



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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**Sunday, July 30, 2006**  
*The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford  
on  
Mark 6:45-52  
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*A SERMON FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

“...It is I, be not afraid” (6.50b)

Garrison Keillor, popular radio talk show host of *The Prairie Home Companion* broadcast on National Public Radio, has coined a phrase that, I have been told, is sweeping Lake Woebagon: “*Who knew?!?*” Translated, it means: *imagine that!* or, *What a surprise!* It’s an expression of disbelieving-belief.

Today’s Gospel, in which Jesus walks on water (6.49), is familiar to believers and non-believers alike. It’s an example of “*Who knew?!?*”

Five thousand have just been fed (6.30-49), and Jesus tells his disciples to get into a boat and row to Bethsaida (6.45) on the opposite shore. He, however, remains, going, instead, to “...a mountain to pray” (6.46). Evening comes. And, looking out upon the sea, Christ sees his disciples “toiling,” as the Gospel puts it, rowing hard against a headwind (6.48). Christ, then, steps forth for Bethsaida, walking upon the surface of the waves.

The Evangelist is, I think, yoking the imagery of this account to that of two older and familiar stores from *Genesis*: 1) the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters (1.2); and, the Lord God walking in the garden of Eden (3.8). What we have, therefore, in today’s Gospel is an elaboration on the theme of creation. So, let us keep this in mind as the story continues to unfold.

Walking upon the sea, in the darkness of night, Jesus passes near the boat of his disciples. Spotting him, they mistake their Lord for a ghost (6.49) and cry out in fear (6.49). This introduces another Gospel theme, mistaken identity: men do not know who Jesus is. In this story, the disciples, who are also representative of all who dwell in the kingdom of this world, are unable to distinguish nightmare from mystery, perdition from rescue; a reminder, that the eternal often comes to us as contradiction.

Seeing their distress and the terror invoked by their misperception, Jesus approaches the boat, comforting and assuring the disciples with words that are also an imperative, a command: “...It is I, be not afraid” (6.50b). He, then, climbs on board, whereupon, “...the wind ceased...” (6.51), which is to say, peace and order are restored; again, a reminder, that God comes to men as the bringer of peace to a world in which there is no peace. “*Who knew?!?*”

Amazed, the disciples fail to comprehend the nature of what has happened. Scripture records the reason: "...their heart was hardened" (6.52). So, wisdom, or the knowledge and love of God, true vision, are given a context by Mark. Humanity, the Evangelist says, is incapable of knowing God without a heart that is prepared, open, vulnerable and available to receive God. Only grace can create that receptivity. Therefore, Mark is telling us something about ourselves: that we are contingent beings; which is to say, men and women absolutely dependent upon a God, who is our ultimate source of reality. This is also a God of creating Word: a Word breathed over the waters of chaos at the beginning of time; a Word continuously uttered to the hearts of men throughout the ages of history that calls to men, searching men out; and, as such, it is also a Word which is truth and life, for without or apart from this mystery, we are, as one would say in Yiddish, *bupkeis*; nothing! Or, as Trappist monk and author, Thomas Merton, describing the poverty/bankruptcy of the human condition, writes in his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "The human race is a body of broken bones" (as quoted by Paul Elie, *An American Pilgrimage*, p. 185). In other words, without the life-giving Word, we are as dead men walking.

Mark, this morning, is presenting a strange story, one of a series of miracles he chronicles in his Gospel, their purpose being to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of heaven; a mystery that the Messianic One both is and brings, an end time in which the world and humanity are being recreated. Thus, the miracles of the Gospel have something in common with the story and purpose of the original act of creation and the consequence of our ancient parents eating a bad apple in the primordial Garden. The deep waters of today's miraculous ambulation upon the waves, therefore, like Christ in the Jordan waters of baptism, hide grace and newness of life, because the God who comes to us across the sea of daily toil as one unknown, and, who is always contradiction, is also the God of redemption, the God of our freedom and hope. *Who knew?!*

What causes us to stumble/disbelieve in today's account is, I think, the troubling and irrational notion of anyone walking on water. Obviously, men do not walk on water any more than men who jump out windows fly! Therefore, the miracle of today's Gospel is either fantasy and religious fiction/foolishness, or something else. Something else is, I think, closer to the truth. The fact that men do not walk on water is precisely the point and the significance of today's record of events. Mark is saying, Jesus is no mere mortal. What we have, therefore, this morning, albeit an improbable occurrence and break with natural law, like the burning bush or the parting of the Red Sea, is an epiphany; which is to say, a manifestation of the divine that emerges from reality. Walking on water is an act transcending the human and natural order. So, the occasion of Jesus slogging across the waves that we today witness, for we are also counted amongst the disciples in the boat, points to a God who is above and over the entirety of creation, a God who is in control. "The sea is his, and he made it; and his hands prepared the dry land" says the Psalmist (95.5), describing a transcendent God who is actively involved in creation, because He is its cause and origin!

Therefore, the truth of this morning's epiphany or revelation is the truth of who Jesus is: Son of God and Son of Man. Mark intends that we, too, will realize this. Christ, is, therefore, declaring himself to all in the boat, to each of us, as well, that he is the messianic one, the bringer of salvation and a new age, a final one, a kingdom of peace. But, because those in the boat are captives to the kingdom of this world, which is to say, men whose hearts are possessed by fear, violence, and death, they, like the world in general, are unable or unwilling to perceive that the living God is indeed in their midst. In other words, those in the boat, we ourselves, are flawed and weak, misperceiving, limited, willful: this is the human condition, making of us little more than *a body of broken bones*, what I often term *powerlessness*. Therefore, help is needed if truth is to be perceived and vision restored, our brokenness

healed, lest all founder and perish, captive in life's violent, fearful, and deadly headwinds! To this anxious and troubled state, a dilemma from which humanity, like Adam and Eve, cannot deliver itself, God comes. And, God in Christ comes, as we see today, in judgment. And, that judgment is reconciliation and mercy: "...It is I, be not afraid" - a greeting that is also reminiscent of "tidings of great joy," the angelic announcement of the Incarnation, where the re-creation story really begins in the birth of the one who is this world's savior, the one who is to deliver us from all evil. *"Who knew?!"*

The point I want to make is simple: today's Gospel is a paradigm for conversion, which is to say, a model for each person's coming to believe; more particularly, belief in God and the Christ, who is and brings the long awaited kingdom of heaven. Belief is, indeed, underway in today's Gospel, but it is not yet completed. All in the boat have a long way to go, evidence of the already-but-not-yet tension of the presence of the kingdom of heaven in the lives of men. This is a tension that is like a tug at the heart strings, pulling each and all, one day at a time, a bit more out of this world and a bit more into God's world, a movement from the myopia of self preoccupation to an eternal way of seeing beneath and beyond and within the waves of present reality.

Today's Gospel, I think, is also a glimpse at a pre-resurrection world, an advantage we share over our shipmates, the disciples, because we already know the Gospel's end. Therefore, a great deal of change, I am saying, has yet to occur in the lives of all on board this small and humble craft this morning, for much is to happen between Bethsaida and Calvary, our journey's real end and true re-beginning, the cross being God's final judgment of reconciliation and peace, the cross being also the restored garden of heaven. Believing, I am saying for each and all, is not completed until the Resurrection, both Christ's and our own -- again, an event about as rational as walking on water or seeing pigs fly! And, even then, its perception is subject to the grace of God, as a disbelieving Thomas was to show. But, as I said earlier, Jesus is no mere mortal, and what he has to offer us and the world is the unlikely gift of eternity, the divine life that he shares perfectly with His Father and Creator of all. *"Who knew?!"*

But, there is something more going on in today's nautical adventure and divine epiphany. Those in the boat, rowing and straining in the perilous dark under their own power, are also an image of the Church, or I should say, pre-church, because the Church does not come into existence until the Resurrection. Today, we are presented with an unflattering dramatization of a pre-church in disconnect/disbelief; that is to say, believers in darkness, struggling to reach life's other shore; obedient, yet misperceiving, faithful yet unbelieving. Something is missing in this pre-church, a disappointment that Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes in the modern church. He writes in his book, *A Testament to Freedom*, saying "This church is no ideal church, but a reality in the world...subjected to all the weakness and suffering of the world" (p. 179). What Bonhoeffer is telling us, applied to today's Gospel, is that darkness and headwind, misperception, and fear *are* the religious experience not just the context of faith! Christ, in other words, is in the dark waters and headwinds of this toilsome life with us and with his imperfect and disbelieving Church! *"Who knew?!"*

Think of it this way, a bit differently. Have you ever noticed that the walking paths in Central Park never give you a long line of vision, only a glimpse of the immediate, as they twist and turn, leading and drawing the eye along in an unfolding vision of the landscape? This is like the believers' journey with God, like the church's witness as well. The parts can sometime seem disconnected, as if they go nowhere. There can be times of no long range vision, only the immediate pathway. However, this seeming limitation can be used by the landscape architect to achieve a great unity and purpose, as it does in the genius of Vaux and Olmstead in Central Park. Sounds of the 18<sup>th</sup> century you say. And, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* comes to mind, "'Tis but a part we see and not a whole" (I. ln 60). Or, if this is too secular and Scripture is preferred, then recall St. Paul writing to the Church in Corinth,

“...for now we see through a glass darkly...” (I Cor 13.12). *Through a glass darkly* is the night vision of today’s Gospel, a way of seeing that is stuck in the part without the whole, shaped more by familiar fear than by the divine love that is unfolding before disbelieving eyes and hearts. So, be it the individual, or the powers and principalities of this world, or the Church, each and all in the fallen creation are vulnerable to a captivity, wherein heart and sight are sometimes sincere yet deluded, mistaken, disbelieving.

The importance of today’s Gospel is, I think, found in this imperfection/impoverishment/mistakenness that contrasts so sharply with the perfect world whose clarity and goodness we want in our lives and church but which we cannot bring about, and whose perceived absence is a powerlessness that troubles our hearts and sense of well being. It is, as well, the importance of the Gospel: the God who is always on the horizon of this world as one unknown, the God who comes to men and women and a church caught between belief and unbelief, the God who is beyond creation and in it at the same time, is also the God who alone is faithful and good, the God whose revelation is perfect Love, the God who comes to each and all, that the weakness and imperfection of creation might become the victory and glory of the Almighty. This God is now Incarnate. And, this Incarnation is a transfiguring Word of a new creation, revealed in Jesus Christ. And, in him is judgment, what we hear today, “...It is I: have no fear.” To our amazement, this is the God who forgives our unbelief and heals our hardness of heart and challenges our misperception. It is the God of faithfulness and mercy who seeks out a weak and suffering humanity, a war torn and troubled world, and a confused and struggling Church, each of whom cannot deliver them-selves from the fear, violence, and death that hold all captive in the kingdom of this world. *“Who knew?!”*

Ours, therefore, is a peculiar God. Listen, to God speaking through the words of the Apostle Paul once again writing to *The Church in Corinth*; “My grace is sufficient for you, because my strength is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor 12.9). Thus, the primary witness of those in the boat this morning is to that same promise, that God will perfect and complete all that imperfectly is. Salvation is now come, and it is come to do and to accomplish what only God can bring forth and fulfill, a new creation from the dust and brokenness of the old. Improbable as this may be, this is our faith. *“Who knew?!”* Call us fools for believing!

I’m going to summarize now before I state what today’s Gospel might ask of us and the Church. I have said three things. 1) Jesus is revealed to the world and the church as uniquely, Son of God and Son of Man. He is Messiah. 2) As the Messianic one, he leads a new People of God in a new Exodus to a new Promised Land. Change/transformation/recreation is a necessary part of faith. And, 3) the witness of the believer and the witness of the community of the forgiven, the Church, are that God alone is, as Scripture puts it, “...the way, truth, life” (Jn 14.6). Ultimately, this is a witness to the resurrected and life-giving One, whose grace makes of us who we were not!

Now, in conclusion, three things we can do mindful of today’s Gospel; three suggestions. 1) We all have our beloved Episcopal Church in mind these days, I am sure. And, if we don’t, the Press surely does! No matter what position or feelings each of us may hold, I am reminded of something comforting and quite profound that contemporary Dutch theologian Hans Kung wrote four decades ago at the time of the II Vatican Council and its upheavals. The words are from his seminal work, *The Church*, dedicated to Archbishop Michael Ramsey. He writes, “Internal decay may threaten the Church; like Israel it may become weak and faint-hearted, it may become proud and imperious, or undisciplined and degenerate, it may be despoiled and violated, it may in many respects forget its true calling and turn its back on the Lord; and, yet...despite its sin and guilt, God himself will preserve it in his mercy...despite its errors and misunderstandings God will preserve it in truth” (p. 342). In other words, to the post-resurrection Church, God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide

and safe-guard it. God's work takes time, so give God time, as the God who alone is faithful is reconciling all. His grace, remember, is sometimes an upheaval that prepares us to receive new life and new vision for new lands ahead. The Church, I am saying, is always a people on exile, always a people becoming who they were not! 2) As a friend said to me recently, "What about goodness...what about the 10 commandments?" As you know, I don't say much from the pulpit about these things, today's Gospel being a case in point. I realize this constant omission can and, does, anger some people. Let me answer. The Gospels address this matter of goodness fully. Goodness for the catholic Christian is hidden in the imperative for believers to "Repent! Repentance is what I always phrase as surrender; the giving of one's will and life over to the care of God. No matter how we see or interpret repentance, and, those interpretations vary in the Christian tradition, Anglicanism, thankfully, draws a very broad and generous net of tolerance and respect for individual conscience. Let us be agreed, that repentance or surrender/amendment of life is the keystone in the lifetime journey of discipleship each person makes with God within the context of a pilgrim Church to life's other shore. Therefore, in the midst of our awkward disagreements, let us not forget laughter and kindness, tolerance and patience. Goodness, remember, is always in the context of rowing against a headwind in the dark to a destination we are all called to share, to share ironically with those who aren't good or who may be our enemies. This contradiction is the new creation of the Cross of Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, who died for all who were not good. A sobering remark of God's mercy and compassion by Dorothy Day, founder of *The Catholic Worker*, comes to mind, "God help us if we get what we deserved" (as quoted by Paul Elie in *An American Pilgrimage*, p. 179). Goodness is the grace of forgiveness: goodness is what we receive from God. And, 3) the fourteenth century Flemish mystic John Ruusbroec, once observed that "what we are is what we see, and what we see is what we are" (*The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, trans. by James Wiseman, Paulist Press, 1985, p. 171). Apply this to today's Gospel. If we are graced to see the Lord in our midst, then we are also blessed to see and experience God's mercy and compassion, the mystery that God is love. There is much in this life we do not understand and many things we shall not change. "Nevertheless," says the Psalmist, "...though I am sometime afraid; yet put I my trust in thee" (56.5). Trust in God's mercy and compassion is the invitation of the Gospel, a surrender unto the power of the One who is always love's mystery, the One who keeps our "...feet from falling...that...[we] may walk before...[Him] in the light of the living" (56.13). Trust in Christ and his mercy, I am saying, is deep seeing, a vision of the eternal day that is dawning in an aching contradiction, a wounding that makes us alive as never before, challenging our idolatrous captivity to fear, violence, and death. God comes to startle us this morning, to awaken us, "...it is I, [EGO EMI], do not be afraid!" *Who knew?!*