

"Across to the Other Side"

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June 24, 2018

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."
³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35-41)

In 1678, Englishman John Bunyan wrote one of the earliest novels to be printed in the English language, an allegorical telling of the journey of faith called The Pilgrim's Progress. The main character in the novel is a man named Christian, who is the quintessential "everyman" of faith. He represents all of us who are trying our best to be faithful disciples until the end. For much of his journey from his hometown, the "City of Destruction," to the "Celestial City," which clearly represents heaven, Christian travels with his friend Hopeful. Nearing the end of his journey, Christian has passed through at least two valleys: the Valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He has avoided the temptations of the Vanity Fair and the comfort of the plain called "Ease." The Doubting Castle, owned by a giant named Despair, is now so far behind him that he can no longer see it. [As you can tell, Bunyan didn't worry about disguising his allegorical messages very much.] But now Christian and Hopeful are in sight of the Celestial City. Even from a distance, they can see the pearls and precious stones of its walls, the bright gleam of its golden structures. They can hear praise and rejoicing rising from the city. As they near the gates, they notice that the fields and vineyards around them are bursting with abundant crops of corn and grapes. They are so close to their goal, and their spirits begin to soar.

At that moment, they meet two men, referred to only as the "Shining Ones," who "were dressed in clothing that shone like gold and their faces glowed radiantly as light."¹ They inform the human travelers that a significant obstacle still stands in their way: a deep river that surrounds the Celestial City. There is no bridge. They would have to go through it. Christian, especially, is afraid of what he sees.

"Is the water all the same depth?" he asks.

"No," they answer, "You shall find it deeper or shallower as you believe in the King of the place."

The two men resign themselves to the fact that the only way to the other side is to wade into the water. But as soon as Christian does so, he immediately begins to sink. He

¹ John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress (Illustrated)*, Kindle Version (Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, 2014), 177. The use of this illustration is credited to Michael L. Lindvall, "Mark 4:35-41: Pastoral Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 168.



cries out to his friend, “Hopeful, I sink in the deep water! The billows go over my head; all his waves go over me!”

I obviously don’t know what was in John Bunyan’s mind 340 years ago, but I have to think that one of the biblical parallels he was thinking about must have been the image of the disciples of Jesus in their little boat on the Sea of Galilee, crying out in fear as the waters pour in over the gunnels. They too are fearing that the billows will go over their heads... that they will sink beneath the waves. In fact, Christian’s experience in the River of Death helps to highlight a possibility in Mark’s story that is not often noticed. Many times we focus on Jesus’ question: “Do you still have no faith?” What Jesus notices first, however, is their fear. First and foremost, they are afraid. If we approach this story with an acceptance that the disciples did have faith, that it is more about fear, it really changes the outcome. And I think that is the correct way to see it. Just like Christian, the everyman of faith, had traveled many miles and overcome many obstacles to get to this moment in the waters, so had the disciples of Jesus. They have left homes and livelihoods behind to journey with Christ. They have already committed to him, heard him preach, and seen him heal people with miraculous power. The disciples have faith. In this moment, they are just overcome with fear.²

Think about it this way. The disciples have faith, but a lot is being asked of them in this moment. First of all, Jesus wants to start this little sailing trip as night is falling... not the best time to set out on the waters, especially on the Sea of Galilee, where storms are frequent, violent, and tend to arise quickly. And what if they had known what lay in store for them on the other side? What if they had said, “OK, Jesus, before we go, tell us what’s over there on the other side.”³

“Well,” he would have to answer, “It will still be dark when we get there, and as soon as we set foot on the land we’ll meet this demon-possessed lunatic. He lives in the cemetery just west of Jerash, and most of the time he’s chained up... but not tonight! Even as we speak, he is busting out of those chains, because he’s got like, superhuman strength... you know... because of the demons.”

“Don’t worry, I got that. I’ll do a quick exorcism, but then we’ll have to figure out what to do with all those demons... because they crave human flesh and souls... you know... like yours. Fortunately, we’ll be able to round up all these pigs that are somehow right there. We’ll need about 2,000 pigs, and it’ll be messy. You may want to pack some boots.”

“Anyway, each demon will get his or her very own pig. And then all of those pigs will go nuts with their new superhuman demon power. They’ll all run off this big cliff and drown in the lake. For obvious reasons, the guys who took care of the pigs will get really ticked off and go tell everybody back in town. Then the whole town will come with torches and pitchforks and tell us to go back to where we came from. I’m pretty sure it will be OK. So, who wants to row first?”

If they only knew, they probably never would have gotten in the boats. And that is my sermon for this morning. Most of the time, we’d rather stay right where we are. It’s not that we don’t have faith. We do have faith. It’s just that it seems way more comfortable to

² Mark Davis, “Piety and Panic,” <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/06/piety-and-panic.html>.

³ Karoline Lewis, “The Other Side,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3645>.

stay put. Truth be told, we don't really want to go to the other side. Can't we just have faith, but keep everything the way it is?

I think this tendency poses one of the most vexing challenges facing the church in this moment in history. Most of us, and I include myself in this, are very comfortable with the things we know. That includes our **theology**: what we think about God, how we envision Jesus, what we think a faithful life looks like. It includes our **values**: what we care about, what we see as most important. It includes our **politics**: how we vote, how we see the world, how we view our opponents. It includes our **view of the church**: how things should be arranged, how we should worship, what our mission priorities should be. All of these things combine to define our personal "territory," those places where we feel most at home. Our human nature – and this is true for everyone – prefers to stay within the safe confines of our territory. When faced with the option of crossing to the "other side" – venturing into the territory of those who are different than we are... to try to be with them, value them, and perhaps even understand them better – when it comes to that kind of departure, we would just rather not.

The problem with this human inclination is that Jesus is almost never satisfied with it. He rarely lets us stay in our safe, familiar territory for very long. I believe this is one of the most important callings we have as disciples in this moment and in this place – that we, as the church, are being called to show the world what can happen when we venture out beyond the boundaries of what is known and comfortable to us – beyond those things that we cannot imagine letting go of – and explore, without anger or judgment, the "territories" of people who are different than us. It seems to be what Jesus really wants us to do, and it seems that very few people are doing it in our culture today. "Let us go," Jesus says, "across to the other side." He never says that we don't have good reason to be afraid of what might be over there, or how we might be treated over there. He just wants our faith to be greater than our fear.

In this calling, we are encouraged in two ways. First, this passage in Mark makes it clear that it is not just the disciples who have faith in Jesus. ***Jesus also has faith in the disciples.***⁴ Jesus says, "Hey, let's go across to the other side." And then the text says that "*they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.*" In other words, Jesus puts his life in the hands of the disciples. He lets them steer. He even goes to sleep. In this story, Jesus doesn't want to shame the disciples for having no faith. He wants to encourage them to recognize the power of the faith they already have.

The second comfort is that we do not have to do this alone. Obviously, Jesus is with us, and that is by far the greatest asset. But there's more. The sentence is so short we might miss it, but that would be a grave mistake. When the disciples push off from the shore with Jesus in the stern, it also says this: "*Other boats were with him.*" When I was in high school and college I did some lifeguard training, and one of the cardinal lessons was that, whenever you had to go out into the water to help someone, if at all possible you were to "go with support." You took a raft, or ring, or some kind of floatation device. The same is true in the life of faith. Mark reminds us that, when the disciples ventured out to the other side, they went as a community of faith. They went together. They went with support.

Notably, as *Pilgrim's Progress* nears its conclusion, Christian had support in the waters of the river as well. Gripped with fear, his head kept slipping beneath the surface.

⁴ Shelli Williams, "Proper 7B: Unharbored," <https://journeytopenuel.com/2015/06/14/proper-7b-unharbored/>

But his friend Hopeful remained by his side, struggling to help keep his brother breathing and moving forward. "Brother," he cries, "I see the gate and men standing nearby to welcome us!"

With little to no confidence in his own faith, Christian chokes back "Not for me. It is you... it is you they are waiting for, for you have been hopeful ever since I first knew you."

"And so have you," Hopeful replied. "So have you! ... Be courageous. Jesus Christ makes you whole."⁵

In that instant, Christian catches sight of Jesus, who is suddenly there with him in the waters. "I see him again!" he cries. "And he tells me, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you!"

"Be courageous, my brother," Hopeful says. "I feel the bottom, and it is firm!" And with that the surging waters became completely calm. The storm quieted, Christian's feet found solid ground, and the two of them walked together... across to the other side.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁵ Bunyan, 180.