

Hillcrest Congregational UCC  
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Seeing, and Seeing  
Mark 6:30-56

Please pray with me.

Today in our scriptures we see two powerful miracles. First, in Mark 6:41- 44, Jesus fed the 5,000. Then in Mark 6:48-52, he walked across the sea during a heavy wind, and when he got into the boat with his disciples, the wind ceased. The Gospels According to Matthew and John include both these stories, and Luke's Gospel has the story of feeding the 5,000, so there must be something important to these stories.

But if we focus just on Mark's Gospel, we could presume that these stories were especially important to him because both stories appear twice. Back in May we looked at Mark 4:35-41. Jesus was sleeping in the stern of the boat when a storm comes up and the disciples all fear for their lives. Then in Mark 8:1-10, Jesus feeds another 4,000 people. But here in Mark 6:30-56, Jesus accomplishes both miracles, one right after the other. Why would Mark repeat these stories? What is so different about them that he would find it important to include them both?

The first thing difference I noticed when I put the stories from Mark side by side is, before Jesus accomplishes these miracles, what does he do? In 6:31-32, Jesus has the disciples go off with him to a lonely place to rest. Then in 6:46, Jesus goes off by himself to pray. In these miracle stories of Mark, Jesus goes to a quiet place, he dedicates himself to rest and prayer, and he centers himself. For those of us who like to keep really busy, and sometimes even lose ourselves in our busy-ness, Jesus is a perfect role model for self-care and centeredness in God. Jesus does not take Sabbath time literally, (his disciples pick food to eat, and Jesus heals on the Sabbath) but he does take Sabbath time seriously. A good lesson.

But, in order to show you the second difference I noticed, we need to consider the context of what has been happening: the stories we have been reading about Jesus' powerful traveling ministry of healing and teaching all lead and build up to today's scripture. Let's go back to Mark 4:35. A few weeks ago, we read about Jesus stilling the storm. He asks his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Next, in Mark 5:22, Jesus was approached by Jairus, to come and heal his daughter from a deadly illness. On the way, in Mark 5:25, a woman touches his cloak and is healed. In both situations, the people come to Jesus in fear, in both situations they are healed by faith.

The next week we read about Jesus being among his own people who do not appreciate him for anything special. "Who does he think he is?" Jesus remarks in Mark 6:4, "that a prophet is not without honor, except in his own home." Then in Mark 6:11, Jesus sends his disciples out to minister. He tells them that the Way will be difficult, people may not listen to them, but they are not to get discouraged or lose faith. They are not to take the negative energy or dust with them, just shake it off their feet and move on. Then, last week in Mark 6:14 we heard that people were claiming that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. We heard exactly how great a risk the disciples took, how very difficult following the Way was when we heard about the execution of John the Baptist.

And today, the disciples return and tell Jesus about all they have done and taught- they cast out many demons and anointed many that were sick and healed them- a successful trip. Ah, Jesus must be happy! The disciples know who he is, they understand the Good News he has taught them, and they have been able to translate it into a ministry. They have been able to live and breathe it for the people so that people are healed!

And then we have the two miracle stories. But instead of two additional stories of success, I think Mark uses them as a vehicle for a message that he thinks is even more important. We can see this by comparing the actions of Jesus and two groups of people.

First Jesus: in verse 31 Jesus takes the disciples away to a deserted place: for they had no leisure even to eat. In that deserted place, Jesus makes sure they are fed, physically and spiritually. Mark's intent here is to evoke the image of the prophet Moses feeding the people in the desert. Then Jesus feeds the 5,000 and this evokes the image of the prophet Elijah who did the same. Mark is reminding us of God's relationship with the people and the prophets.

Then Jesus walks out across and stills the sea. Power over the sea is no less than the power of God! In addition, in verse 48c reads, "He intended to pass them by." This is the same language used in Hebrew Testament stories when God passes by. But the disciples were afraid, and so in verse 50b Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I..." The translation is actually, it is I am. The name God gave to Moses to take to the Pharaoh. The author of Mark is reminding his community of the stories of God and the prophets. He wants to make it absolutely clear that Jesus and his ministry follow directly in the line of history of the relationship of God to God's people through God's prophets. God is present. God is faithful.

Then, we have the first of two groups, the disciples. What is their response to the experience of being fed in the deserted place and being asked to feed the crowd? In verse 35, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place ... send them away so that they may go ... and buy something for themselves to eat." Jesus answers them, "You give them something to eat." Jesus has just ensured that the disciples were "fed," now he expects the disciples to follow his example. The best the disciples can come up with is: should we go and buy bread? Although

you or I in Jesus' place might be tempted to give an exasperated sigh, Jesus' patience is perfect. He simply takes 2 fish and 5 loaves and shows them again what faith makes possible.

Then, in verse 47, "When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, ... he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea ... But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost...they were utterly astounded, 52for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. They saw him, but they did not recognize him! And even though Jesus told them again and again who he was with his word and his actions (including multiplying the loaves just as Elijah had), the disciples didn't get it. Mark's message is that the disciples, just like the people in Jesus' home town, were able to see Jesus but they did not see who he was.

Our second group is the crowd of people: The people's actions bookend this scripture. In verse 33 we read "...many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. Then in verse 54, "When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was."

Mark's message is that the people recognized, the people believed, the people could not only see Jesus but they could see Jesus for who he was. Emmanuel, God With Us! And the result? In verse 56, "And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed." Through faith, the people are made whole in mind, body, heart and spirit.

So we have here the comparison: Jesus represents the presence and the faithfulness of God. The disciples represent doubt. And the people represent faith and the possibilities for wholeness that come from faith.

You see, the people that Mark was writing to, the earliest followers of the Way of Jesus in Mark's community, did not have it easy. Mark wrote his Gospel- his Good News as reassurance during one of many times in history when Christians experienced great persecution. He told them, even though the disciples had Jesus right in front of them, sometimes they failed to see. Even the disciples were afraid. Even the disciples failed to recognize the power of Jesus' message. Even though they walked with Jesus, the disciples' faith was challenged again and again. Even the disciples doubted.

Believe it or not, this is good news! The disciples weren't perfect. The disciples were human like you and I. That means when we are challenged, when the storm in our lives is most frightening, when our physical or spiritual food or resources seem completely tapped out, when our hope fails, when we doubt, all is not lost! Instead, we are encouraged to keep seeking, to keep asking questions, and to keep praying- talking to God, individually and with each other.

So if we look at the miracle stories of Jesus with our skeptical, analytical, logical mind, and find we have doubts, it's okay! Perhaps the miracle of the fishes and loaves was not magical multiplication, but getting people who saw each other as "unclean" strangers to sit down and share their picnic baskets like friends. Perhaps Jesus "walked on water" because the tide was out and he knew where the rocks were. It's okay, we don't have to believe that natural laws were suspended! Believing is not what faith is! Faith is assurance. And we have assurance.

We have the assurance that God has always been present, that God is always present, and that God will always be present. Even and perhaps most especially when we doubt. No matter

what we do or don't do, say or don't say, believe or don't believe, God is present and faithful. Whether we see or recognize God or not. May we derive from this assurance the power of seeing and seeing. Amen.