

Proper 12B - Mk. 6.45 -52

Jesus' Majesty and his Disbelieving disciples

Billy Robinson headed off to vacation bible school at the church down on the corner. After a long day of arts and crafts, bible stories and singing songs he walked back to his house. His mother was waiting expectantly for him in the kitchen. After Billy finished his glass of milk and piece of pie, his Momma asked him, "Billy boy, what did you learn at Bible School today?" Billy scratched his head and shuffled his feet and said, "Well, we learned about Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea." Thinking his answer

was sufficient he looked to make a break for the great outdoors. But his Momma stopped him. "Billy", she said, "tell me that story; I don't think I remember how it goes." Billy was trapped, and he knew it. So he said, "The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. Moses came down and told the Pharaoh, 'Let my people go!', but he wouldn't. So Moses led the people out of town and down to the Red Sea shore. Pharaoh chased them with his horses and chariots. They were trapped!"

Billy's Momma said, "Oh, how exciting. What happened then?" Billy said, "Well, then Moses called

the Navy and the Army Corps of Engineers. They brought in boats and helicopters carrying a pontoon bridge. The Israelites walked right across to the other side. And even better than that, when Pharaoh's army tried to follow them the Navy SEALs blew up the bridge and all the Egyptians went to the bottom!"

Billy's Momma peered at Billy and said, "Billy boy, I don't think I believe that!" Billy smiled and said, "Well, if you don't believe that, you sure won't believe what they really told us at Bible School!"

I would draw your attention to the Gospel lesson appointed for this morning in which Mark relates Jesus' miraculous walk upon the waters in the Sea of Galilee. And while we may laugh about Billy's modernization of this story I was interested to hear recently that Billy was not too far off. It seems that Professor Doron Nof, of Florida State University, has proposed a more reasonable explanation of our passage. In a BBC article of April this year, Professor Nof proposed that based on studies showing an era of cooler weather in Palestine approximately 2000 years ago. These sub-zero temperatures could have produced ice on the surface of the Galilean Sea thick

enough to support the weight of a man. So, says Nof, “If you ask me if I believe someone walked on water, no, I don’t. I believe something natural was there that explains it.”

Now, we may respond to scientific research such as this in the same way that Billy’s mother did at the mention of fanciful flotillas, but Mark’s testimony has fared little better in the hands of Biblical scholars. Some have used words like “gratuitous” and “showy” to describe Jesus’ watery trek. Healing from disease and emotional distress (their word for demon possession) have certain charitable value to them. But

walking on water effects no social stability or religious goodwill. It is simply ostentatious, not becoming of a faith healer or social critic.

But wouldn’t we, not ourselves able to stand upon the waters, be on safer ground if we asked St. Mark what he was trying to say in his Gospel? We find his purpose simply stated at the beginning and at the end of his Gospel. He begins this way: The beginning of the joyful message of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye

the way of the lord, make straight his paths. Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with accounts of Jesus' birth. He is divine because he was conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary. But Mark begins by stating that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah, who is also the Son of God.

Mark concludes his Gospel in this way: So then the Lord Jesus, after had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. So Mark ends where he begins, extolling the majesty and magnificence of Jesus, the Son of God. We should not be surprised, then, when we find Mark proving his

point in the midst of his Gospel. It is Mark's intent in the Gospel today, to show Jesus in his majesty and the disciples in their inconstancy.

By recording the event of Jesus walking on the water Mark claims that Jesus of Nazareth is God. Does that surprise you? I am sure that we could all agree that walking on water is not a normal human behavior. We might be unanimous in our agreement that Jesus' activity was supernatural. But do we understand Mark to be saying that Jesus is divine? He most certainly is.

In the Old Testament, who is the only person that walks on water? It is Yahweh alone. Consider the first verses of the Bible. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” The earth was formless and void, *tohu vavohu*, and God moved over the waters. The waters heave and churn, they are in chaos. Yet, almighty God, who creates the world stands firmly upon them.

Likewise, the book of Job identifies Yahweh as the one who walks upon the waters. In the midst of

destruction and torment Job cries out wanting to know how all this could have happened. Is Yahweh really the true God controlling heaven and earth? The Lord responds by asking Job if he is big enough to question God. Was Job there when the earth’s foundation was laid? Was he there when Yahweh locked up the sea in its place? Had he caused the sun to rise in the morning? Had he entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? The only answer Job can give to these searching questions is a whispered “No”. There is none other who has done these things than Yahweh himself.

Finally, it is not enough that Yahweh walked upon the waters as he created the world. He walked in the waters as he saved his people Israel. The psalmist writes, “Thy way is in the sea, and thy paths in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known. Thou leddest thy people like sheep, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” Though the nations raged against the Lord God like so many seas, he brought his people out of Egypt, through deep waters, and placed them in a pleasant land.

So Mark asks his reader, “Who walks upon water?” And there comes only one reply, “Only God does, Jesus Christ the Lord.”

But having shown the majesty of Jesus Christ the Son of the living God, Mark proceeds to the inconstancy of the 12 disciples. “They were utterly astounded for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” They were utterly astounded, and who wouldn’t be! They thought they were going to drown and the next thing they know a ghost has walked across the water, climbed into the boat, made

the storm go away and mysteriously transported them to the shore! Who here would not be astounded?

But Mark has qualified their astonishment by writing, “they did not understand the loaves.” Not 12 hours earlier Jesus had fed 5000 men, plus wives and children, with five loaves and two fish. There were 12 baskets left over. Before that he had raised a dead girl to life. And just before that he had calmed the storm with a word. Mark says, they had seen all these things – and STILL they were astounded! Why? Because they were hardhearted. Their hearts were made of bone.

So then, dear friends, what can we learn from the example of these astonished disciples? First, that faith is no natural virtue, but it is a gift. How often I have heard it said, “Oh, if I had more information I would believe in Jesus. If he came back and showed himself to me, then I would know he was real. Then I would believe in him.” Is that true? Do we need more information? Jesus didn’t seem to think so when he told the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man had neglected poor Lazarus who lay at his door. When they both died, Lazarus went to sit in Abraham’s lap and the rich man to the torments of

Hell. The rich man asked if Lazarus could bring him a drop of water, but he was told no. Then the rich man asked that Lazarus be resurrected and sent to warn his five brothers. Abraham said to the rich man, “No, they have Moses and the prophets. If they will not listen to them, neither would they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.”

Friends, we do not need information; we need intervention. We have been given the testimony of Mark of the glory of Jesus, walking as God upon the waters! We have heard the testimony of the apostolic witness that Jesus came forth mightily from the grave,

by the strong arm of his Heavenly Father! We do not need more information to believe. We need God’s intervention to take away our hard, bony, dead hearts. The answer is not that we should do better, be nicer with these hard hearts. Instead, let us beseech Almighty God that he give us new hearts, that we might see Jesus as he truly is and believe in him. Let us not waste another day without beating down the doors of Heaven with our prayers til we receive that which we need the most: new hearts.

Finally, if the disciples’ astonishment was not the appropriate response to Jesus’ majesty, what is? Dear

friends, we are here this day to do that very thing! We must worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost! Once we have received at God's hands the gift of faith, a heart that does love him, then we must fall down before him and worship him.

Consider your health and your wealth. Consider your children. Consider the peace and tranquility that you enjoy in this land. Consider the forgiveness that you have received through the life-giving death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Which of these have you earned? Which of these has not been a gift given to you from the great depths of love that Our Lord bears for you?

All of these things have been poured out upon you as signs of his favor toward you. Let us all worship him, even as the heavenly host worships him. For they stand before him, not in astonishment, but in awe and wonder at the mighty deeds that he has done. Let us join with them as they adore the majesty of the Everlasting Father, His Son Jesus Christ Our Lord, and the Holy Ghost the Comforter. AMEN.