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“Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid” (Mark 6:50).

1 John 4:11-18; Mark 6:45-52

Mark wants his readers to see the connection between Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes and the gift of manna in the desert. Jesus is the new Moses, and when, like Moses, he prays on the mountain before walking on water to save his disciples, Jesus is invoking the exodus as a preview of his passage through the waters of death to new life in the resurrection.

Each crossing of the lake is a rehearsal of the faith the disciples will need when storms threaten to sink them and the boat of the church. The risen Christ is with his church, not as a ghost but as savior and redeemer. “Have courage, it is I, do not be afraid.” Mark’s narrative emphasizes just how long it took the disciples to grasp who Jesus was. Like the crowds, they wanted him to be a messiah king to restore Israel. If he could feed 5,000 men in the desert, he could raise an army to defeat the Romans. They would be his lieutenants, ready to share in his glory. Like the people in the desert with Moses who “hardened their hearts,” the disciples refused to see God’s plan for Jesus.

In Chapter 8, halfway through his Gospel, Mark has Jesus quiz his disciples about who they think he is. Only then is Peter inspired to call him the Christ, at which Jesus reveals his approaching suffering and death. This is the kind of messiah he will be, despite Peter’s efforts to dissuade him. In Chapter 9, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on the mountain where he is transfigured. This scene, too, is a preview of the resurrection and the revelation that by his suffering and death Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

How long it took the early church to understand Jesus is reflected in Mark's Gospel. Faith is not a lock-step march forward into glory, but more like an invitation to walk on water. We must live between earth and heaven, sometimes in doubt and sometimes in blessed assurance, in periods of tranquility and other times shaken by crises and uncertainty. Like the disciples, we must emerge from our own struggles with faith willing to trust that Jesus is always with us. There is no guarantee we will not experience storms, suffering and loss. In fact, being with him guarantees we will face challenges.

"Hardness of heart" is a terrible state to be in, so convinced of my own reality that I must reject and even vilify those who disagree with me. It is also a very small place to be, with mental walls on all sides to protect my world, even if this means closing out new ideas, experiences, people and the chance to learn and grow. Discipleship is a lifelong journey of opening our hearts to God and one another, which is the path to the fullness of life.

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