

Mark 6: 45-52 "Hearts of Stone" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/12/21

It was a dark and stormy night. This infamous sentence is considered by most to be the worst possible way to start any story. A piece of prose so purple you could slap a price sticker on it and sell it as a grape. Nevertheless, that is the image Mark gives us in his version of this biblical story. John tells the Cliff Note's version of the story: the sea was rough, the disciples were scared, Jesus spoke, and before they could haul him aboard, the boat immediately arrived at the far shore. No spooky details, no ghosts, no ceasing of the wind, no astonishment. Luke skips the story altogether. Matthew adds to Mark's version by giving Peter's brave but failed attempt to meet Jesus out on the waves, followed by Jesus' quick rebuke, "You of little faith- why did you doubt?" after which the wind dropped and the disciples did too. One by one, they fell to their knees in the bottom of the boat and there among the dried bait and tangled nets, they confessed their faith, "Truly," they said, "You are the Son of God."

But Mark isn't as kind to the disciples nor to us, his listeners. His account of Jesus' walk across the water is a more disturbing one full of puzzling details that come to a rather gloomy end. Mark tells us that after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus tells the disciples to get into their boat and push off from the shore when it is growing dark. But, as Barbara Brown Taylor boldly asks, who sails at night that doesn't have to? Sailors will take off in the middle of the night for calmer waters if a hurricane is coming and they want to save their boat from damage; cruise liners take off at night so they can get to their destination by morning and are thoroughly equipped for night sailing. But common fishermen don't head out in the night, especially when flashlights and kerosene lanterns haven't been invented yet. Then Mark tells us that they were headed to the other side, to Bethsaida, which poses another problem, since Bethsaida is not on the other side at all, but far to the north. Then comes the violent wind and waves, so strong that the disciples row in place half the night. I don't know if you have ever been in a kayak or canoe battling strong winds, but it is no fun to row as hard as you can, only to go nowhere. The text indicates that they were painfully rowing as the waves fought against them. It was very early in the morning, what sailors call the fourth watch, when Jesus came to them walking on the lake. He meant to pass them by. Did you catch that line in the story? But they mistake him for a ghost and scream in fear, which caught his attention. So he stops to reassure them, climbs

into the boat, and the wind stops, just like that. They give no thank you, no praise, no confession of faith because they are too astonished. They know who he is, but they still do not know who he is. They just don't get it. The disciples don't recognize that their Rabbi was also the Messiah they had been waiting for. You can tell Mark is frustrated with the disciples' reaction because he tells us their hearts were hardened, meaning their minds were closed. With hearts of stone, the disciples don't understand much of anything they've experienced including the feeding of the 5000, the healings, the miracles, or the teachings of Jesus.

Maybe that explains why they weren't so glad to see Jesus. Never mind for a moment that he meant to pass them by – they didn't know that, so why weren't they thrilled to see him? Why didn't they welcome being rescued from the storm and readily help him into the boat with loud shouts of relief and joy? Maybe because it wasn't the storm they were most afraid of? The rowing may have raised some blisters on their hands, but the text doesn't say they were afraid until they saw a figure approaching them across the water, on top of the water. In that darkest of night, just before dawn, when their minds and bodies were exhausted, they had kept rowing. These fishermen were tough, they could be counted on to produce, at least as long as no one messed with them. The storm, as hard as it was, wasn't the problem, it was Jesus. Even after he had soothed them saying, "Don't be afraid, it's me!", they are still astounded by the calm Jesus produced; it is not the waves or the storm but the calm that blows them away. They didn't understand, Mark says, because they had hearts of stone.

This past week, we were inundated with images and stories from 9/11, some of which came from the Museum which now sits at Ground Zero. I was grateful to tour that Museum back in July, specifically to pay tribute to the many who willingly sacrificed their lives that day. They painfully rowed against the worst storm our nation has ever endured from outside forces. On that day, the best of humanity came shining through and overshadowed the terror and tragedy. As a nation, we were united in our resolve to survive, to diligently row through that fourth watch which landed on our shores. Sailors explain more about that infamous fourth watch known as the darkest moments before the dawn. As told by one sailor, this is the time just before dawn when in the deepest dark, stuff starts to happen around you. You are out there surrounded by black water as far as you can see, especially if there's no moon, and your

eyes start to play tricks on you. You stare at the waves long enough and you begin to think you see land, or worse. You think you see rocks rising right up in front of you, or phantom ships drifting with all their lights off, or sea monsters. Your heart is seized with fear, your mind is gripped with paranoia. Pretty soon, the waves start sounding like the breathing of some huge invisible being, or the whispers of people spreading lies, or the shouts of people “Don’t mess with my rights,” “Keep out the misfits,” “Survival of the fittest.” Then you start realizing just how alone you are, and how far from home, and how many ways there are for you to die. But you can’t think about that too long or you’ll go crazy, so you eat a sandwich and watch funny TikTok videos or you see how many hymns you can whistle or you polish your compass until the sun comes up.” Or in the words of Mark’s gospel, you row and row and row; you stay busy; you stay focused on the far shore, on your destination, and you dismiss everything that gets in your way. Others either agree with you and are tolerated or they disagree and therefore are dangerous and worthless. The disciples’ hearts were hardened, Mark says. They had cardiovascular sclerosis. The part of them most capable of feeling, of understanding, of encountering God was clogged up so that very little could get through to them anymore. Maybe it was their stress, all that hard work. Or maybe it was their diet; eating on the run wherever their work carried them, moving from place to place. Or maybe it was their isolation; separated from family and friends. Whatever the reason, they had heart conditions. Their hearts were all but shut down and they didn’t even know it.

It is scary stuff which can lead to extreme reactions – A sect of Muslims takes down the World Trade Center so all Muslims are bad; Afghans can leave their country but not come here; COVID came out of China so Asians deserve punishment; the Delta Variant is a myth to elevate vaccinations. Scary stuff – and the thing about scary stuff is that it’s hard to control your response to it. Sometimes we feel strong and able to see it through and sometimes we can’t think straight. Rowing against the waves, the wind, and the dangerous storm, the disciples in the boat are a metaphor of the church struggling to survive as best it can, to see and row through the storm to the other side, to hold on until the sun rises. The disciples are prepared to row harder and harder all night long if they have to. What they were not prepared to do was to see their Lord hiking toward them across the Sea of Galilee – unsummoned, traveling in a

most unorthodox manner in the middle of the night. It didn't fit their expectations; it violated their categories. He wasn't supposed to be there at all, and so they didn't see him. They saw a ghost instead, which was all they could see with what was left of their hearts. Intent on their duties, on guard against all the things that go bump in the night, determined to fight rather than embrace, they mistook the Lord for a spook, for someone who meant to do them harm, but he didn't hold it against them. Instead of passing them by, he stopped to comfort them, "Take heart," he said, who had such a surplus of heart to offer them. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." From that moment on, they remained his church, clogged hearts and all, and he remained their Lord, the Divine One who kept climbing into our boats to be with us over and over again from that day forward, with heart enough to spare for us all. So keep your minds open and hearts softened for the Divine One will appear and climb aboard once more, reassuring every one of us, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."