

## “Is Jesus in Your Boat?”

Mark 6:45-52

Dr. Richard J. Alberta

Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church

August 14, 2011

**Text: Mark 6:45-52 (NIV) <sup>45</sup> Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>46</sup> After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. <sup>47</sup> When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. <sup>48</sup> He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, <sup>49</sup> but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, <sup>50</sup> because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." <sup>51</sup> Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, <sup>52</sup> for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.**

Quite an interesting passage. The disciples are straining in the boat in the middle of the lake ...the really deep part... in the dark of night. The word translated “straining” is related to the word for “torture” [bas-an-id-zo]...they are struggling mightily and the wind is definitely against them. They are probably very scared. And Jesus can see from the land that they are straining. Jesus sees them thru the storm a full three miles away or so. Remember that the next time you’re straining and you wonder if Jesus can see what is happening.

Then they see Jesus and since they do not yet understand who he is and what he is able to do, now they are terrified at him! Picture this. They are frightened by the wind and afraid they are going to drown and now they see what seems like a ghost walking on the water! Pretty rough night for a group of tough fishermen! Have you ever felt that you are straining against the wind and waves and your boat might sink...and you might have just seen a ghost? Have you ever been terrified? I have. Let us pray.

The great missionary J. Christy Wilson, Jr. used to tell a funny story about a rainy night many years ago. He and twenty others were sitting on an airplane waiting to fly out of the Middle East to their next mission destination. There they were on this little plane with its nose up in the air and its engines running. The cabin door was closed and they sat and sat wondering why in the world it was not taking off. They become somewhat irritable and all the more so because there was a constant pounding on the side of the plane. Finally, they got up to see what it was and there...standing in the pouring rain outside...was the pilot! Someone had closed the door and he was not onboard yet! They were trying to make their flight *without the pilot!* Have you ever done that? I have.

Let’s take a close look at today’s passage for our message “Is Jesus in Your Boat?” First, we must be clear about something. This is one of those accounts in the Word of God that literally happened to illustrate great spiritual truths. It is not an allegory. It has all the attributes of being literal including location and time and the people involved. Bible skeptics will say this is obviously a story written to illustrate

something. It does do that but this is a true story. It is actually quite wonderful how God uses these events to teach us deeper truths. Such as Jesus literally at a well telling a woman about living water as in John Chapter Four. Judas literally leaving the gathering to betray Jesus and John notes that it was “night” in John Thirteen. Real events indicating deeper meanings. Today's passage shows us many critical truths. Consider how it opens:

**45 Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.**

Jesus has just fed the crowd of five thousand people. John's Gospel tells us that some people wanted to make him their King. But Jesus is determined to get away. He sends the disciples ahead of himself. They should be leaving having been overwhelmingly convinced that he is Deity...God having taken on flesh. This was a miracle of creation proportions that only God could do. Jesus had not prayed it would “work.” Rather, he offered a blessing after he made it work as only God could do. So, they should not have had any doubts about who he was. But sometimes in our Christian lives no matter how much we experience Christ...we still are not sure who he is or of his power. Jesus sent them ahead so that he could have some time alone for prayer and re-charging himself. This is his human side fully evident.

**46 After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.**

This is not the point of the sermon but it jumps out at us. If the Son of God had to take time to be alone and pray in order to continue in ministry....don't we? And in the middle of all of this busyness and with people waiting to see him in Bethsaida, he still set aside time for prayer. I need to hear that. Anyway....

**47 When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land.**

So they set out on their journey across the lake without Jesus. This was an act of obedience. He had told them to go on ahead. Keep in mind that the water they were crossing was below sea level and prone to terrible downdrafts and violent storms. So, we have to understand that for his own purposes, Jesus was sending them exactly into that environment. Jesus knew that. We should not think that Jesus was caught by surprise. He often lets us go into to struggles quite deliberately.

If you've walked with the Lord you know that he will sometimes do that with us. He will tell us to strike out and he will not be as evident nearby and obvious as we might like. A lot of what we do in life is getting into the boat and moving to the next destination. We think we know exactly where we are going and how everything is going to work out. And then life interrupts us. The husband or wife dies. The job disappears or the cancer re-appears. The finances tank or the marriage goes on tilt. In recent years, I've seen more people work thru the unexpected than ever before. I need not tell you that there is rough sailing out there. And please note: the point of this sermon is not that they should not have gone off across the sea without Jesus. He sent them off! They had to go. The point is that he did not forget them! That he would join them and save them.

Again, these are fishermen who knew the lakes and seas. They probably started out without a care about the weather and the winds or maybe they were uneasy. They knew the Sea of Galilee could get rough especially at night. And it did! John tells us that they had rowed about three and a half miles but it had taken to the fourth watch of the night to get only to the middle! So, these men had been out on the sea at a minimum of six hours maybe even nine hours and were only halfway!

How often in life do we take a journey expecting it to be a short and efficient trip and we find it taking forever and exhausting us? How often do we wonder if Jesus has allowed this and did he know what was coming...and why? In the 1960's a Catholic Priest named Malcolm Boyd wrote a bestselling book about his spiritual journey. Its title was "Are You Running with Me Jesus?" I've often thought of that during difficult times. I've found myself praying "Lord Jesus...be with me...go ahead of me...you're with me right?" That is why I so value the words of Psalm 73 near the end:

**Psalms 73:23-25 (NIV) <sup>23</sup> "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.**

**<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you."**

But the truth is that there are times when he seems distant. When he seems to have gone off to other things. When we wonder if he knew or if he knows what's up in our lives. When we want to ask "Are you running with me Jesus?" And too often we forget the Sovereignty of God in ordaining challenges and situations that will truly make us grow. But in fact, if God were to let us know most of what was coming into our lives we'd probably hide in the basement!

Let's face it. We're all looking for a smooth trip. In fact, we're the first generation of humans who are being told we *should* have a smooth trip! The other day, I saw an ad for a high-priced Oriental airline. It shows a passenger sitting in a sort of private section...big easy chair and computer. A lovely window with a counter. The ad says the passenger will have "...extra space for work, entertainment and relaxation, and larger-than-ever fully flat beds for a restful sleep. And there's always someone nearby to anticipate your needs!" Yes! That's what we want. Perfect comfort and someone always nearby to anticipate our needs! But most of our plane rides seem more like Snoopy with his goggles flying a bi-plane sideways holding on for dear life just praying the fool thing will land! The boat rode or the plane trip of life often seems anything but placid! And we all know that what we really want from Jesus is the assurance that he is standing nearby always anticipating our needs...or rather our wants!

Back to the disciples. This part of the Sea of Galilee might have only been about five or six miles across. As we said, they have taken at least six hours to get half way! They are totally spent and beginning to wonder if they will even survive! What will they eat or drink if they are out there much longer? Has Jesus forgotten about them? The next time you feel alone in a boat about to capsize and you're out of strength...remember these men. Remember too that Jesus knew very well that they were out there and struggling! And consider what comes next:

**48 He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them...**

As we said earlier, they are not just “straining” they are being tortured by the effort! Even men of amazing strength can crumble at some point. I recall watching on television as the Olympic rowers neared the finish line in the five mile run. Their skin gleaming with sweat and their breathing labored and deep...moaning and knowing that they dare not let up even for a moment. These disciples are not in race but rather they are trying to survive! And they not only have the wind to contend with but a shocking vision off in the distance! Some in the ancient world thought that ghosts on the water indicated certain disaster. So much like life! For them, this is really a “What's next?” moment. Have you had those? When everything seems to be coming undone and then things...get worse?

How often in our world do we find ourselves straining to achieve or just survive and then some other element even scarier comes along! It seems that God is allowing us to endure too much and then He allows even more trials! These are very tough men who are not easily scared. But what do we read?

**49 but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, 50 because they all saw him and were terrified.**

Jesus is far enough away that they do not recognize him yet he is not trying to avoid being seen. Why does he seem to walking by? Perhaps because he is again demonstrating his Divine nature. It reminds us of the language in Exodus 33 where God passed by Moses. Or in Job where we read:

**Job 9:5-8 (NIV) 5 He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. 6 He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble. 7 He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. 8 He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.**

Jesus had just shown that he is the Lord of creation by taking a few small loaves and fish and feeding over five thousand people! But the disciples are not found saying “The God of all creation is mysteriously inside Jesus of Nazareth and that’s how he is able to do this!” No. They still do not get it. Now, Jesus is walking on the water...doing the supernatural to show them his Sovereignty over the whole creation...and they are terrified! What is there about us as believers that so often we are either ignorant or terrified or both?

It seems to never occur to the disciples that it is Jesus! They are terrified! The Greek word used [tarraso] means “all stirred up!” In fact, we can be so afraid that our vision clouds and our hearing goes on and off. Soldiers in combat have reported such fear that they cannot see things or that they have terrible hallucinations. These men are totally overwhelmed. They’ve forgotten the fear of the raging sea and now they ironically are terrified at the sight of the only one who can save them. Instead of beholding his Glory, they are overcome with fear. It says they “cried out!” That’s a word [anakrazo] that means “shout seeking attention.” But to whom shall they shout? Who will help

them as they fear for their lives? Who could possibly help them in this state of deadly fear? Only Jesus.

Sometimes we need the storm experience just to put our self-dependency and pride to death. Charles Colson was a graduate of the George Washington University Law School and a former Marine Officer. A tough, smart and confident man. And a prominent and brilliant attorney in 1969, when President Nixon asked him to leave his career and join him on the White House staff as Special Counsel to the President. Colson quickly became the second most powerful man in Washington...some might say the first. A limousine always at the ready and a platoon of assistants waiting for his next order. He was flying very high...until the Watergate break-in cost him all that he had. Eventually, Colson was sentenced to one to three years in the Maxwell Federal Prison in Alabama. While in prison, his family fell apart on the outside. His wife was on the edge of a breakdown. His son was in jail for narcotics possession. And after learning all of this Colson, the second most powerful man in America, was given a prison job. He was put in charge of a washing machine and told to clean the other prisoner's dirty laundry.

Not long after that, Colson who had tentatively come to Christ before going to jail totally surrendered his proud and arrogant self to the Son of God. But it took all of that breakage...a boat about to capsize in the storm...to bring Colson to complete dependence upon Christ. Now if you are struggling in a storm, you may say that story has nothing to do with you because you've broken no laws. That's probably true. But the principle is the same. Jesus will bring his own into a terrible storm if that is what it takes to get them to depend upon him completely! Thus, the men in the boat. They are terrified. Then they hear these words:

**Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."**

Oddly enough, the one they are afraid of tells them because it is him they should not be afraid. That raises a question. Have you ever been afraid of Jesus? In a way we should be. Not afraid that he will hurt us and not really afraid of him...but afraid of what he might allow. Of what he might allow to bring us to know him fully and depend upon him completely? They've got about one ounce of courage left and now they realize that they are more afraid of Jesus than they are of the raging storm! How curious! Could it be that we do not really understand what Jesus is trying to do in our lives? Could it be that Jesus is not concerned to make us wealthy or famous but to make us totally and completely dependent upon him and to join him in that faith that will bring Glory to God the Father? Is it possible that we do not fully understand the mind and workings of our Savior?

I like that scene in the great allegory "Hind's Feet on High Places." Written years ago by a woman named Hannah Hurnard, the Lord placed a copy in my hands before leaving for seminary in 1978. Donna and I with a new born...everything sold and going off without any view of the future. All we could see was the horizon and all we could hear was Jesus saying "Go!" There was the real possibility of fear in that but the thought of not obeying Jesus was even more frightening. For Jesus can be frightening with his warnings.

There is a marvelous scene in the book where the deer named "Much-Afraid" has been sent on a journey to learn to climb the mountains. She has weak legs and a limp and

she is ready to turn back and give up. Then she looks up and there he is...the Chief Shepherd...who of course is Jesus. And he is looking into her eyes and she sees something. She sees what she calls a “terrible determination” and it is almost frightening to realize that he is not going to *let her*...give up. That *he* is more terrifying in his determination than the journey itself!

The same with the disciples in the boat. They suddenly realize that Jesus is more terrifying in his might than the storm itself!

**<sup>51</sup> Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed...**

Why are they amazed? Because the storm stopped? Why should that have amazed them? That the one who fed thousands with a handful of food miraculously multiplied...should walk on the water showing his power over the creation and then command the storm to stop? Because they still did not understand that Jesus was God in the flesh! We read:

**<sup>52</sup> for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.**

The good news is that Jesus did not fail them even though their hearts were hard. The bad news is that he would keep sending them out into the storms until their hearts softened...and they understood that he is Lord.

Is Jesus in your boat? Are you cheerful about the storms that he allows? Will you trust him when the waves get very high? Do you understand...do I understand that Jesus is immensely more powerful than any storm and in some strange way...more frightening? Do we understand what Pascal the great French mathematician who came to Christ in a marvelous way...do we understand what he meant when he said “If you have no fear, then fear. If you have fear, then have no fear.” You think the storms are frightening? Going thru the storms without Jesus is far more frightening. So...is Jesus in your boat?

Let us pray.