

"The Unexpected Savior"

Mark 6:45-56

July 26, 2015

9th Sunday After Pentecost

In an English courtroom, a “dock” is a box-like space in which the defendant stands in order to be judged. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called “God in the Dock”, a series of essays “suggesting that modern human beings, rather than seeing themselves as standing before God in judgment, prefer to place God on trial while acting as his judge.” (Wikipedia) People expect God to be as they envision Him to be and demand that God act like they think He should act. They expect God to explain Himself and justify all of His actions to them.

Although Lewis wrote “God in the Dock” over a half a century ago, his premise still rings true, especially when it comes to Jesus. We want to be free to judge Jesus on the basis of who we expect Jesus to be and how we expect Jesus to act. The disciples did exactly this in Jesus’ time. We do the same in our time. Our text for today suggests that we not act so hastily in this matter.

The disciples at Jesus’ time were struggling with the identity of Jesus. They knew him to be a rabbi, a miracle worker, perhaps even the Messiah. They expected Jesus to teach them, to help them, perhaps even free them from their economic, political, and social woes.

Although we confess that Jesus is true God, do we really perceive Him to be God? Many people have a much more casual notion of Jesus. He is my best friend whom I can call on when I need Him and who won’t bother me when I don’t need Him. He is my wish granter, a Biblical genie, who exists to grant my wishes and make me happy. He is my Enabler. He has no real requirements for my behavior or my life. He is not terribly demanding so I can do pretty much whatever I want to do as long as I say I believe in Jesus and that I love Him.

Our Gospel reading for today paints quite a different picture of Jesus. Imagine the scene here. Jesus had just fed 5,000 men with five loaves of bread and two small fish. This miracle apparently had little effect on the disciples other than solving their problem of how to feed the crowd and filling their own bellies with food.

Jesus makes His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to Bethsaida on the other side of the sea while He dismissed the crowd. After Jesus dismissed the crowds, he went up to the mountain to pray. Night fell. It got dark – very dark since there were no artificial sources of light in those days. A strong wind blows up. The boat in which the disciples are in is fighting hard to make any headway against the wind.

Here is where it gets very interesting. From a great distance away on the shore, in the middle of the night, with no source of light, Jesus is able to see the disciples in their boat and their predicament. He then defies the laws of physics by walking on the water, in the middle of a storm, out to the disciples in the boat.

It gets even stranger when our text says, “He meant to pass them by.” This doesn’t seem to make any sense until we realize exactly who it is that passes by. In the book of Exodus, Moses asked the Lord to show His glory to him. The Lord tells Moses that no one can see His face and live. Instead, the Lord says, “I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:22-23)

Job says the same thing of the Lord which seems to prefigure our text for today. Job says, “[God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea;... Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not.” (Job 9:8,11) Who is this now trampling the waves of the sea and passing by the disciples?

Some people may be surprised at the disciples’ extreme reaction. They cried out and were terrified. Perhaps this is because of how Sunday School pictures portray this scene. The scene is somehow lit (otherwise, how could you have a picture in a pitch dark setting?). The disciples can see Jesus perfectly well. The wind and the waves are shown probably not as strong as they actually were. In some pictures, Jesus appears to be out for a leisurely stroll.

But the scene was much scarier because of the complete darkness and the power of the waves. The disciples cried out. The disciples were terrified. This was not a gentle rabbi approaching

them. This was not a mere miracle worker. This was not a political, economic, or social Messiah. This was....a ghost? That's what the disciples thought. But they got it completely wrong. This was Yahweh, the holy and righteous One, the creator of the universe and the ruler of the wind and waves approaching them in bodily form.

We often get it completely wrong, too. We like a more casual Jesus. We like Jesus, meek and mild. We like Jesus as our buddy, our wish granter, our enabler, and our life coach. Had we seen Jesus approach us on that dark and stormy night with all of His power and might as Yahweh as we sat in the boat, we would have cried out and been terrified, too. We would have thought Him to be a ghost or much worse.

It is interesting that the Lord does not become angry at the disciples' lack of understanding, nor does He wipe them out for their lack of faith. Jesus is very patient with His disciples. He interrupts this show of divine power and might in order to condescend to their level. He encourages them, "Take heart." In other words, be courageous at this time. He comforts them, "It is I!" Ego eimi – I am He. These are the words the Lord uses to describe Himself in the book of Isaiah: "I, the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he." (Isaiah 41:4) He comforts them, "Do not be afraid". He gets in the boat and the wind ceased.

You would have thought the disciples would "get it" by now, but they didn't. The text says, "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." Not only did the disciples not get what they had just seen and experienced, but they still didn't get the miracle of the loaves – the feeding of the 5,000. They were clueless!

What is the point for us? Some will look at this story of Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm and think, "This means Jesus is powerful and will calm the storms of our lives if we just trust Him enough." But that's not getting it. It is naïve and untrue to say that Jesus always calms the storms of our lives. Sometimes, He allows them to continue and they can become pretty bad. And, besides, there was absolutely no faith on the part of the disciples in this story – only fear. Often, faith is lacking in us, too.

The point here is that the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth; the God who rules the universe; does not leave us, as sinners, to face His power and might; nor does He leave us in our fear and misunderstanding about who He is and what He is doing for us. He condescends to our level, like He did for the disciples. We probably feel insulted by that word “condescend” because it normally sounds so negative and insulting when we use it. It means to “descend from a superior position, rank, or dignity.” But that’s the point of the first part of our text. Jesus IS descending from a superior position to us who are of an inferior position, something totally unexpected.

He comes not to embarrass us but to save us. He tells us to take heart and be of good courage in the midst of our sin and guilt; our suffering and despair. He is patient with us. He does not become angry with us as He could, nor does He wipe us out as He should for our sin. “It is I”, He tells us. “Your mighty God and your merciful Savior.” As mighty God, He condescends to our level, becoming true man like us to suffer what is due for our sin. The lowest He could go, He did – to a cross – where the Almighty Lord dies for His sinful creatures so that He might be forgiven and not die eternally, but live – again, something totally unexpected.

After going down to the grave, He comes up out of the grave, alive again. This, too, was totally unexpected by the disciples and anyone who knows death. When a person dies, it’s all over. But the Lord Jesus shows His power and might by defeating death, defeating the grave, and defeating the devil so that we might do so as well. We shall do what no one ever expects anyone to do: We will come back to life, rise from our graves, and live forever.

He gives us that life already now in the most unexpected of ways. He gives birth to our new life when we are baptized with ordinary water attached to His Word of promise. He strengthens that new life by speaking to us through His Word. He nourishes that new life when we attend His Supper and He gives us His very body and blood in, with, and under ordinary bread and wine. All of these gifts of our Lord are very unexpected means in how they appear, but, at the same time, very exceptionally effective in what they do.

Many of our problems can be traced back to our expectations. Faulty expectations can lead to faulty results. This is true with Christ Jesus. If we expect Jesus to be only a nice guy who only does what we expect in the way we expect it, we will miss out on who He truly is and all that He has to give us. See Jesus for who He truly is: the Lord who created and rules heaven and earth. Believe Jesus for how He truly acts: in humility and condescension, rather than with power and might. Accept as true how Jesus gives us His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation: through water, words, bread, and wine. Through an unexpected Savior who operates in unexpected ways to accomplish unexpected results, hear Him say to you, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Amen