

## “Superhero Christians”

Mark 6:45-56

July 29, 2018

Superheroes seem to be incredibly popular these days. Over the past 6 months we have seen superhero movies such as Justice League, Star Wars VIII: The Last Jedi, Black Panther, Avengers: Infinity War, and Incredibles 2 come out in theaters and I'm sure more are on the way. Our Vacation Bible School theme last month was “Hero Central,” as the children learned about some of the great heroes in the Bible and how they, too, can be heroes. And this weekend in downtown Raleigh, a convention of superheroes and comic book characters known as “Supercon” is taking place where people can come dressed as their favorite superhero and meet some of the Hollywood celebrities who portrayed superheroes in movies and on television. Everyone loves a superhero. Everything they do seems to be galactically important, and they do it all with such confidence and ease.

But we also learn that most superheroes have weaknesses and in their younger years they struggled to become superheroes as they were mentored by wise individuals who had gone before them. Eventually there comes a time for these young people who are studying to be superheroes, as well as those who are studying to be teachers, firefighters, police officers, doctors, lawyers, mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives when they realize there's a difference between believing and following. It's one thing to believe in Jesus, and to believe in the goodness and joy of being a teacher, doctor, parent, or spouse, but it's another thing all together to actually put your faith in Jesus, or to teach a classroom of uninterested teenagers, or to be the doctor on call during Christmas, or to clean up after a sick child. Believing can give you dreams, but following can give you pain and exhaustion.

In other words, it's easy to talk bravely like a superhero when you're not the one who has to be brave. The disciples in our Gospel lesson, are placed in a situation by Jesus where they experience how difficult it is to be brave and to have faith in Jesus.

In the verses leading up to our text, Jesus had just miraculously finished feeding over 5000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. The disciples had told Jesus that it was impossible to feed so many people with such a small amount of food and I'm sure they were concerned that if they did not send these people home to get something to eat, the crowd could get upset that Jesus had not provided a meal after keeping them there so late while teaching them. But Jesus calms their fears and concerns by miraculously providing enough food from the small amount they gave Him to the point where everyone was full and they had 12 baskets of leftovers.

The Gospel of John then tells us that when the people saw what had been done, they were so excited that they were ready to make Jesus their king. I would guess that Jesus knew the disciples were very vulnerable in this situation, meaning they might have felt pretty good about themselves. After all, they had participated in this miracle by organizing the people, giving out the food, and picking up the leftovers. And now with the crowd wanting to make Jesus their king, the disciples would have found it very easy to talk brave. Can't you just imagine what they would have said to today's media. “I knew Jesus could feed these people. Some of the disciples doubted, but I never doubted for a second.”

So notice what Jesus does at the beginning of our text. In verse 45 it doesn't say that Jesus asked His disciples to please get in the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side. It says that Jesus “Immediately made his disciples get into the boat.” I'm sure the disciples wanted to enjoy this moment, after all, Jesus was very popular, but they did what Jesus commanded.

Meanwhile, Jesus went off by Himself to pray. As the evening sets in a storm comes up and makes life very hard for the disciples in the boat. Our text tells us that Jesus saw them out there struggling against the storm. This probably went on for a while as we are told in verse 48 that Jesus did something rather unusual around “the 4<sup>th</sup> watch of the night,” meaning between 3:00am-6:00am. It says that Jesus “came to them, walking on the sea.” The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water towards Jesus. Now that's amazing. Believing in Jesus got all of the disciples to climb into the boat and to set sail, but Peter's faith in Jesus got him to bravely step out of the boat and to start walking on the water. As long as Peter remained focused on Jesus everything was fine, but as soon as he saw the wind he was filled with fear and immediately Peter begins to sink. But still believing in Jesus' power, he cries out to Jesus to save him. As

Jesus reaches out his hand and grabs Peter, He demonstrates the difference between belief and faith. Peter's belief got him rescued, but his lack of faith caused him to sink.

While the Gospel of Mark does not record this event of Peter walking on the water, Mark does tell us something about Jesus in verse 48 that can be very easy to miss. Notice at the end of the verse it says, "He (meaning Jesus) meant to pass by them." Jesus meant to pass by them? What does that mean? Was He trying to sneak by them, hoping they wouldn't see Him, but He got caught? That doesn't sound like our loving God. Was He trying to race them to the other side? I don't think so. Maybe he was testing the faith of the disciples to see if they would trust Him, by showing them they had nothing to fear.

Whenever the Bible speaks of God "passing someone by," it often means that God is going to reveal Himself to someone by showing a glimpse of His power and love. For example, in the book of Exodus, Moses is having a conversation with God and he asks God for some kind of assurance that God would be with him as he leads God's people. God then agrees and says, "I will cause all my goodness to pass before you...but you cannot see my face." So while God passes by Moses, He covers Moses' face with His hand (which represents God's protecting power) and after passing by He allows Moses to see His back. What Moses sees, we don't know, he never says anything about it. But Moses then proceeded to bravely and confidently lead God's people, knowing that God would always care for him.

I think Jesus meant to pass by the disciples as a way to test them. While it would have been surprising for most people to see Jesus showing up in this way by walking on the water, the disciples of all people should have known it was Jesus. After all, they had just seen Him feed over 5000 people and they had seen Him perform many other miracles, so if someone was going to be walking on water it's probably Jesus. But instead of being relieved or filled with joy, they were terrified and thought they saw a ghost. However, Jesus quickly identifies Himself and calms their hearts by saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And then He gets close to them by stepping into the boat and calms the storm.

There is great comfort in what Jesus says and does here in this text. Even though we may have faith in Jesus, how often do we need to be reminded of who Jesus is and what He does for us? We may not be struggling or scared in a boat, but we all have struggles and concerns that may scare us: There are financial concerns, we have worries for our children (no matter how old they are), there are problems at home we may not want to talk about, we might be dealing with the death of a loved one or a friend that just doesn't make sense, or we may have sins that pile up and wreak havoc on our lives. But instead of being brave by looking to the greatest superhero of all in Jesus, who has no weaknesses and is right there with us, ready to help, we panic and we try to handle things ourselves. Whether we trust Him or not, He is always there; not to judge us, but to comfort and protect us.

Paul says in our second lesson for today that we have a God "who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us." And that's what we need to remember. Jesus sees you, knows you, loves you, and comes near you with a power that is beyond our understanding. Yes, in life there will be storms, but when we clothe ourselves in the lifejacket of faith and begin to walk on the troubled waters of our lives, through all the waves that seek to distract us from following Jesus, through all of the distractions that cause us to question the force of Jesus' love for us, He will be there, and we will experience His power as Jesus calls out to each one of us saying, "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid."