

## “Do Not Be Afraid”

### The Twentieth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 6:45-56; Isaiah 41:1-14*

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Something truly remarkable happened in the wilderness area near the Sea of Galilee. Jesus led five thousand people out into a desolate area and performed a miracle which not only involved feeding this large number of people, but which at the same time demonstrated that he was Israel’s Messiah and the true shepherd of Israel. The feeding of the five thousand out in the wilderness amounted to the creation of a New Israel and at the same time constituted a call for a new Exodus. As a sure sign that the messianic age had dawned, those who follow Jesus, the true shepherd of Israel, lack for nothing. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah who makes his people lie down in green pastures and feeds them with heavenly bread. It is becoming clear to all those who witnessed this event that Jesus is not John the Baptist come back from the dead. Nor is he Elijah, or one of the prophets. No, Jesus is much more than any of these men. He is Israel’s Messiah. All the clues are present and yet Jesus’ own disciples still fail to grasp the significance of what has just transpired.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are in that section of Mark’s gospel (chapter six) in which Jesus changes the focus of his messianic mission by preaching the gospel of the kingdom in new areas outside the confines of Galilee. In order to accomplish this, Jesus first returned to his hometown of Nazareth, where, sadly, old friends and former neighbors mocked him while he marveled at their lack of faith. About this same time, Jesus commissioned his twelve disciples to go out two by two and preach the gospel of the kingdom throughout the towns and villages in the area. Mark recounts how at this point in his ministry Jesus came to the attention of king Herod, who wondered if Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life. And then we have seen how it was that when Jesus returned to Capernaum, after preaching in the hill country to the southwest, large crowds were waiting for Jesus and his disciples to return. In fact, so many people had gathered that yet again Jesus could not eat nor rest. But the central theme which underlies this transitional section of Mark’s Gospel is the confusion on the part of the people about Jesus’ true identity. Some people think that Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. Others think Jesus is Elijah. Still others think that he is one of the prophets. But there is no doubt in anyone’s mind—except the religious leaders of Israel—that God’s hand is upon Jesus and that something of truly biblical proportions is going on through his ministry.

When Jesus called his disciples to leave Capernaum by boat, there is much messianic symbolism involved. On the face of Mark’s account, it appears as though Jesus and his disciples are leaving to get some rest. But Jesus is actually calling the disciples into the wilderness because Jesus will now reveal additional information about his true identity. Jesus will create a New Israel in the wilderness and provide his people with the long-expected messianic feast. When Jesus and the disciples arrive at their destination—presumably some distance from Capernaum—a huge crowd has followed them. Seeing that the people are without a shepherd, Jesus has compassion on them and teaches them. But before too long, it was getting dark and Mark recounts that the disciples asked Jesus to stop teaching and send the multitude away so that the people would have time to seek food and shelter. Instead, Jesus instructs his own disciples to feed the crowds. Utterly perplexed by Jesus’ instructions, the disciples lament that they did not have enough money to buy enough bread to feed this large number of people who had followed Jesus out into wilderness. What did Jesus mean when he instructed *them* to feed all these people?

When Jesus arranged the people in groups of fifty and one hundred the messianic symbolism begins to

come into view—recalling to mind the way Moses arranged the twelve tribes of Israel in the wilderness of the Sinai. Miraculously, Jesus then turned five small barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed the more than five thousand people who were assembled, and still leave some twelve baskets full of food left over. The redemptive-historical imagery is clear—Jesus has called the true Israel out into the wilderness where he would be a shepherd to his people who had no shepherd. Not only did the people recline in green pastures—a powerful messianic image found in the twenty-third shepherd Psalm—but Jesus miraculously fed them, just as God had fed Israel in the wilderness of the Sinai.

Not only was this a fulfillment of a number of messianic prophecies which foretold of the Messiah feeding his people in the wilderness, this scene also calls to mind the image of a new Exodus. Jesus was simultaneously fulfilling a number of important prophecies, which, at first glance, had little or no seeming connection. This miracle in the wilderness, then, serves to direct Jesus' disciples away from all of the wild speculation about him being John the Baptist or Elijah to the fact that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah, who was also the true shepherd of Israel, in marked contrast to the false shepherds of Israel who have accused their own Messiah of being demon possessed or of being a magician and false teacher. While the crowds sense the messianic implications of Jesus' actions, they will react in a completely inappropriate way. The disciples, meanwhile, are still not seeing what Jesus intended them to see. And so Jesus continues to lift the veil as to his true identity as he now walks on water and then heals a multitude of people. And the disciples are still struggling to make sense of it all.

**A**s we turn to our text (Mark 6:45-56), Jesus performs another miracle associated with the Sea of Galilee. The purpose of this miracle was that Jesus continues to demonstrate his absolute authority over all of creation.

In the first miracle on the Sea of Galilee Jesus spoke to a storm, bringing about an instant change in the weather (wind and sea) from storm and tempest to calm conditions. In this second miracle, Jesus will now walk on water, which demonstrates to his disciples that he is not merely Elijah or John the Baptist come back from the dead. In verses 45-46, Mark informs us that *“immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.”* For a very important reason which Mark does not mention, Jesus abruptly sends the disciples away from the crowds, while at the same time he seeks out a place of solitude for prayer. We do know from John's account of this event that there was an important reason for Jesus' decision. In John 6:14-15, John records the following. *“After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did [the feeding of the five thousand] they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself”* (John 6:14-15).

What this undoubtedly means is that ministry of Jesus has come to a decisive turning point. When Mark mentioned all of the rumors which were circulating about Jesus, his list did not include speculation about whether or not Jesus was Israel's Messiah. But now, after Jesus fed the five thousand in the wilderness, messianic expectation suddenly reached a fever pitch. In fact, many of the people who witnessed Jesus feed them immediately picked-up on the messianic symbolism they had just witnessed and ran with it. Before long, they were trying to make Jesus king! In response to this out-of control enthusiasm sweeping through the crowds, Jesus quickly dismissed the disciples and sent them away. Jesus wanted no part of the kind of messianic expectation then popular in Israel.

It was widely held that the Messiah would come as a fierce warrior who would lead Israel back to

military and economic greatness.<sup>1</sup> If Jesus could feed five thousand people, heal the sick, and cast out demons, then perhaps he would be the one to restore Israel to its former greatness. And in order to do that, surely he would deal with the Romans and their lackey, Herod Antipas. Furthermore, the people hated the self-righteous Pharisees and they distrusted the Sanhedrin who, in the minds of the people, were every bit as much a political body, as a religious one. And they knew that Jesus was no friend of the Jewish religious establishment. When the people began speaking of making Jesus their king, they were right to pick-up on the messianic symbolism they just witnessed. But they mistakenly understood the messianic kingdom in national or political terms. And so Jesus knew that the people were thinking about the messianic symbolism in an unbiblical way and so he immediately orders his disciples to leave the area before things get any further out of hand.

Not only did Jesus send the disciples away, but Jesus withdrew by himself to pray and escape from the crowds. This is a pattern we see throughout Mark's Gospel—Jesus seeking solitude and communion with his Father after significant moments in his ministry.<sup>2</sup> Recall that Jesus withdrew to the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry after he cast out a demon and healed many in the synagogue in Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:35-39). Jesus now withdraws after feeding the five thousand, when the messianic focus of his mission now comes out into the open. And then Jesus will go out to Gethsemane to pray after instituting the Last Supper (Mark 14:26-42). In every one of these cases, Jesus retreats from the crowds so as to be alone to pray, refusing to give in to the adoration of the people, who fail to understand the true meaning of his messianic ministry. Instead of doing what the adoring crowds want done, Jesus is focused upon doing the will of his father, and so to gird himself against such temptation, Jesus goes off by himself to rest and pray.

That Jesus spent a fair amount of time in prayer on this occasion becomes obvious, because it was dark by the time the following took place. According to verses 47-48, "*When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them.*" This too is part of a pattern in Mark's Gospel. Whenever Jesus leaves the disciples alone, soon they are in trouble because they have failed to grasp who Jesus is, and because so far, they still lack the faith to believe his promises to them. The disciples have been rowing against the wind, because they have been blown off course, and they are bone weary. And so Jesus went out to their aid. "*About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost.*"<sup>3</sup> The fourth watch of the night was 3:00 AM. The wind which was blowing from north to the south, forced them off-course and they were nowhere near Bethsaida, where Jesus directed them to go.

Amazingly, we read that Jesus walked out to them on the water and was about to pass them by, when they suddenly saw Jesus heading past them. Not surprisingly, Mark describes that "*they cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified.*" Even though Jesus had performed a number of miracles prior to this, it was hardly something you'd expect at 3:00 in the morning when you were bone weary from rowing against the wind, unable to steer in the direction you need to go. People usually don't walk

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<sup>1</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 234.

<sup>2</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 234-235.

<sup>3</sup> Cranfield notes that this sentence makes perfect sense if we read it in the first person. Cf Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 226.

on the water in the middle of the night, passing your boat when you are struggling to fight against the wind. The disciples caught sight of Jesus walking toward them and cried out in terror! The reference to a ghost should be taken as though the disciples thought they saw a “water spirit,” a disembodied spirit which was commonly believed to inhabit the water and which appeared before a disaster occurred. More than likely, the white caps of waves took on a very eerie shape, especially at night, which caused seaman to fear that some sort of demonic apparition was involved. While it is hard to blame the disciples for being afraid, the reality is this fear of a ghost stems from failing to grasp who Jesus is.<sup>4</sup>

After they saw him, Jesus replied in such a way to allay their fears and let them know that they had not seen some sort of apparition, but that their master had indeed come to rescue them. Knowing their fear, *“Immediately [Jesus] spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’”* While these words can mean nothing more than “it is I, Jesus,” very likely these words mean much, much, more. Every Jew knew from memory the famous words from Exodus 3:14, in which YHWH spoke to Moses from the burning bush, saying “I am that I am.” These are the words Jesus applied to himself in John 8:58, which caused many who heard him to pick up rocks to stone him, since for Jesus to use these words of himself would amount to blasphemy, if Jesus were not God in human flesh.

The Jews of Jesus’ day were also quite familiar with the words from Isaiah 41:4 (part of our Old Testament lesson). *“Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD -with the first of them and with the last—I am he.”* When coupled with the other words Jesus spoke to them, “take courage” and “do not be afraid” Jesus is clearly affirming words known to be spoken by YHWH in the Old Testament as though he (Jesus) has full authority to do so. While the disciples were terrified, Jesus consoles them with the familiar words of YHWH—“it is I.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Jesus is making an implied, if not an overt claim to be YHWH.<sup>6</sup> The one who had previously commanded the sea, now walks on it.<sup>7</sup> Despite all that they had witnessed Jesus say and do, this was too much for them to grasp and so they are frightened when they need not be.

Having assured the disciples that everything was alright, Jesus now joins the disciples in the boat. According to verse 51, *“Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed.”* No doubt! Not only were these men tired from rowing, and they had been scared out of their wits by Jesus’ unexpected appearance. Mark now explains the source of their perplexity—*“for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.”* The crowds grasped the messianic significance of Jesus’ feeding in the wilderness (which was good), but applied the false understanding of the messianic reign to Jesus (which was bad). But the disciples had witnessed Jesus heal countless people, drive out countless demons and claim to forgive sins. They had seen Jesus calm the storm on this same body of water, they had witnessed Jesus cast out a legion of demons, and three of them had seen Jesus raise Jairus’ daughter from the dead. They had gone out preaching the message of the kingdom and were able to report back to Jesus that people were healed and that demons fled in terror

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<sup>4</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 236-237.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 237; Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 227.

<sup>6</sup> France does not agree, and adds the temptation to use the Isaiah passage as a reference to deity should be avoided. Cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 273, n. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*, 231.

when they did so. And then when Jesus led the five thousand out into the wilderness and fed them, the messianic symbolism was so great, no one could have missed it. The crowds saw the messianic implications (although they misread Jesus' intention) and wanted to make Jesus king. But the disciples still did not get it because their hearts were hard. And so when they got into trouble on the sea, instead of panicking and thinking they had seen a ghost, they should have expected Jesus to come to their aid and called out to him. But they did not.

The sad fact is, if the disciples had truly understood what had happened in the wilderness when Jesus fed the five thousand, they would have instantly recognized Jesus when he approached their boat, especially when Jesus says "I am he." The disciples still lack faith, specifically that God is accomplishing his purposes in and through the ministry of Jesus. The clues as to Jesus' identity were everywhere. The messianic symbolism of the wilderness feast was inescapable. The disciples knew all of the Old Testament passages about God being Lord of the sea and the Lord of wind and the waves. Had they grasped the true significance of Jesus feeding of the multitude, they would have expected Jesus to come and help them when they encountered trouble. Since we have been talking about patterns in Mark's Gospel, here we see yet another pattern unfolding throughout the gospel, the disciples continue not to grasp just who exactly Jesus is.<sup>8</sup>

**B**efore Jesus expands his messianic mission even farther—specifically to the cities of Tyre and Sidon to the north—Jesus travels to the region of Gennesaret where he will heal many.

Apparently, the wind had driven the disciples far to the south of their original destination, Bethsaida. Instead, they land in the Gennesaret which was a fertile plain running along the western shore of the Galilee, just a few miles to the north of largest city in the area, Tiberius. At the time of Jesus, the area was densely populated. We immediately get a sense of how wide-spread Jesus' popularity had become. As Mark puts it in verses 53-54, "*when they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus.*" No one was expecting Jesus to arrive, and yet his arrival generated an instantaneous response. Once the people recognized that Jesus had come to their area, Mark describes the reaction in verses 55 and 56. "*They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.*"

Here again we see the horrible effects of human sinfulness which is indicative of our fallen race. People who were sick and who suffered with no relief correctly saw in Jesus their only hope of being delivered. And so they flock to him. Who can blame them? And yet they cannot see beyond their own immediate circumstances to the bigger picture. Jesus did not come to heal all manner of diseases—although in his grace and mercy, he healed countless people in the Gennesaret region. Jesus came to deal with the underlying cause of all human sickness and suffering, and that is the fact that ours is a fallen race and that our sin leaves us under the curse of death. We also see that Jesus' fame was now so great that everywhere he went, people had anticipated his arrival and had brought their sick and infirm loved ones so that Jesus might heal them. We read that all who touched Jesus were indeed healed.

But as many commentators have pointed out, while the people see Jesus as a healer/miracle worker/exorcist and seek to touch him, they do so because they think that magically they will be healed.

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<sup>8</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 238.

This is not a sign of faith, but of ignorance and blindness to the things of God. What is notably absent from this account is any mention of Jesus preaching or teaching throughout this region. Sadly, the people are not prepared or ready to hear what Jesus has to say. Like the crowds we have seen elsewhere, these people really don't care who Jesus is—it doesn't matter if he is John the Baptist come back to life, or if he is Elijah, or if he's one of the prophets. These people just want relief from their suffering. And yet despite their spiritual blindness, Jesus sees their pitiful condition and is gracious to them and heals all those who reach out to him.<sup>9</sup>

**W**hat can we learn from this section of Mark's gospel which is applicable to us?

The underlying theme throughout this transitional phase of Mark's Gospel is the question as to Jesus' true identity. Those who see that God is working in and through the ministry of Jesus are struggling to figure out how Jesus relates to the key figures in Israel's history. Such people identify Jesus with John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. People who make such an identification are clearly trying to make sense of Jesus' words and deeds. As of yet—that is before Christ's death and resurrection—these people don't have sufficient information to figure out how one person (Jesus) can fulfill so many diverse and seemingly unconnected prophecies. These are the people who seek Jesus out because they see God working in and through him. Many of these people will become the first Christians.

Then we have the disciples. Jesus has called them out of this larger group and is slowly but surely revealing to them detailed information about just who, exactly, he is. They, in turn, will teach the others. The disciples have already witnessed Jesus forgive sins, raise the dead, calm a storm, cast out demons, establish a new Israel, call for a new Exodus and then fulfill a great deal of messianic symbolism by feeding five thousand in the wilderness. And then when Jesus comes to rescue them from their predicament on the sea, they think he is a ghost. They do not recognize their own master. Mark tells us that this because their hearts were still hardened and that they did not understand what the feast in the wilderness was all about. It is not until Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ in Mark 8, that the disciples are said to begin to truly grasp the significance of Jesus' person and work.

And then there are the crowds who followed Jesus out into the wilderness (which probably included a number of those who believed that God was working in and through Jesus). These people saw the miracle Jesus performed and immediately grasped the messianic significance of what Jesus had done. But seeing the messianic symbolism through the misguided lens of Jewish nationalism, these people want to make Jesus king! They want him to lead the nation and clean up the immorality and corruption. And so Jesus distances himself from such a sentiment as quickly as he could. Jesus was focused on doing the will of his father, not doing what the people wanted. This will anger many of these people later, especially when Jesus turns out to be the suffering servant and not a military leader who will lead the nation to a glorious victory over Rome.

Finally, we have the citizens of the Gennesaret. Like the people around Capernaum, they don't care much about theology or Jesus' true identity. They just want to be healed and delivered from their suffering. These people are pitiful and while we can understand their plight and feel compassion for them, they miss the whole point of why Jesus has come. They are consumers and seekers. These are the same people who will turn on Jesus just as soon as he fails to give them what they want. Along with

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<sup>9</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 240-241.

those who want to make Jesus king because of their political aspirations, these people will be the ones yelling for the release of Barabbas and demanding that Pilate put Jesus to death. Their sin—the root cause of all their suffering—has so blinded them that all that they can see is their immediate need. When Jesus doesn't meet it, they are through with him.

The point is simply this. Mark is telling us that we must take Jesus as we find him in the New Testament. Jesus is not someone who we accept as Savior, but not Lord. Jesus is not someone we can control or adopt as our mascot because he supports our cause or our politics. While we repeatedly see his amazing compassion, the Jesus of Mark's Gospel is not the "Jesus meek and mild" of so much of Christian literature. Jesus is not interested in pleasing the multitudes or meeting the felt needs of seekers—he's about his Father's business. Jesus has no time for the religious people—the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, who see themselves as better than others, all the while unable and unwilling to see their own sins. He eats with tax-collectors and sinners. The Jesus we find in the gospels simultaneously confronts us in our sins and then delivers us from the guilt of them—if we repent and believe.

In fact, reading through the gospels with the lens of New Testament fulfillment (specifically the cross and resurrection) and with the eyes of faith, we see that Jesus is slowly but surely revealing himself to his people—especially the disciples. We must see that Jesus is revealing himself to those who otherwise would perish in their sins. We must see that Jesus takes the initiative in calling disciples and revealing himself. Unless, Jesus does so, no one would understand who he truly was, and even if he walked into our midst this morning and performed some dramatic miracle, we would not believe nor understand unless God enabled us to do so. Unless God grant us faith in Christ, we too would be among those demanding to be healed, we would be trying to make Jesus king for all the wrong reasons, and then we would be among those who then turn upon Jesus when he did not give us what we wanted. We are every bit as sinful as those about whom we read in the gospels. Therefore, let us never forget the debt of gratitude we owe to God, nor let us forget where we would be had God not chosen us to believe.

And been given faith which understands the things of God, we know that when troubles come—and they will—we need not cry out in terror as did the disciples. For we will hear Jesus' voice through his word say to us, "do not be afraid, it is I." Unlike the disciples, we have read the final chapter of the story. We know that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, the Son of God, the covenant mediator, that one far greater than Elijah, who forgives sin, is Lord over nature and even death itself. Because we know who Jesus is, when he says "do not be afraid, it is I," we need not fear, but receive all comfort. For he has come to save us.