

Taking Heart
Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14; Mark 6:45-52
West Valley Presbyterian, October 2, 2022

1. Last week we learned from Peter and the rest of the disciples about how fear can extinguish faith. This week, we are going to learn about how fear distorts our perception of God in our midst.
2. But first, we need to understand the context of this week's Scripture passage.
 - A. We are studying Mark 6:45-52. But everything in the Bible has a context. And the context of today's passage is Mark 6:30-44, the feeding of the 5000.
 - a. Jesus and his disciples had gone via boat to a deserted place so they could rest from the demands of the crowds of people.
 - b. But the people figured out where they were, and hurried around on land to join them. And Jesus felt sorry for them. So he taught and healed hour after hour. Well, what happens when people are crowded together for hours with no food? There's a reason that the church kitchen is second only to the sanctuary in the life of the church. If you don't feed people, they get cranky!
 - c. You know the story. The disciples ask Jesus to send the people away to buy food. He says, "You feed them." They say, "We don't have enough money. And the only food we have is 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. That's nowhere near enough!" And Jesus miraculously multiplies those loaves and fish, so that everyone present has plenty to eat.
 - d. How do you think the people reacted to that? (explain that John says that the people wanted to crown him king right then and there.)
 - e. If they'd tried, how do you think Jesus would have responded?
 - B. In today's passage, Mark tells us what Jesus did to make sure that the crowd wouldn't get out of bounds.
3. Jesus immediately makes his disciples get into the boat and head out on the lake toward Bethsaida; and he stays behind. He bids farewell to the crowd, which is a respectful way to refuse what they want. And then he goes up into the high hills around the lake, by himself, to pray. Alone with the Father for hours.
4. We don't know what Jesus was praying about. But we do know that being alone with his Father for hours strengthened him. Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Humanly speaking, teaching and healing and feeding great crowds of people is very tiring. Divinely speaking, time with the Father strengthens him. More than anything, Jesus wants what the Father wants; and prayer immerses him in what the Father wants.
5. In the pre-dawn hours, Jesus sees from his hilltop perch that the disciples are struggling. This time it's not an extraordinary storm like we talked about last week. This time it's adverse winds, which were very common on the lake. Adverse winds mean that the boat isn't getting swamped. But they can't sail; they have to row, and they've been rowing for hours. So Jesus goes to strengthen and encourage them. By walking across the water.
6. Why does he do that? Walking across the water is hard for us to understand. And it certainly was hard for the disciples to understand. Our text literally says that they screamed in terror, because they thought they were seeing a ghost.

7. He does that to show them that God himself is with them.

A. The book of Exodus is about God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and forming them into his own people. Right? Moses, the Passover, the escape from Egypt, the drowning of the pursuing army, the giving of the commandments, the provision of manna and water in the desert, the forming of a people. The disciples knew all that.

B. What they didn't get is that there are connections between the Exodus of long ago and the feeding of the 5000, which had just happened.

a. For example, the miracle of feeding of people in the wilderness, when there's hardly anything to eat from a human point of view. Happened at Sinai, happened at the Sea of Galilee.

b. For another example, the deliverance through water. God parted the waters of the Sea so Israel could leave Egypt, and restored the waters upon the pursuing army. And now here is Jesus coming across the water to help them.

C. Jesus knew that his disciples knew their Torah. So he intended to strengthen them by showing them that God himself was present in their midst, just as he had been at Sinai. Therefore, they had nothing to fear.

8. We know that that's what Jesus intended, because v. 48 says, "He intended to pass them by."

A. What's that about? Well, that phrase is related to Exodus 33:18-23, which tells us what happened when Moses asked to see God's glory with his own eyes.

B. Moses had been having a mighty tough time. He'd brought God's commandments and covenant to his people; and the people responded by building a golden calf and worshipping it while Moses is communing with God on the mountaintop. Yet even though Moses was very angry, he went before God and pleaded with him not to take his presence from the people. God finally does agree to continue on with his people, for Moses' sake.

C. After all that, Moses could use some strengthening and encouragement! So he asks God, "Show me your glory, I pray."

D. God replies, in 33:20, that "no one shall see me and live." But, he says, "I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by."

E. "Until I have passed by." Same as what Jesus intended to do. "He intended to pass them by."

F. He is intending to show the disciples that in him, God is at least as much present for them as he was for Moses. Jesus intends to strengthen and encourage them, and show them that they have nothing to fear, that God is present in person, right here and right now.

9. But instead of being heartened, they are all screaming in terror because they think they've seen a ghost! So Jesus goes to Plan B.

A. Instead of passing by, as he'd intended, he says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And he gets in the boat with them. He's connecting with them as human to human, rather than as God to human, because human to human is all they are able to understand.

B. In their fear, all the disciples can see is a ghost. They can't see the reality of God's glory passing by. What a loss!

C. In v. 52, Mark explains, "for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." They didn't make the connection between the manna in the desert and the loaves of bread in the deserted place. They didn't get the connection with Exodus then. And because they didn't get it then, they also couldn't see God's glory when it was passing by, right in front of them.

D. They were astounded, but they were not filled with faith.

E. They were not able to receive the full blessing that Jesus intended. Fear distorted what they saw, and hid from them the presence of God right in their midst.

10. They are not the only ones whose fear distorted their perception of God!

A. For example, the church I served in Columbia before retiring, the Church of the 49ers, once went through a very difficult time.

a. The church was founded in 1854; about 100 years later they remodeled the sanctuary and put in central heating among other things.

b. And then, early one Saturday morning, the church caught fire and burned to the ground, along with the manse next door. The fire was so fierce that nothing was left but the hand-hewn square nails that the gold miners had used in the original parts of the building; a puddle of metal that had been the church bell, and a communion plate.

c. The church had no insurance, and no money. And the worst thing was that the pastor, Joseph Hillhouse, and his family had lived in the manse. They were now homeless and had lost all their possessions. Part of the fellowship hall had survived; but that was it.

d. So here you have a small church, that lost everything except their people and their God. What were they going to do?

B. It wasn't easy to figure out what God wanted.

a. Some of the people were so fearful that they couldn't see any future for the church. Rebuilding looked impossible with no insurance and no money. So they felt that the church should close, and the pastor and family should find another church to serve.

b. Fortunately, though, the pastor did not let his grief or his fear overwhelm his sense of God's leading. Rev. Hillhouse and some of the elders focused more on God than on fear, and their perception of what God wanted turned out to be correct.

C. Rev. Hillhouse had all the kids sift through the ashes and bring him all the square nails they could find. Then he attached each square nail to a fundraising letter, explaining what had happened and asking for help. And he and the elders mailed those letters to everyone they could think of: the denomination, charitable funds, and politicians and friends from the governor on down. Basically the letter said, "These historic nails are all that is left of our hundred-year-old church; please help us and our community."

D. And guess what. God was with them! God blessed their fundraising efforts. They got the money they needed; they rebuilt the church; it is still in use, and it is still the center of the community of Columbia.

E. My point is, that the leaders who weren't fearful, were able to accurately perceive where God was leading, and were able to rebuild the church.

11. Last week we talked about not letting fear extinguish our faith. We recognized that fear has a legitimate place in our lives; but it shouldn't rule our lives. Only Jesus should rule our lives. This week, as we look at the disciples, we see what happens when fear distorts our perception of God. We miss out on all that God is doing, and wants to do, in our lives.

12. But how do we keep from allowing our fear to affect our perception of God's leading? Well, remember what Jesus did; he withdrew by himself to pray, for as long as he needed. If Jesus needed to get away and pray, then how much more do we! Jesus warmly invites us to withdraw and pray whenever we need, for as long as we need.

13. How do we do that? For individuals, Pastor Morgan has mentioned a type of prayer that is especially effective at getting fear under control, and it's called centering prayer. I'd like to commend it to you as well. The idea is to sit down to pray, and focus on God's presence. Let go of anything in your mind that isn't God. When you feel afraid, or when you start drifting off, you just refocus on God's presence. Using the name of Jesus can help with that. You don't talk to him, you just make yourself available to him. That's it. You do this once, or ideally twice, a day for about 15 minutes.

14. And how do we keep fear under control as a group? Celebrating the Lord's Supper together is very helpful for that. In the sacrament we let go of whatever our group fears are, and we focus instead on the real presence of Jesus as we share the bread and cup together. I don't know what your fears are, as individuals or as a group. But I do know that Jesus is right here with us, saying to us, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid."

Let's respond to him by singing together, "Break Thou the Bread of Life."