reveals in his account that this same crowd returned to the place He had fed them the next morning, and they sent search parties for Him by entering small crafts and crossing the sea to find Him.

So, I don’t know exactly how Jesus escaped. Did He escape supernaturally as He did after He preached in the synagogue in Nazareth, and they tried to throw Him over the brow of the cliff? Or did He just use His words of wisdom to find a means of escape in the middle of the night or whatever it may have been? But the big question before us is why Jesus broke apart from this crowd, full of excitement from Him feeding them? And as stated earlier, He did not want the popular theology of the role of the Messiah to overtake either Himself or the disciples; and more

pertinent to this particular account, Jesus is going to perform a miracle. But first, He has to separate the disciples from Himself so they see their need and dependence upon Him in the midst of a storm. Jesus knows exactly what He is doing here. They had taken for granted the feeding of the five thousand, and they needed to be reminded of their dependence upon Jesus for everything, not just food.

And so, we see the separation; and that takes us now to the second part, and that’s what I want to call “the solitude,” verses 46 and 47. We read that “*After he had taken leave of them,*” that is, Jesus, “*he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.*” Everything about these two verses reveals to us the solitude of the moment. The crowds are now by themselves. The disciples are now by themselves on the sea. Jesus is now by Himself on a mountain. He is in solitude fellowship with His Father. Three times in Mark’s gospel, he highlights the fact that Jesus prayed during His earthly ministry. Back in chapter 1, verse 35: “*Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place,*” a secluded place of solitude, “*and there he prayed,*” to His Father, or again, in Mark 6:45, that would be the second place. And then there’s another one in chapter 14, if you pick up in verse 35: “*Going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.*” Of course, this is a reference to Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. Similar to all three of these accounts of Jesus praying is the fact that it occurs at night or early in the morning under darkness. It’s in an isolated place, but most insightfully, it is always rooted in the disciples’ misunderstanding of His mission.

Every time Jesus goes to pray, it is a crisis moment where the apostles have a moment of bad theology in which they are misunderstanding what His role as Messiah is. Time and time again, Jesus repeated words like John 6:38, “*I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*” And time and time again, Jesus would not do the will of anyone, whether it was the crowds, whether it was the Pharisees, whether it was the apostles. He came to do the will of His Father, and here is where I want to be quite frank with you this morning because I believe that most commentators are wrong when they say that Jesus went to pray for Himself that He would avoid the temptation to have an earthly kingdom. In fact, He had already won that battle—right?—when He faced Satan in the wilderness. He was taken up on another mountain and all the kingdoms of the world and their glory were shown to Him in Matthew 4, and He resisted that temptation of an earthly kingdom offered by a Satan that couldn’t really offer it unless Jesus would cave in. This time when Jesus went on the mountain to pray, it was not Himself that was being tempted; it was the disciples. Jesus had already settled in His mind He wasn’t going to be a freedom fighter for Rome. His kingdom would not come through political revolution but spiritual transformation, and it would be critical that the apostles understood this. So, Jesus’s prayer time, as we read there in verse 46, “*He had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.*” Mark my words, He was praying for the faith of the disciples to be strengthened. And we know this prayer was answered because when we get to the end of Matthew’s account of this, their faith was tested through the midst of the storm, and they passed.

But here, Jesus seeks solitude with His Father in prayer for the sake of the disciples as they get ready to enter the storm; and so, we read in verse 47, “*When evening came, the boat was out on*

the sea...” Some translations say the middle of the sea to remind us of the fact that they were isolated and in solitude, and it says, “*and he,*” that is, Jesus, “*was alone on the land.*” Now, I think that we see here the prayerful heart of Jesus on display for His people. That was also seen in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17. You remember Jesus says, “[*Father*] *as you sent me into the world,*” verse 18 of John 17, “*so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word...*” Jesus is our great High Priest. Even before we were born, Jesus was high on the mountain praying for us, interceding for us. And no doubt, the picture of Jesus on the mountain praying to His Father, as the disciples enter the storm in the middle of the sea, is a picture of our great High Priest ever interceding on behalf of us from the glories of heaven, as He looks below at the storm-tossed church in a hostile world, or He looks upon your life in the midst of the pain and the roughness of the seas.

And so, in solitude, He prays for the storm the disciples are entering, which is reflective of the storms they would face in the future. He’s praying that they would be upheld with faith and strength, that they would look to Him in the midst of this; and here, I think we need to pause to reflect on what this means for us. Remember, the disciples did not want to get into the boat. Jesus had to force them, but though they did not want to get in the boat, they obediently did. And I want to say this, God’s path for the church is always the path of the storm; and praise God, we don’t always know when a storm is coming, but we are to obey Him. We are to follow the logic of Job 31:4, “*Does he not see my ways and number all of my steps?*” From this, we learn that trials don’t mostly come from a life of disobedience but rather from a life of obedience. Here are the apostles obeying Christ, which sends them into the very trial of the storm. It is true that we reap what we sow, good or bad, but that is not trials. That is more accurately described as consequences. Trials, on the other hand, are ordained by God. Trials are those things God sends us to and sends us through. He places His children in the path of storms to reveal His presence and His comfort, and He does so to test us. You must understand that as we look at this account. This account is not merely about the disciples. It’s about you. It’s about what you face in life. It is about how God directs the storms in your life sovereignly to reveal His presence and His comfort and to strengthen your faith in a way your faith would never be strengthened had not Jesus loved you enough to do that.

And I just want to remind you of James chapter 1. If you flip over there quickly with me to James chapter 1, what does James tell us about trials? Verse 2: “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect,*” that is, don’t be disobedient, but obedient, “*that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” In fact, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*” If He’s the one that sent the testing, He’s the one that can give the answers to why you’re facing what you’re facing, but the point is it’s the testing of our faith. We are to trust God that through this process it makes us stronger and wiser and more faithful to God. So, I really believe that Jesus, just as He looked upon the multitudes before He fed them with the loaves and the fish, He looked upon the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, I think Jesus is looking down from the mountain to his apostles as sheep who are not trusting with full faith in their Shepherd. And

from Jesus’ vision on that mountain, looking below, we see the vantage point of God—always caring, always watching—and learning this; that through the eye of life’s storms or trials, Jesus always leads His people as a Good Shepherd does. But here are these disciples in isolation; Jesus all alone on the land, the solitude. They alone on the sea. He alone on the mountain. The storm hasn’t come, but maybe they have a sense that something is looming. That’s a great lesson for us as well. The fear of the unknown should not paralyze us, for the Master knows what we don’t, and He’s always prepared to come to our rescue. In fact, I believe it’s best we don’t know the storms that are coming, and I also believe it’s best that He does know and that He is in full control.

Martin Luther preached a sermon on Mark chapter 4, which is the other account of a different storm where Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat, and Martin Luther—as we celebrate Reformation Day, you have to quote Luther at least once—says this in his sermon: “The first lesson,” which I think can be applied not simply to that passage but this passage because both involve a storm, “The first lesson,” Luther says, “is that if you want to be a Christian and you want to have the gospel, you must anticipate rough weather, for it is inevitable.” And then he says this: “When you live in security, when you are free of danger and have no needs, then you may think that with free will, you can do anything. But at time of need, where is your free will then? It’s lost and it fails you when it comes to the test, but faith stands and seeks Christ.” Jesus was seeking the disciples so they would seek Him. This is a picture of God’s sovereignty, not merely in salvation but also in the storms of life.

And that takes us now to the climax of this story, five eye-opening parts. The separation, verse 45; the solitude, verses 46 and 47; now number three, the storm, verses 48 and 49. From the solitude of His mountain perch, Jesus, verse 48, says, “*saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.*” Now, it could have been, as Edersheim believes, that this is the full Passover moon that is illuminating the sky. We know from John chapter 6 that it’s near the Passover, and if there is a full Passover moon, perhaps Jesus is able to see clearer than He would otherwise be able to see. But what I want to point out is that He didn’t just see what was happening to the boat; He saw *in* the boat, and so, I believe that this was supernatural omniscience. He saw that they were making headway painfully. Now, if you are using a New American Standard version, that will translate it as “*straining at the oars.*” Jesus is a long distance off, high on a mountain, in the darkness. So, even if there was a full Passover moon, there’s no way that He would be able to see unless He had spiritual binoculars that the apostles were straining at the oars. They had reduced themselves no longer to sailing but to rowing. Again, to quote Luther, he says, “When distress strikes and God does not help immediately, no matter, just hold fast, do not waiver, but firmly believe that Christ is with you in the boat. For in His own good time, He helps.” And I think that would apply even to this text.

Jesus sees what is going on. He just as well is right there with them in the boat because He’s in control of the situation, and He is aware of their plight. Now, the Greek translates that phrase “*making headway painfully*” or as the NASB says, “*straining at the oars*” it’s the Greek word *basanizō*, and it literally means “to torment.” It’s used to describe, for instance, demon possession back in Mark 5:7, or in Revelation chapter 12, the contractions of childbirth. Even today, people refer to the “demons” that one struggles with. And by that, they don’t mean

physical demons or even spiritual demons; they mean metaphorically speaking, the troubles that hit someone’s life. Well, to be sure, these apostles were not being tormented by evil spirits but by tumultuous waters. This was not the power of hell. This was the power of heaven. God ordained this storm, and they are being tormented by God’s instrument of the wind and the waves. The sails were down and the oars were out, as the disciples hurriedly paddled, and verse 48 says not only were they making headway painfully because they were straining at the oars but also because *“the wind was against them.”* The wind was against them. Perhaps this is one of the reasons they fought with Jesus getting into the boat. I don’t know, but we do know that no sailor during this time would have gotten into a boat if the winds were really bad. This is a matter of obedience. God always knows what is best, and they obeyed God.

John 6:19 says they were three or four miles out in the sea when they were rowing. Matthew 14:24 says that *“The boat was a long distance from land, battered by the waves.”* So, this is an intense storm. Mark doesn’t highlight the intensity of the storm as much as he does the intensity of fear that later comes over the apostles when they see Jesus walking on the water, but in Mark chapter 4, he does note the intensity of the storm. And there is no reason to think that this storm is any different than the one in Mark chapter 4, except here is the difference; they’ve already been saved by one storm. And so, while I think it is fair to say, because verse 52 does, that their hearts were hardened, it doesn’t mean they had no faith. I think they had some faith. At least they obeyed Jesus when He shoved the boat out into the water to separate them from the crowds. At least they obeyed Jesus when they took the sails down and started straining at the oars when it would have been far easier to let the wind blow them back because it was blowing against them. No, they were working hard to be obedient in the midst of this storm. And here is a model for us, beloved. I think of that verse in Philippians chapter 2 where Paul speaks about the power of God working in us. He says in Philippians 2:12, *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* And what a picture this is. The apostles being obedient, and they are in fear and trembling, straining at the oars, and the power of God is helping them, the power of God. There is nobility in rowing through our trials because the wind of the Holy Spirit will take over the sails and push us through, but we are required to be obedient. We are required to be diligent, as we submit to the sovereignty of God.

Now, let me just say a little bit about the Sea of Galilee. I’ll remind you of what I reminded you of before when we looked at the storm in Mark chapter 4. This sea sat thirty miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. We call it a sea, the Sea of Galilee, but really, it was a large lake. It was located in the Jordan Valley, which was complete with high hills and sharp cliffs; and so, there was a weather phenomenon that happened here. As the cooler air that came down from the higher Golan Heights passed through the canyons and the ravines of the Jordan Valley, it intersected with the warm air of the valley, and it crashed onto the water, generating as much as ten-foot-high waves. Now, most scholars say that if you cross the Sea of Galilee from northern tip to southern tip, it would take six to eight hours. But remember, the disciples are not crossing it tip to tip. They’re crossing just a small portion, and yet, we read, notice in verse 48, it was *“about the fourth watch of the night.”* Now, Mark is using Roman reckoning of time instead of

Jewish since most of his readers were gentiles, and so, the fourth watch of the night would have been from 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., somewhere in that period. So, let's just assume that the disciples left just before dark, before evening came during the first watch of the night, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., and now it's 3:00 to 6:00 a.m. This means the disciples had been rowing for eight to ten hours. They're still in the middle of the sea, and they've gotten nowhere, and they're still straining at the oars.

But Jesus has full omniscience, does He not? He sees it all. That's the point of verse 48: *“He saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.”* We read that square-rigged sailing vessels of the time would find it difficult to make any headway in wind. People tell us that an average speed of a boat would have been four to six knots with wind blowing in the wrong direction. Progress was very slow, and only the most well-maintained vessels with the best crews were able to sail against the wind. Literary sources suggest that most sailors preferred to wait in port for better weather. Don't mess with the wind. And boats could be rowed, but this would be very inefficient against the wind. Do you get the picture? These are experienced sailors, who probably didn't want to go out in the first place but agreed to go out in obedience to our Lord. The easy thing to have done and that any sailor would have done would let the wind blow them back to where they came from. But instead, they do the most unorthodox thing that doesn't follow the manual; they bring out the oars. They are intent to obey our Lord, and this is something that I am apologetic about concerning many commentators who do not point out the obedience and faith of the apostles at this point. Just remember they are not rank unbelievers. Their faith may be small, but their faith is there. Their faith is there.

Jesus had already proven to take them through one storm, and I think that in their hearts and in their minds maybe a little bit of Scripture is roaming around. Could it be possible, Proverbs 15:3, *“The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.”* Zechariah 4:10, *“The eyes of the LORD, range through the whole earth.”* Verses like these. Obedience often brings winds of torment and struggle, and there will be winds of torment and struggle in your life that will drive you from the obedient destination to which Jesus has sent you. And here we learn positively from the disciples that no matter how hard the wind may blow, if it is against the will of the Lord, if it is against the Scriptures, if it is against bringing honor to the Lord, you must keep rowing and keep going because God has put you in that test, and He has promised to bring you through that storm faithfully where your faith is perfect and complete and lacking in nothing, just as we are promised in James chapter 1. After all, God does not promise the removal of us from storms altogether, but He does promise the rescue of us from the midst of the storm, and that's what we see in verse 48 that *“About the fourth watch of the night,”* 3:00 to 6:00 in the morning, *“[Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea.”* Jesus literally walked on the sea.

Now, all of you know that I went to conservative seminaries, but one of the assignments we were given, even in a conservative seminary, was to read liberal theologians so that we understood liberal scholarship and were able to refute it. And I remember reading post-enlightenment works that really began with the presupposition that the laws of nature cannot be overturned; that they could be explained by rationalistic terminology. And so, you read these scholars going to great lengths to deny the miracles of the Bible. In his book entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer, who wrote in the early 1900s recounts a number of ridiculous suggestions that

scholars came up with to argue that Jesus, in fact, was not walking on the water, but this was just an optical illusion. Jesus was walking along the shore, and the disciples didn't know it. Jesus was walking on a sandbar that they couldn't see, and because of the wind and the waves, their vision was impeded. I think not. These were experienced sailors, and more to the point, can we just take the Bible at face value? It says Jesus walked on the water. The Greek preposition is *epi*. It means He walked on it. He walked upon it. He walked literally on top of it.

So, there's no getting around the fact that this was a miracle, and the disciples couldn't believe what they saw. This was a miracle involving the Master who holds the universe together, suspending natural laws to walk on a substance He didn't create to be walked on, and yet He's walking on it. So that while this passage reveals Jesus' omniscience in seeing the struggle from afar in the dark, it also reveals His omnipotence to do what He wants with the weather and to do what He wants with the water. The One who brought the waters to order at creation passes on top of them. He makes a path for His feet on the chaotic waters. This is a miracle. Mark is highlighting the omniscience of Jesus. He saw what they were facing, the omnipotence of Jesus walking on the water, and so, that tells me that this is not just some run-of-the-mill miracle. This is what Old Testament scholars refer to as a theophany. The word *theophany* comes from two Greek words: *theós*, which means “God” and *phainó*, which means “to manifest.” And so, a theophany is a manifestation or a showing of God in visible form.

I'm going to give you a couple of examples of this, but first, I want you to note that strange language at the end of verse 48. It says, “*He meant to pass them by...*” He meant to pass them by. Now, this phrase essentially means “pass before” or “pass in view of.” It doesn't mean “go beyond.” There are some commentators that think that. I think that they are wrong. These commentators say that Jesus intended to walk past them as they struggled and meet them on the other side, but once they cried out for help, He saw their need, and He came to rescue them. That's the wrong way to interpret this because that removes Jesus' omniscience. It's not like He walked down from the mountain and said, “I think I'm going to take a walk on the water. Oh, oops, there's the disciples. I need to help them.” No, He saw it from afar. Others suggest He arrived near the boat, and intended to pass them on purpose, knowing they needed to be rescued but giving them an opportunity to cry out to Him first. Well, this view retains Jesus' omniscience because He walks on the water knowing their plight, but it removes His omnipotence because it makes Jesus impotent, impotent to act unless the disciples reach out to Him first. Are you familiar with another theology that goes by the title of Arminianism? “Just reach out to God first, and He will hear you.” No, that's not correct either.

What is the view that retains His omniscience—He knew what was going on—and His omnipotence—He was going to help? And that's the third view. Mark wants His omniscience and His omnipotence to remain intact, and so the third interpretation is to see this as language which describes God's self-disclosure to His people. Notice again, the end of verse 48: “*He meant to,*” underline these words, “*pass by them.*” Take your Bibles and turn with me to Exodus chapter 33. This is critical to a correct interpretation of his passage, Exodus chapter 33. You're familiar with this account, so we don't need to linger long, but we need to linger long enough for you to see this language. Picking up in verse 18, Moses interceding for the people upon Mount Sinai, and what do we read Moses said?

“Please [God] show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name,” What is my name? *“‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,”* he said, *“you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory,”* here it is again, *“passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”*

What is this? This is a theophany of God’s glory passing by Moses, not the full extent of it because that would incinerate Moses but a partial revealing of His glory. Or then again at Mount Horeb—and you don’t have to turn there—the Lord God revealed His presence to Elijah. We read it for our public reading of Scripture. There is Elijah who is playing the part of a spiritual hermit, thinking he was the only faithful one left, and God was saying that his faithfulness would prove there were other faithful ones, and God passed by him. Same language, “passed by.” Not once, not twice, but three times; and Elijah got a whiff of God’s glory. And you even have the language there that says God was not in it. God was not in the earthquake. God was not in the fire, but there was a sense in which His glory was there. The passing of God was there, though not God Himself—a theophany, a visible manifestation of God. Or think back even further to Genesis chapter 15 when Abraham asked God, “How will I know that you will keep your promise that me and my people will inherit the land of Canaan?” And what do we read? God appeared to him in a smoking oven, in a burning torch and that strange covenant ceremony. This too was a theophany; God appearing in the visible forms of an oven and a torch. Again, not the full revelation of God but something of the essence of God’s power and of His glory. And then maybe one more, the one that you’re most familiar with, Exodus chapter 3, Moses standing before the burning bush and God speaks to him; a theophany, a visible form of God, a visible form of God.

But I want to tell you this morning that as glorious as it was for Moses to stand before that burning bush and hear the voice of God, and as glorious as it was for Abraham to participate in the covenant-making ceremony with Yahweh Himself, and as glorious as the glory was that passed by Moses on Mount Sinai and passed by Elijah on Mount Horeb, there is nothing in the history of the world in terms of theophanies that was more glorious than the Son of God walking on water in visible human form, passing by the apostles. This is Jesus of Nazareth? God come in the flesh—not in fire, not in an earthquake, not with wind—but in human form. The most compelling evidence that what the disciples saw this evening was a theophany of God is this very fact; Jesus did what only God Himself could do. Have you ever seen someone walk on water? Neither had the disciples. In fact, they knew only God could do this.

One other Old Testament passage, Job chapter 9. Turn back with me to Job chapter 9. What does it say about God? Job says, Job 9:8, his reply, *“[God] alone stretches out the heavens, and [God alone] treads the waves of the sea.”* Verse 11: *“Behold,”* notice this language, *“he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him.”* I mean, the disciples were rubbing their eyes saying, “Did I just see what I thought I saw?” as Jesus passes by, as Jesus treads the water as only Yahweh can do because Jesus is Yahweh. Jesus is God in human flesh. And just

again, notice the language of separate at the beginning of Job 9. Job answered and said: *“Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God?”* For there’s no one like God. Verse 3: *“If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times.”* Who is God? *“He is wise in heart and mighty in strength—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?”* Here, the disciples have hard hearts, we read in verse 52. Job says, *“Who has hardened their heart against God where God has not succeeded upon His elect to soften their hearts, to reveal Himself to the?”* And what does God do? Well, He does crazy things that no mortal can do.

Verse 5: *“He who removes mountains...he overturns them in his anger,”* verse 6, *“[he] shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; [he] commands the sun, and it does not rise; [he] seals up the stars; [he] stretched out the heavens and he treads the waves of the sea.”* This is something no weatherman or sailor could ever explain. This is no sandbar. This is God walking on water, and you saw the separation in Mark—Jesus separating the disciples from the crowds, Jesus separating the crowds from Himself. And Job says, *“Let me just draw a line here and separate God from everyone else. There is no one like Him.”* So, if that’s true, this must be God. Let’s give a little credit to the apostles. They did have a lot of the Old Testament memorized. I have no doubt they thought of Job chapter 9. Jesus passed by the disciples to reveal His transcendence, to show that He’s transcendent and separate, and yet we see His transcendence and eminence because He has come near to us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no greater miracle than the incarnation, and I cannot wait to celebrate the incarnation, beginning, Mrs. Pat, after today we begin to celebrate the incarnation and Christmas. In this miracle, the transcendent God reveals Himself to the disciples in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So, is it any wonder that the disciples respond the way they do? Notice verse 49, *“but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out...”* Literally, they cried out. It means to be thrown into a panic. In fact—this is interesting—it’s the same word that is used in the gospels to describe the demons crying out because they recognize—get this—the deity of Jesus. Back in Mark 1:23, this was a long time ago, but *“Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.’”* Demons always knew who He was.

Finally, the disciples are crying out, shrieking out like the demons, and in fact, in John 6:69 after the disciples deserted Jesus, we read that Peter makes that confession: *“You are the Holy One of God,”* the same confession of that demon-possessed man in the synagogue. And, of course, you remember after the last storm when they were in the boat, and the waves and the seas were calm, Mark 4:41 says that the disciples never made a confession. Instead, they asked the question, *“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”* Well, here’s their answer. They’re looking at God in human flesh, and it says in verse 49, *“they saw him walking on the sea,”* not a sandbar, *“and they thought it was a ghost...”* They thought it was a ghost. Now, I personally do not believe this is superstition on the part of the apostles. Again, I want to give them more credit than many want to give them. The word here *ghost* is *phantasma*. In classical Greek, it literally means “a spirit or an apparition.” The only other occurrence of this word is found in Hebrews

chapter 12. We won't turn there for the sake of time, but in that text, it speaks about fire, smoke, darkness, thunder that accompanied—get this—Moses at Mount Sinai. These were not signs of hell on Mount Sinai. They were signs of the power of God, the power of heaven. God was in the midst of that fire. He was in the midst of that smoke. He had passed by, His glory did, Moses. Listen, I think the apostles are brought face-to-face with God, and they know it. That's why they're terrified. That's why they shriek out. They are just as terrified as their forefathers were at the bottom of Mount Sinai. They've never seen anything like it.

As I said, the only time this text even indicates they are fearful is not in the storm but when they saw Jesus. It doesn't mean they weren't fearful in the storm, but it's a way for Mark to highlight and exemplify and magnify that their fear at seeing Jesus, God in human flesh, overshadowed any fear that may have come from some storm on the sea. This was much more terrifying. But that then takes us to the fourth part. The separation, the solitude, the storm; now, number four, the solace. The solace or the comfort, verse 50, *“for they all saw him,”* all of them. They knew what they saw. They were eyewitnesses. They *“were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’”* Jesus has entered the storm. Now He's going to enter the boat, but before He does that, He gives some words of comfort. I want to tell you, Christian, that Scripture will be your greatest solace. In your times of heartache and trial and storms, you need to hear the words of Christ. You need to be reminded of the gospel. You need to be reminded of God's sovereign power so that you can take heart and not be afraid.

Again, Mark has shown us Jesus' omniscience. He saw what was going on, not just outside the boat but in the boat; the omnipotence of Jesus. He came and rescued them out of the storm. But not just His omniscience and His omnipotence but also His benevolence, His love. Immediately, it says, He spoke to them. He didn't want them to fear any longer than they needed to. Immediately, the love of God. He is all-knowing, omniscient. He is all-powerful, omnipotent. But don't miss this, beloved, He is all-loving. He is a gracious God, and notice how Jesus identifies Himself again supporting my point that this is a theophany of God. He says, *“Take heart,”* or take courage, be brave, *“It is I.”* *Ego eimi* in the Greek. The Greek Septuagint when it speaks about the title of God as Yahweh, I AM, it uses this language, *ego eimi*, I AM. That is the title of God. Jesus is declaring deity to the disciples. He doesn't say, “This is Jesus.” He says, *“It is I,”* *ego eimi*. God said to Moses, *“I AM WHO I AM,”* *ego eimi*. *“Ego eimi* has sent me to you,” Moses told Pharaoh. A word about these comforting words from the prophet Isaiah:

*Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD, the first,
and with the last; I am he. [ego eimi]*

Or Isaiah 43:10:

*“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD,
“and my servant whom I have chosen,*

*that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he. [ego eimi]
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.
I, I am the LORD [ego eimi]
and besides me there is no savior.*

Folks, this is a theophany; God’s self-disclosure in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that’s the point of this story, and that’s why it’s such a turning point for the apostles. Now, Mark doesn’t record it, but if you flip back with me to Matthew chapter 14, it’s at this point after Jesus speaks, *“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid,”* that Peter begins to step out of the boat. Mark doesn’t record it. Why does Mark not record it? Well, Mark doesn’t record it because Peter is his primary source, and Peter likely was a humble man and didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention to himself. So, Mark leaves it out, but we read about it in Matthew 14:28:

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Yeah, there was little faith but there was some faith, right? Straining at the oars, stepping out to walk on the water like God was doing. Well, that takes us to the conclusion. Five eye-opening scenes: the separation, verse 45; the solitude, verses 46 and 47; the storm, verses 48 and 49; the solace, verse 50. Now, verses 51 and 52: the stillness, the stillness. Notice verse 51, *“And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded...”* So, their alarm turns to astonishment, but this isn’t because of the storm. This is because of the Savior, right? They’re astounded that He has calmed the storm by walking on the sea. John 6:21 says something very, very interesting. I remember preaching through this many, many years ago, and I was reminded of this when I studied this passage here in Mark. In John 6:21 it says, *“Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”* Some believe that they just zipped to the other side like that, supernaturally. I assure you if that’s what happened, it was no thrill ride. They were in the middle of asking, *“What just happened to us?”* and then that happens. Again, they are astounded, but before they got to the land, they began worshiping Jesus. Mark doesn’t point it out for whatever reason, I don’t know, but Matthew does. Matthew 14:33, *“And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”* You’re the Son of God.

And this is why we must make verse 52 mean what it says and not what we think it says. Verse 52: *“for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”* Prior to the storm, they had not taken into account what that miracle meant regarding the identity of Jesus. So, they entered the storm with less faith than they should have had. Their great sin was not reflecting on the miracle; that it pointed to His identity, that only God can create manna from

heaven or bread. So, I tend to think that verse 52 is less of a criticism of the disciples after the storm and is really more of a criticism pointing back to what their hearts were like before the storm, but now their hearts are softened because why? Matthew tells us they worshipped God. They worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. From this point on, their eyes were more wide open in faith to the identity of Jesus. And here is one of the great lessons of this story, and I’m going to say this firmly, but I want to say it very gently; trials awaken our faith and strengthen our faith more than the good times because in the moments of deep despair, all we have is to turn to God, who we sometimes and even sinfully so think isn’t there or doesn’t care. Oh, He’s there. He’s looking. He’s coming to our rescue. You know why? Because He ordained the trial to begin with. He comes to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, loving us so much to redeem us from our sin, to redeem us from all the sorrow of this world. Let me just say God does not give the hardest storms to the toughest saints. He makes the toughest saints out of the hardest storms. How inappropriate it would be then to not quote Romans chapter 8. I think it’s appropriate.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

May I suggest that if those verses sound trite, it’s not because God’s Word no longer has power. It’s just as powerful as Jesus’ words, “*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid,*” but perhaps the reason they sound trite or powerless can be reduced to two reasons. Number one, you’re not in the midst of a trial, and so that verse doesn’t come with the weight that it would come if you were in the midst of a crisis. Or secondly, you’re about to enter a trial at the direction of God’s sovereignty so that you can become more aware of your dependence upon Him. That was the disciples’ problem. They needed a trial. They needed a storm because, otherwise, they would think they’d be okay without Christ. Trials are for our good because God loves us. He loves us so much He sent His Son to die for us, and the greatest storm of all, to be raised from the dead. He sends storms to us so that we feel His comforting presence, His love, His compassion because, quite honestly, we are like the disciples too much. And we think, at least practically—not confessedly so—but practically, “I’m doing just fine.” The storms of life will change us. They’re meant to change us because God loves us.

The last two events—the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water—is it virtually impossible to see that Mark is trying to remind us that Jesus is Yahweh? He created bread, and He fed His people in a desolate place, and then He walked on water just as He ripped the Red Sea apart for His people. Time and time again throughout history, God proves His faithfulness, but we’re just like the disciples; slow and hard of heart to believe. I’ll close with a quote by Luther, same sermon:

If you wish to be a Christian, you will certainly experience trials. However, if you call upon Christ in time of need, He will hear you, rescue you, and cause your trial to bear blessed fruit and great glory. For the present every necessity is met; and later, eternal life will follow.

Praise be to God. Let us bow for prayer.

Father, thank You for the strengthening truths of Your Word. Lord, we pray for those among us who are struggling, who are doubting. All of us, I suppose, in a sense bear burdens this morning; some more than others, but Lord, we understand that Christ is with us. Christ is among us. Christ is in us. Christ is directing it all for His glory, and we can trust Him. We thank You for these wonderful, comforting words; and Father, we pray that we might apply them prayerfully, this Lord's Day, as we meditate upon them. We ask these things in the blessed name of Christ, our Savior. Amen.