

Mark 6:45-52 God is Our Refuge and Strength

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. 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 Then 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.

The outbreak and rapid spread of the coronavirus across the globe has been a recent focus of attention. Now, it is not only a concern for people in certain countries, but it is an issue for global society as a whole. There is not only its specific impact to contend with but there is also the uncertainty that this outbreak is creating, causing anxiety in our workplaces, schools, and day-to-day activities. Particularly as Christians, we must think about how we should see and interpret this kind of situation. We must ask what God is telling us, how God is working through this, and how we are to respond to this. It is a difficult situation and we must grieve with those who suffer, and, at the same time, it can give us the opportunity to think about the love of God that goes beyond our hardships and that comforts us and strengthens us.

Today, we have taken a look at a passage from Mark, chapter 6. There is an important word in it that means an "adverse wind" or a "storm," and I would like to connect this word to the unexpected hardships that we face in our life, including the coronavirus.

This is the storyline right before today's passage: it is set in the time when Jesus was becoming more well-known to many people and becoming highly respected. A number of people came out to listen to the teachings of Jesus. And Jesus took pity on people who were suffering, and showed them a miracle by feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

A lot of people were so surprised by this miracle and excited about it, and they might have tried hard to get closer to Jesus. Then Jesus called his disciples to gather privately. Jesus told them to leave and get into the boat and go ahead to a place called Bethsaida. Jesus left behind the huge crowd, and went up to the mountain and prayed there by himself. The disciples, listening to Jesus, took the boat and tried to go to the other side. It was late in the evening and the weather was very windy. The disciples were rowing the boat very hard in the sea, but it was not easy due to the wind and the waves. This scene is also described in the book of Matthew, which describes this tough situation as follows: "by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them." (14:24)

Why was the weather so inclement on that day and troubling the disciples? Why was this so, after the amazing miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand?

The disciples might have been really excited when they were getting on the boat, thinking ‘how can a miracle like this happen? It is a hard thing to believe and it’s amazing.’ After experiencing the mysterious power of Jesus, they might have felt courageous as they got into the boat. They were strengthened, and they had a destination, the village Bethsaida, which was not that far away. However, they could not make it across the sea and they couldn’t reach Bethsaida even though they tried all night long. The storm, along with the adverse wind and waves, prevented them.

There are similarities between a sea and a virus. Just like a virus is hidden in our life, like something that is deep inside a closet, there may be wind and waves hidden in a sea that looks calm and peaceful. Although it may look calm, it’s not always calm, and it may have a storm. A storm sometimes attacks so suddenly and intensely. And there are times when people go for a journey on the sea and get severely attacked by the hidden aggression of waves.

This attack of waves and storm is not the first time this occurs in the Bible. In the book of Mark, chapter 4, there was a time when the disciples had a collective life crisis because of a storm. After the crisis, the sea calmed again and it seemed conquered. Just like a virus gets conquered, the sea seemed to have become entirely peaceful, posing no potential danger. But here it is, roaring again, in today’s chapter. The disciples had to resist the storm all through the night. We can ask the question, “What brought this windstorm?” or “Why is this happening?” There could actually be a reason for natural disasters and other types of life difficulties. For example, in the book of Genesis, when Noah faced the worldwide flood, it came from a reason – it was the judgment of God. And in the book of Jonah, when Jonah faced a huge storm in the sea, it was part of God’s special plan for Jonah. There might be a reason for our difficulties, but it is hard for us to always recognize the reason. And we cannot draw a hasty conclusion about what the reason is. In today’s passage, the disciples are struggling with a windstorm without knowing the reason for it. And no matter how we endeavor to overcome the storm, no matter how we pray, there are times when the situation does not seem to get any better. No matter how we pray to God, we can experience serious damage in our life. And anyone can suffer from a storm. Innocent children have become the victims of the coronavirus, and very faithful Christians have become the victims of coronavirus. We never know for sure why we are undergoing this difficulty, why innocent people have to suffer, and how we can overcome these situations.

The book of Mark describes the disciples facing the wind differently in two different passages – chapter 4 and chapter 6. In chapter 4, verse 35-39 describes the disciples’ reaction as follows: “35 On that day, when evening had come, he [Jesus] said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.”

This passage has some similarity with and differences from today’s passage, found in chapter 6. In both passages, Jesus commands his disciples to go across to the other side of the sea. A

difference is that Jesus does not get into the boat with the disciples in today's passage, but Jesus accompanies them in chapter 4. The second difference is that when a windstorm came, Jesus was sleeping on the boat in chapter 4. In that case, the disciples wake him up and ask for his help. But in chapter 6, Jesus was not in the boat. So the disciples try to combat the storm by themselves. Although they ask for Jesus' help in chapter 4, in chapter 6, they do not even shout out for help, nor do they pray to God. Did they think that they were powerful enough to overcome the storm? It doesn't seem like this was the case, because they struggle with the storm all night long. What seems to have happened was, since they thought Jesus was far away, they gave up on praying and they gave up on asking for Jesus' help. They just tried to manage the situation by themselves. So we can see that two contrasting attitudes of the disciples are portrayed: one is to wake up Jesus and ask for his help, and the other is to strive to fight the storm, like in today's passage. Which attitude would be what God desires for us? As the Bible talks about both ways, and both are shown by the disciples, it may not be an either/or situation. Making an effort on our own doesn't mean we are not also praying or relying on God.

To that end, today's passage teaches us a very important point. The disciples believed that the storm would calm at some time, so they confronted the hardship and did their best to resist it, although it was not an easy battle. They might have known that although it would be hard to entirely suppress the storm, at least it would be eased at some point in time.

And an interesting scene follows. It describes that Jesus saw that the disciples were straining at the oars against the adverse wind. How could Jesus, who was staying far away at the mountain, see the disciples? Was he watching them with a telescope? Jesus was praying at the mountain. Jesus was already praying for the disciples. Jesus already knew about their situation and was watching their suffering and pain. Jesus was paying attention to them. Seeing the disciples' struggle, Jesus comes toward them early in the morning, walking on the sea.

I actually tried to imagine this scene. I pictured that it was a dark night when the sea was roaring violently with an adverse wind, waves, and storm. At night without any light, let us imagine Jesus walking on the turbulent sea. How would have it looked? I think Jesus might have been striding or even nearly running toward the disciples, who had been concerned and exhausted. Jesus might have been almost running with his clothes flapping in the wind. Jesus was getting closer to the disciples when he said to them, "Take heart, it is me; do not be afraid."

To Jesus, neither a sea nor a storm was an obstacle. Jesus could walk over anything. Jesus walked on the water and came to his disciples who were suffering and frustrated. In fact, the disciples were terrified when Jesus was walking toward them on the sea. It's plausible enough to imagine that they were terrified, because they hadn't seen such a thing before. However, while they were heroically rowing the boat in the midst of the storm, trying to keep the boat afloat, they should have remembered one thing. That is, the almighty Jesus who had just fed five thousand people on that very afternoon. Jesus who was powerful and compassionate enough to feed five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread. The disciples might not have had the time or energy to grab the Bible or to say a word of prayer. They did their best to combat their hardship, which may be part of the attitude that God desires for us. However, during their striving, deep inside their hearts, they should have had Jesus. They should have remembered that

Jesus is the one who was always watching them, praying for them, and working with them. The book of Mark points out the disciples' state of mind by stating that "51 Then 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." Their hearts were hardened in the midst of the adversity of the storm and the uncertainty they faced because of it.

We are now here to worship, and we are concerned about the spread of the coronavirus. We feel concerned about our loved ones and our neighbors here in the United States and in different countries, and also about ourselves. We are facing a very unexpected difficulty, and we get concerned about the uncertainty it brings – questions like where it came from and when it will go away. From the bottom of our hearts, we are to pray that it will go away as soon as possible. And we are to do our best to resist it and protect ourselves and our neighbors so that we can stay safe. This is to be like the disciples resisted the storm. And, at the same time, more than anything else, we need to believe that our God is a loving God, who blesses us and keeps us, wherever we are and whatever difficult circumstance we are situated within. In Psalm 46, we are reminded that it is God who is our refuge and strength, and our ever-present help in trouble. So, despite the suffering that we have very little control of, we can rely on God and anticipate the work of God with hope. We are to cherish our identity as children of God, and to embody the love that Jesus showed us by comforting and encouraging our neighbors who are weakened physically and spiritually. Let us hold on to the message: "Do not fear" and pray, and strive to resist our difficulties. So let us not fear, remembering Jesus who is always watching us and working in us. With confidence, let us use this opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus through our prayers and our care for others.