

1.30.2022 Epiphany 4 (Mark 6:45-56)

The passage we read from the New Testament this morning can be seen as a lesson for every Christian that there are times when God compels us, even *constrains* us to do something, and the end of that endeavor is not the ultimate goal. There are times when the journey is in fact the destination.

Our Second Lesson this morning is a familiar story found in three of the Gospels. St. Mark begins his version by writing, “*And straightway He constrained His disciples to get into the ship, and to go to the other side...*” (Mark 6:45). St. Matthew, in his version of this Gospel account, words it the same way, saying, “*And straightway Jesus constrained His disciples to get into a ship, and to go before Him unto the other side...*” (Matthew 14:22). The Gospel writers are clear about the fact that Jesus *made* His disciples get into the ship. This was a call from their Lord and Master. They were commanded by Him to go to the other side.

Their *Lord* constrained them and compelled them, *He* called them to go, and as you consider this fact from the disciples’ perspective, doesn’t it seem logical to assume that Jesus’ only intention in making them get in that ship was for them to reach the other side? It’s a reasonable conclusion, but the fact that it’s reasonable doesn’t mean it’s correct, and also, that mindset that Jesus was calling them into His service for only one reason (to reach a particular goal) places all of the emphasis on attaining that end, and the journey becomes nothing more than a necessary set of steps to reach the destination.

As we consider this passage today, we will find that what seems, from our finite perspective, to be a correct conclusion about God’s plan - is not, and that’s a great reminder of how important it is to always be mindful of this truth that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah when He declared, “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:8-9). God’s thoughts, His ways, His plans for those who love Him are infinitely higher than we might assume, and we see that truth clearly revealed through a series of miracles that occur *after* the disciples began this journey, but *before* they made it to the destination our Lord commanded them to reach. These miracles reveal the true reason Jesus made His disciples get into that boat.

The first miracle is described this way: *“And when even was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and He alone on the land. And He saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night He cometh unto them, walking upon the sea...”* (Mark 6:47-48). If it wasn't simply to reach the other side, then why did Jesus make His disciples get into the ship? This first miracle begins to answer that question as our Lord reveals His Divine power as the One, True God who walks on the waves of the sea as if it is dry land. Jesus wants His disciples to know who He is, and this miracle not only reveals the Omnipotent power He possesses as God, it also reveals the fact that God knows how we struggle. St. Mark tells us that in the storm, Jesus *“saw them toiling in rowing.”* We may wonder why our Lord waited so long to come to them, because by this time (about 3:00 in the morning) they'd been rowing nine hours and had only made it half way to their destination. We may wonder, and again our *thoughts* and our *ways* may lead us to an incorrect conclusion, but this is certain: God saw them, He came to them, and this trial taught them, and it teaches us, in every circumstance to patiently wait for Him with perseverance and faith.

The next miracle is described this way: *“But when they saw Him walking upon the sea, they supposed it had been a spirit, and cried out: For they all saw Him, and were troubled. And immediately He talked with them, and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid”* (Mark 6:49-50). The first miracle revealed our Lord's Divine power, His identity as the One, True God, and His knowledge of our trials, and when we consider this miracle, and the words Jesus used when He spoke to His disciples, we find our Lord once again revealing His identity as God. In the original Greek, the central part of His statement: *“Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid”* literally means *“Be of good cheer: I AM; be not afraid.”* As you know, *I AM* is the Divine name of God. When Moses met Almighty God at the burning bush and asked His name, God said, *“I AM THAT I AM.”* And He said, *“Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’”* (Exodus 3:14). After walking to them on the raging sea, Jesus referred to Himself using the Divine name of Almighty God, a Holy Name these men would not have spoken. In doing so, He reveals once again that He is God Almighty, and assures His people of His constant, Divine presence in, and His Omnipotent power over, every trial we face.

This miracle is a Divine revelation of our Lord and God, and this miracle also

reveals the heart of God. Jesus' response to His disciples' fear shows us the way He loves and cares for His people. They *cried out*, Jesus saw that they were *troubled* and *immediately* He said to them "*Be of good cheer: I AM; be not afraid.*" God loved them before they left the shore, He loved them when He made them get in the boat, and He loved them in the midst of the storm. "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8). This trial didn't change who God is, this trial revealed who God is.

The final miracle we'll consider takes place immediately after Jesus said, "*Be of good cheer: I AM; be not afraid.*" St. Mark tells us that after our Lord made that comforting declaration, He "*got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded*" (Mark 6:51 ESV). The miracle that is impossible to miss in this verse is that the wind ceased, the truth that "*even the winds and sea obey Him*" (Matthew 8:27). The One, True God who walks on the waves of the sea as if it is dry land can calm the wind and the waves of the sea because He is the Creator who sustains, preserves, and governs all things visible and invisible "*by the Word of His power*" (Hebrews 1:3).

The way our Lord exercised His Omnipotent power over the winds and the sea is a miracle that is impossible to miss, but there is another more subtle, yet beautiful miracle contained in this verse that we must not overlook, the miracle that Jesus "*got into the boat with them.*" When He came to His disciples, St. Mark tells us that "*the ship was in the midst of the sea*" (Mark 6:47). Mark's description of their location (they were in the middle of the sea) means that Jesus had walked, on the raging sea, for about three miles to reach their boat. Clearly, our Lord didn't *need* to get into the boat with them, He *wanted* to be in the boat with them. He wanted to provide these men, and He wants to provide us, with the comfort, security, and peace that can only be found in His loving presence.

The passage we read today can be seen as a lesson for every Christian that there are times when God compels us, even *constrains* us to do something, and the end of that endeavor is not the ultimate goal. Jesus didn't make His disciples get in the boat simply as a means to reach the other side. He constrained, compelled, even commanded them to get in the ship so that He could, in a glorious and miraculous way, reveal who He is and how He loves, and He wants to do the same thing in our lives.

We often make the mistake of focusing our attention on a particular goal we believe God is calling us to reach. We often think that God's only purpose is to lead us to a particular destination, but in fact, as we see in this lesson, God's will, His desire, is for us to depend entirely on Him today. To see Him, our Lord and God, in our daily struggle, walking toward us on the sea as if it's dry land. It is not the destination, but our faithfulness to Him in every step of this journey, that glorifies God. By His grace may we see Him "*walking upon the sea,*" and may we welcome Him into our ship to the end that He may fill our lives with His comfort, security, and peace which passes all understanding.