

Don't Be Afraid!

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 6)

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The Gospel According to Mark
Chapter 6

In our study of the Gospel According to Mark, we now come to chapter 6:

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith (6:1-6).

We tend to have an exalted picture of Jesus, as a kind of otherworldly figure with a halo hovering over him, who proceeds through history sort of disconnected from the everyday kind of life you and I know until he comes to the agonizing destiny of the cross — which also, for us in modern America, seems equally removed from the norm of our experience. That part might be changing, as we learn of a crazed gunman targeting Christians on a college campus, or of Christians beheaded by Islamic radicals in the Middle East. But usually, perhaps, we don't visualize Jesus dealing with the same sorts of circumstances so familiar from our own daily experience.

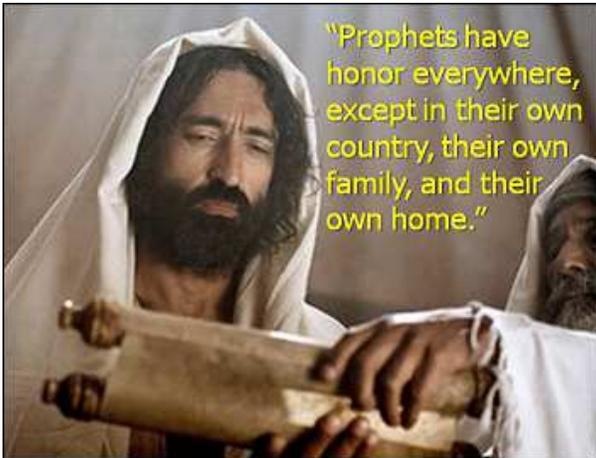
But here, at the beginning of what we call Mark's chapter 6, we get a glimpse of the down-to-earth Jesus. We learn about his gainful occupation, and his family, and how his fellow townspeople saw him. We learn he was a "handyman," as another translation has it. Usually Jesus is called a carpenter, but the word Mark uses is *tekton*, somebody who could fix things — or do stone work, roof houses, and serve as a kind of general contractor. Yes, Jesus was a *tekton*; in terms of the technology of the time, we might even call him a "tech."

And we also discover he had four brothers, whom his hometown neighbors list by name: James, Joses, Judah, and Simon. And he had sisters as well, though in the Jewish culture of the time their names don't get mentioned. Women occupied a subordinate position in most of the ancient world; what's remarkable is how Christianity changed that. For example, when Jesus is raised from the dead the Gospels specifically name the women who first reported his resurrection to the disciples; and as Paul states in Galatians 3:28, "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." But here in Jesus' hometown — presumably Nazareth, though Mark doesn't name it — the old ways still prevail.

That could be one reason Jesus doesn't get a terrific reception in his hometown. It wasn't that people remembered his shortcomings so they couldn't take him seriously as a preacher, as might be the case of I went back to someplace where I had "messed up" and then presumed to straighten everybody else out. No, with Jesus I believe it was because what he was teaching to them, in their synagogue, was "rocking their boat," jarring them out of their complacency by making God real to them at last. "People were astonished," Mark says, when they heard Jesus; they wondered, "Where does he get it all from?" And only a few receptive souls were able to receive the healing Jesus brought by his presence. So this incident is the source of the



expression “a prophet without honor,” describing someone we don’t take seriously to give us help or useful advice because we’re too close to them, or they’ve grown up with us, and we can’t really believe they’re that remarkable or that great. Even Jesus’ brothers James and Jude apparently didn’t become followers of Jesus till after his resurrection made it plain who he is, the Messiah of Israel.



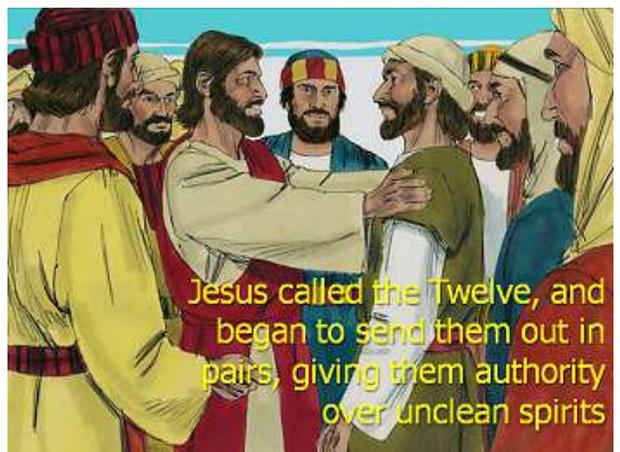
There’s an old saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Were the townspeople of Nazareth too familiar with Jesus, whom they had known from boyhood, to see him as the Lord’s Anointed? Unlike the woman with the hemorrhage in the previous chapter, were they too close to him to be able to receive the benefits of the power and authority that flowed from his presence? So we might be asking ourselves this question: **Is Jesus too familiar to us — is our talk about Jesus, and with Jesus, too repetitive and commonplace — so that his healing and rescuing power never really impresses us?** For all his being a down-to-earth, flesh-and-blood Person, shouldn’t there be a

kind of *holy strangeness* in our experience of Jesus, so we don’t have the same ho-hum reaction the people of Nazareth had that kept them from knowing the reality of the living God that was at work in him? Just asking.

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." They went out and preached that people should repent (6:6-12).

Mark has introduced the twelve disciples in chapter 3, and we’ve seen how they’ve reacted to Jesus as they’ve heard his teaching about the kingdom of God and witnessed his demonstration of the presence of the kingdom in his “mighty works and wonders and signs.” Sometimes the disciples’ reaction hasn’t been terribly promising; they’re astonished at the power Jesus displays over sickness and death and the forces of nature, but they’re still left wondering who he is. Finally, though, Jesus has decided it’s time to share that same authority over evil with his followers so they can be sent out to do the same works he’s been doing. If that surprises us, it’s a consistent teaching of the New Testament that the authority Jesus has over evil is granted to every believer. As he states in John 14:12, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”



I’m sure you’re thinking, “Dr. Leonard, that’s great for a person with exceptional faith, but I’m just a plain old Christian with an ordinary faith that sometimes isn’t very much faith.” I can certainly appreciate that, but we need to take the Lord at his word when he says that we’re made in his image. Scripture is clear that God is in the power-sharing business, and delegates to people the same kind of authority he exercises over his universe. Our problem may be, not that we lack the authority over evil, but that we *lack the faith to exercise the authority we have*.

At the end of Mark’s Gospel the risen Lord Jesus declares, “These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons . . . ; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:17-18). The title of this message is, “Don’t Be Afraid,” the word Jesus speaks to his disciples when he comes to them on the water. I wonder if sometimes we’re just *afraid* to exercise the authority we have over sickness and evil — afraid nothing will happen, and we’ll be shown up as a faithless failure. Well, one sure way to fail is to not try in the first place. Remember: faith isn’t *success*, faith is *obedience*. God tells us to

exercise the same kind of authority over sickness and evil that Jesus gave his twelve apostles, and then leave the results to him. But there won't be *any* results, if we don't obey. That's why we make an opportunity during each worship service for people to come forward for special prayer. So let's ask this: **Do I dare to take Jesus at his word, and exercise my God-given authority to resist and defeat the evil things that come against me, my loved ones, and my community?**

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago." But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

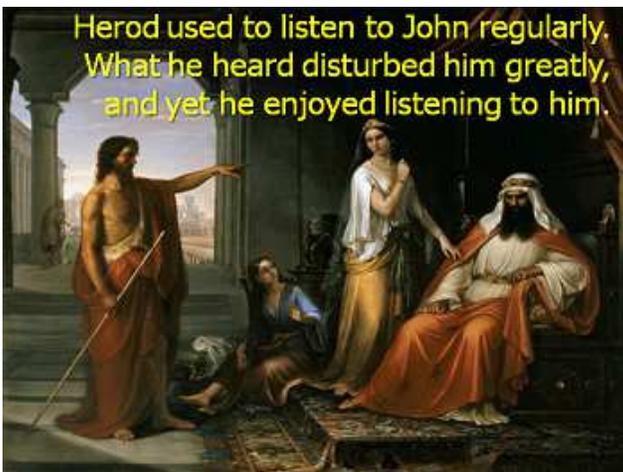
Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" "The head of John the Baptist," she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb (6:14-29).

This is probably not your favorite Bible story, but the account has some interesting religious and cultural connections. Culturally, for example, the story became the basis for the opera *Salome* by the German composer Richard Strauss. This text is also part of the reason Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate birthdays — because on birthday celebrations in the Bible someone always gets killed. (Coincidentally, my sister's



birthday is tomorrow but I never send her a card because she and her husband are Jehovah's Witnesses.) As you know, the Herod in this account is not the same Herod who ruled when Jesus was born, but his son Herod Antipas who ruled over Galilee at the time Jesus began to preach, about thirty years later. All the Herods were Jewish puppet rulers under a Roman governor, and this Herod was later deposed by Rome and sent off to exile in Gaul, the far corner of the empire that we now call France.

John the Baptist, of course, was a relative of Jesus and the one who paved the way for his preaching of the kingdom of God. Mark opens his gospel with the account of John's preaching of repentance, or return to the Lord. People from all over the region were coming to him to be

baptized — not the same kind of baptism as Christian baptism, which brings us into membership in the body of believers, but baptism as a sign of forgiveness of sin because God is about to do something new for his people. John was "setting the stage" for the coming of Messiah, the One who was to bring the presence of the Lord back to his people. And, as Mark tells us (chapter 1, verse 14), Jesus didn't begin to preach until Herod had arrested John. So the account of John's death, at this point in Mark's narrative, is a flashback to events that occurred some time earlier.

What can we learn from this grisly account of the untimely death of John the Baptist? John had been arrested because he was taking Herod to task for marrying his brother Philip's wife, Herodias — a violation of the Law of Moses. The Herod family weren't very faithful Jews; they were "Hellenized," with a life style more in tune with Greek culture than Judaism, and that didn't sit well with someone like John who wanted to see his people stay faithful to the Lord so he could fulfill what he intended to do through his chosen ones. It was

Herodias herself who instigated John's arrest, because Mark tells us that Herod himself regarded John as a holy man and liked to bring him out of his prison and listen to his preaching. Finally, of course, Herodias got her way and used her daughter Salome, whose birthday-party dancing fascinated Herod, to embarrass him into doing away with this pestiferous prophet. When Salome asked Herod for John's head, as one translation says, "he hadn't the guts to refuse her" because of the vow he had made in front of his guests.

Notice this about Herod. He admired John, and liked to listen to him. But, it seems, for Herod this preaching was just entertainment; he didn't respond with a real change of heart. He was sorry about having to call for John's execution, but in the end for him it wasn't about the God John was talking about; it was all about Herod's own pride and insecurity. When asked to do something he knew was wrong, he gave in to his own self-protective impulses and let it happen. In the face of pressure from family and friends, he took the easier way out. He couldn't make the right decision in a pinch; it's no wonder the Romans eventually found they couldn't rely on him, and stripped him of his office and packed him off to the "boonies." Here's our question: **Am I like Herod? Am I entertained by the preaching of the Word but, 'when push comes to shove,' do I have the "guts" to stand by what I know is the right thing to do?** That's a sobering question, isn't it?

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

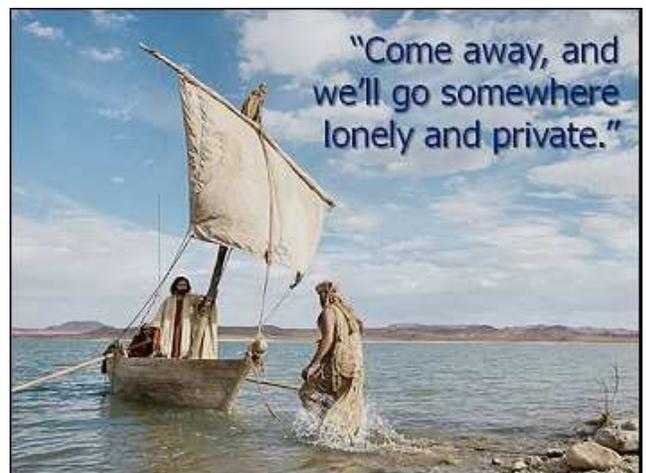
By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five--and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand (6:30-44).

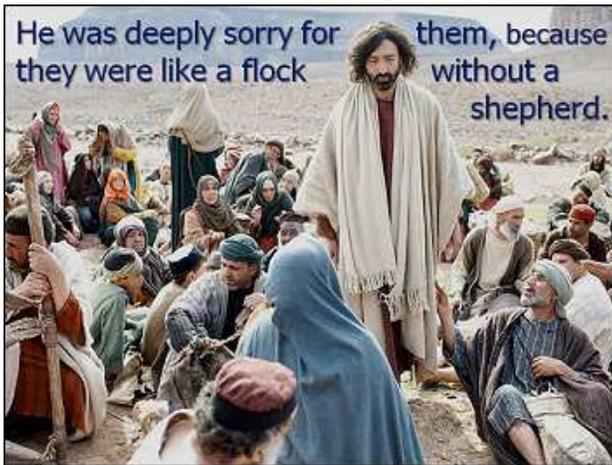
John the Baptist was not only the prophet who baptized Jesus and directed others to him as the "greater one" who would bring about the deliverance God had promised his people. He was also Jesus' relative. It's understandable that Jesus, upon hearing this news of John's senseless, violent death, would want to have some private time away from the crowds. But meanwhile, Mark tells us, there's a mission in progress; the disciples are out spreading the word of the kingdom, casting out unclean spirits and healing the sick. Finally they return with the report of what they had done, and then Jesus can say, "All right, it's time for a break. Come away, just you, and we'll go somewhere lonely and private."

But it was not to be. Word of Jesus' teaching about the emerging kingdom of God, and of his "mighty works and wonders and signs," has spread throughout the region. Crowds are following him wherever he goes, eager for a word that their God, seemingly silent for so long, is "on the move" again. Jesus and his disciples go off to a lonely spot; from other Gospels we learn they sailed from Capernaum across the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee to somewhere near Bethsaida — only to find a large crowd already gathered there. Whatever his



personal grief over John, Mark tells us, Jesus “was deeply sorry for them, because they were like a flock without a shepherd.”

Sometimes when we’re overcome with sadness, or depression, because of things that have occurred in our lives, we just want to pull into ourselves and forget the needs of everyone else. But if we’re called to the work of God — and all believers are called — we can’t let our emotions get in the way of our ministry to others. Jesus did what he was called to do, regardless of what his personal feelings may have been, and with his help we can do the same. **Do I allow my emotions, whether sadness or anger or resentment or fear, to affect my behavior as a Christian and my participation with others in the work and worship of God’s church?** That’s a question we might be asking ourselves.



But Mark isn’t relating this event at Bethsaida just to show how Jesus sets an example in selfless behavior. He’s telling it because what happens next is a revelation of the creative power of the Son of God. As the day wears on Jesus’ disciples become concerned. The people have nothing to eat, so they ask Jesus to send them into town to buy food. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples to feed them. All they have are five loaves of barley bread and two dried fish. (John’s Gospel tells us that a boy in the crowd brought them for his lunch.) Jesus takes the food and blesses the bread, giving thanks to God. When the disciples pass out the loaves and fish there’s enough food, and more, to feed the 5,000 men plus the women and children with them.

Theologians have called this a “nature miracle,” and people who don’t believe in miracles have tried to explain this story another way. Perhaps when the boy shared his lunch everyone else was ashamed and brought out the food they had hidden in their clothing. Or maybe the earliest Christians just made up the story to make Jesus look more glorious than he was. Such explanations don’t stand the test of honest historical research, because the different details we find in the Gospels point to *eyewitness testimony about a real event*. Jesus is able to do what he does because he is the Lord of creation. All matter, whether the cells of the human body or the molecules of a loaf of bread, is subject to him. If he can heal the sick and command unclean spirits, he can also feed this large crowd from just a few loaves and fish. What Jesus can do with the “raw material” of the universe is a revelation of the kingdom of God at work, and of who Jesus is as the Head of that kingdom.



And there’s more. Before distributing the loaves and fish to the crowd, Mark says, Jesus “looked up to heaven” and “blessed the bread.” In ancient Christian art the five loaves and two fish are a symbol for the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion. In John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus explains its deeper meaning. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we’re taken back not only to the Last Supper in the upper room but also to that place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus breaks the loaves and feeds us with himself, filling our lives with his life and making us, as Peter says, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Let’s ask, then, as we receive the symbols of Jesus’ life: **Am I just going through a tired ritual, or am I receiving the risen Jesus into myself so I can live and act with all the power and authority he has given me as one of his own?**

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went — into villages, towns or countryside — they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed (6:45-56).

Once the 5,000 and others have been fed and Jesus has dismissed them, he finally has time to get by himself and pray. So he sends the disciples back to Capernaum in their boat. It's dark now, and one of those quick Sea of Galilee windstorms has come up. The disciples' boat has been blown off course. But Jesus knows their plight; Mark says, "He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them" (Mark 6:48). So in the middle of the night he comes to them walking on the lake. At first the disciples are frightened by his appearance; they don't recognize Jesus until he speaks to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Then he gets into their boat, the wind dies down, and they land safely at Gennesaret where, once again, the people of Galilee rush to him because they know he can heal them.



At once he spoke to them, "Cheer up," he said, "it's me. Don't be afraid."

We're all familiar with this incident, but did you notice something odd about Mark's version? There's no mention of Peter getting into the water and trying to come to Jesus, as we find in Matthew's account. I wonder why not? Well, Mark's Gospel is thought to be based on the reminiscences of Simon Peter himself, and *maybe* Peter was a little embarrassed at what happened to him then and didn't include that part!

The Bible is the inspired Word, because "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (1 Peter 1:21), but when we examine it in depth we always have to reckon with the human element as well. And that's true of all we do in serving the Lord, whether it's how we operate as a church today or whether it was the apostles writing the books of the New Testament. Part of what we do is of the Lord, and part is from

us. That's what theologians call the *incarnational* nature of our faith; God works through human flesh and blood today, just as he did in Bible times. That's the very truth in the coming of Jesus; as John states, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). So here's a question: **Am I willing to be used by the Lord to do what he wants done, even though I know I'm an imperfect human being?** Because God often works through imperfect people; in fact, there isn't any other kind of people for him to work through!

There's another very odd thing about Mark's record of Jesus coming to his disciples on the lake. Mark says, "He intended to go past them." Why would Jesus mean to just pass by his disciples when they were in such danger trying to get their boat across the lake? And how did Mark know what Jesus intended to do? Matthew doesn't include that statement in his account. Obviously there's something mysterious here, that we don't quite understand (and I, personally, have no clue). Let's remind ourselves that not everything in the Bible is easy for us to explain today. When we find things that seem hard to understand — like some of the visions in the Book of Revelation, for example — we need to be careful not to come up with easy or superficial or overly clever explanations and think we've solved the mystery. Our explanations should never trump the Word of God itself, because that makes our explanations the authority instead of the Word. Scripture isn't there for us just to explain, but for us to obey in order to serve the Lord. As Moses states in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

So what's the point of Mark's account? Notice how the disciples react to Jesus when he comes to them on the waves. As Mark writes, "They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." The truth about *who Jesus is*, is still unfolding before their eyes, and at this point

that revelation is a little heavy for the disciples to take in. Jesus has authority over unclean spirits and illness, and as the Word of God he also has authority also over wind, water, and all of nature that he, himself, has created. When he comes to his followers on the water, he isn't coming just to bail out his disciples when they're in trouble; in fact, as Mark says, "he meant to pass by them." I suggest to you that this event is a revelation of the Son of God who is to rise from the dead and inaugurate God's new creation.

God the Creator has set about to restore his universe to the goodness it had in the beginning, where evil spiritual forces, disease, and storms hold no fear. And he is restoring his people to the fullness of his own image, the way he made us in the first place. Jesus, in his authority over the loaves and fish, the wind and the waves, is the promise of that new creation — and not only the promise of it, but also what the apostle Paul calls "the first-born among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), as through his Holy Spirit he makes it a reality in our lives. Our last question: **Am I like the disciples, my heart hardened to the reality of who Jesus really is? Or do I understand, as they finally did, that Jesus is the Word of God, who has all authority in heaven and earth? Do I make that truth real in my life?**

Let's conclude by summarizing our questions:

- Is our talk *about* Jesus too repetitive and commonplace, so that his healing and rescuing power never really impresses us?
- Do I dare to exercise my God-given authority to resist evil things that come against me and others?
- Is the preaching of the Word just entertainment for me, or do I have the "guts" to stand by it in real life?
- Do I allow my emotions to affect my behavior as a Christian, and my participation in the church?
- In Communion, am I just going through a ritual, or am I receiving the power and authority of the risen Jesus?
- Am I willing to have the Lord work through me, even if I'm not perfect?
- Do I understand that Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth? Do I make that truth real in my life?

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