

**“Straining at the Oars”**  
**Mark 6:45-56**

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*Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.*

*When evening came, the boat was out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.*

*When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*

I don’t know if this is entirely true, but I would suspect that most of us carry around an image or two of Jesus in our minds. Maybe yours is Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, or maybe it’s of him breaking the bread at the last supper. Maybe your “go-to image” of Jesus is a picture of him healing a sick person, or welcoming some children into his arms. Without thinking about it too much, I would guess that most of our images of Jesus are pleasant ones. Jesus is smiling in them and appears to be having a good day.

Have you seen the Jesus action figures? It’s true, the Jesus action figure really exists! The advertisement for it reads:

*Everyone has a different take on Jesus. Muslims saw him as a prophet; Buddhists say he was enlightened; while Christians hail him as the Son of God. But, wherever your theological compass points, you will agree that this is the coolest action figure since G.I. Joe. Each hard plastic Jesus Action Figure stands 5" tall with poseable arms to reach toward the heavens and wheels in his base for smooth gliding action. Comes in our illustrated package with biblical quotes on the back.*

And then there’s the “deluxe edition” of the Jesus action figure. The ad reads:

*There is no action figure more deserving of a deluxe edition than the Son of God. This 5-1/4" tall, hard vinyl figure comes with eight amazing plastic accessories: five loaves of bread, two fish and a jug for turning water into wine (not guaranteed to work for real). Also features "glow-in-the-dark miracle hands!"*

Glow-in-the-dark hands? I don’t know about you, but I seemed to have missed the verse in the Bible where Jesus glows in the dark.

I think it's fascinating to think about how we choose to remember Jesus visually, mainly because there are certain moments in Jesus' ministry where our images of him do not line up with the disciples' experience.

Today's reading from Mark's gospel is a good example of that. Jesus and his followers are in a remote place, and Jesus has just fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Evening came, and Jesus had the disciples get into a boat and head to the other side of the sea while he remained behind to pray. The disciples obeyed, but then at some point during the night, a storm started to brew out on the water, as they were often known to do on the Sea of Galilee. I imagine it was a long, restless night for the disciples as they struggled to keep their boat afloat. But then, at the break of day, Jesus came to them, walking on the water. And verse 49 says that "when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified."

It's really an amazing scene. The disciples are scared out of their minds and crying out—or, quite literally, they're screaming with fear. Sort of a strange response, isn't it? Wouldn't you think they'd be overjoyed? I mean, here they are out on the lake in a storm, straining against the oars, struggling to keep their boat from capsizing. They're probably exhausted because they've been putting up with the wind all night, and now at first light, here's Jesus walking on the water towards them. Verse 49 should read, "But when they saw him walking on the lake, they cried with joy and laughter and shouted at him, 'What took you so long, Jesus?'" But their image of Jesus is not a pleasant one. It's not of Jesus smiling, healing, teaching, or comforting. They think he's a ghost, and the sight of him scares them to death.

What could it be about seeing Jesus at that moment that would be so frightening? To answer that question, I think we need to imagine what it's like to lose control—to find ourselves in that moment where we know beyond the shadow of any doubt that our own efforts will not save us. To know why the disciples were so terrified of Jesus is to know what it's like to truly strain at the oars, to use up everything you've got, to exhaust all of your human energy only to find out that you don't have what it takes. To understand the disciples' fear, we have to remember what it's like to face our own powerlessness in the storm.

Maybe you've been there. At some point in your life, you've found yourself at that place where life gets really, really bad, and where you've been forced to give up the illusion of control, and forced to accept that all your strength and all your best efforts will not make a difference.

Mandy was fifteen when one day after school she wrote a note in her room and then took a bottle of pills. Her mother found her on the bathroom floor. Paramedics arrived in minutes, and they got her to the ER. She was ok, stable. Her mom and dad were obviously relieved to still have their daughter with them, but a new storm had blown into their lives, and they found themselves drowning in an endless sea of information about depression and anxiety in teenagers—and drowning in an endless stream of questions: Why did this happen? What did we do wrong? Why didn't we see this coming? What could we have done differently? Through it all there was the fear—fear that this could happen again, fear that life would never be the same, fear that they were powerless against Mandy's inner struggle. A few days after the incident, in waiting room

at the hospital, Mandy's dad said, "What really scares me is that no matter what I do, no matter how much I say, and no matter how hard I try, I can't make her safe."

Our real fear is not the sight of Jesus coming through the storm to rescue us. Our real fear is knowing that Jesus is our only hope. Now that might sound like a ridiculous thing to say, but if we confess that Jesus is our only hope, then it means we've exhausted all other options. It means that we know for a fact that our own efforts are simply not enough.

Some friends of ours have a four-year-old son who came down with a mysterious condition this past spring. It was quite serious—for a couple days his life literally hung in the balance, and since the doctors had no diagnosis, a good part of their fear was that no one knew quite what they were up against. After about a week in the hospital, whatever it was that was ailing their son went away, and they soon found themselves home again. Safe. Back to normal. But then a couple weeks later his mother was talking with me and she said, "I'm still scared. I know everything's alright, but I'm still scared to death. And I don't know why I feel this way—everyone else is looking at my son and saying 'It's a miracle!' I'm still scared."

Our real fear is not a fear of God's presence during our time of need. Our real fear is knowing that life is so fragile—so fragile that the only hands that can truly keep it are God's.

Maybe you've been there. Maybe your life has taken you to that place where you've realized that your hope in God is really the only hope you have. You've tried to make the marriage work on your own, you've tried your best to beat the cancer, you've given it everything you've got to feel well again, you've battled depression, you've strained at the oars... But at the end of the day, you've had to face the harsh reality that all of your best efforts and all the best efforts of all the people around you just might fall short, and you are left to place your final trust in God's hands. That may or may not be a comforting moment for you—it could very well be the most terrifying thing you've ever done—to give up the illusion of ultimate control in your life.

I wonder if that wasn't part of the disciples' fear—that recognition that their fate was not in their own hands.

Let me tell you something about my own faith. I'm good at straining at the oars. When there's a storm in my life or in this world, I'm pretty good at digging in and paddling hard. I work hard, I have above-average intelligence, I'm a decent problem solver. So faced with just about any situation, I usually figure I've more or less got what it takes to get me through it. But you know what's really frightening? Sometimes I don't. Sometimes I can't get through the storm. Sometimes my best isn't enough and I'm faced with the question: Can I trust God to silence the storms that blow beyond my control? And, when those storms will not be silenced, can I trust God to carry me through?

I think that those are the questions that face us as a congregation. And you want to hear something dangerous? This church is full of loving, talented people. Wonderful minds. People with amazing abilities. So much wisdom and intelligence is here in this room. Given the problems of this world, and the problems of this city, there's probably not much we can't accomplish if we were to get organized and put our backs into it. This is a powerful church and

we can strain at the oars when we need to! We can dig in, and we can battle poverty, we can battle hunger, we can battle injustice.

But can we, at the end of the day, can we confess that our hope is not in *our* ability to work hard or accomplish anything, but rather in Christ, the One who silences the storm? Can we put our faith, our hope, our trust in him, and then can we live in faith, loving as he loved, serving as he served?

Amen.