

Palm Sunday: Crossing Dangerous Waters

Mark 6:45-56, Mark 8:11-13, 22-29 by Patty Friesen (Mar. 25/18)

Throughout Lent we've been studying Jesus' calming storms and healing people. We've learned that the Sea of Galilee divides the Jewish community in the west from the Gentile community in the east and every time Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee, there is a storm, symbolizing the tension of crossing this religious and cultural divide. Again today, Jesus and his disciples crossed to "the other side" in a boat and a storm arose. This is their second crossing to gentile territory, a journey to the unknown, to the other side of humanity.

Mark is writing to the early church in Rome as they try to integrate these two opposing ethnicities - Jews and Gentiles. In this crossing to Gentile territory however, the disciples go alone, Jesus is still on land, on the mountain and he sees that they are in trouble at evening, but doesn't go out to them until morning, walking on the water. The disciples are terrified, seeing something super natural, but immediately he spoke to them and said. Do not be afraid. It is I. Then he got in the boat with them and the wind ceased.

As Ched Meyers in his commentary on Mark says, "These harrowing sea stories dramatize the difficulties facing the kingdom community as it tries to overcome the institutionalized social divisions between Jew and Gentile. The wind and sea as obstacles derive from the ancient Semitic myths of the sea as cosmic forces of chaos and destruction. It is no wonder the disciples are reluctant to make this journey for all the symbolic forces of segregation oppose this journey. And no doubt the real life social hostility to such a project of integration threatened to drown the early church community.

But Mark insists that Jesus will rescue this project and silent the winds of opposition.”

(P. 197 Meyers, Binding the Strong Man)

It is essential that we understand the stormy seas in Mark to indicate Jesus' mission to integrate the Gentiles, because then we understand the healing and the feeding of the 5000 also take place among Gentiles. The healings that follow the crossings demonstrate Mark's mastery in using narrative action to illustrate inclusion, which is the cornerstone to the new social order being constructed by Jesus.

Mark 8 is Jesus' last journey “to the other side.” After fighting with the Pharisees who ask for a sign from heaven, Jesus sighs deeply in his spirit and crosses to the other side, to the Gentiles where he finds more faith. The disciples have been struggling to understand what Jesus is about as symbolized in the 4 episodes of healing of blindness and deafness. The enemy isn't the Gentile but social blindness and deafness itself.

In fact the healing of the blind and deaf heralds the coming of the messianic age as prophesied in Isaiah. “In that day, the deaf shall hear and the eyes of the blind shall see. (29:18) Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped (35:5).

“Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him.” Again Jesus touching sick unclean people does not make him unclean. “Jesus asked the blindman, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees walking.’” Jesus healing touch is only partially successful and requires a second touch in order to see plainly. Some readers feel this shows Jesus isn't strong enough to do

an instant cure. Others observe that this is a more realistic model of physical and spiritual healing than an instant cure. The man could have been happy with seeing people like trees but Jesus has a firm commitment to him seeing clearly. Impaired sight is not a replacement for seeing clearly.

The growing sight of the blindman relates to the confessional struggle of the disciples. They get second chances to see see more clearly also. “Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again and he looked intently and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly.” The object of the story points back at us. As Ched Meyers, our favourite Mark commentator says, “The readers ourselves are suddenly forced to ask ourselves whether we have really understood as well. We suddenly feel our superiority to the ignorant first disciples slipping away. The smiling self-confidence engendered in us makes us vulnerable to Christ’s deep-cutting questions. We must frankly ask ourselves whether we are not ourselves still caught up in the same ignorance as were the first disciples.

“Jesus went on with this disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets. He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

Caesarea Philippi is a Greek city named for the Caesar called Philip of course. Here in the far north of Palestine, Mark introduces the true site for discipleship as being “on the way.” Peter’s confession is the middle of the gospel and the turning point for it, closing the first half of boat and storm stories and healing/feeding stories and chapter 9 begins Jesus and the disciples’ move on the way to the passion drama in Jerusalem.

Which brings us to Palm Sunday. Jesus makes the journey from the pagan north where his authority is recognized as is his priestly power to heal and forgive to the southern city of religious power in Jerusalem where people will reject him and his disciples betray him. Mark says, You'll find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. This triumphal entry is a new beginning, something that has never been done before, an entry not as a conquering hero but as a disarming surprise. Jesus changes the notion of kingship and humility. His power lies not in attempts to intimidate or destroy but in the foolish power of disarming love.

Mark slows down his fast-paced gospel to walk us through the last week of Jesus' life. We invite you also to slow down and come to church Thursday at 6:00 for the Last Supper and communion, Good Friday service Friday night at 7:00 and back here for next Sunday Easter morning with Easter brunch. May we walk with Jesus this week, as he walks with us. Amen.