

**MARK 6:45–56.** (EHV)

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he himself dismissed the crowd. After he had sent them off, he went up the mountain to pray. When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and Jesus was alone on the land. He saw them straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night, he went to them, walking on the sea. He was ready to pass by them. When they saw him walking on the sea, they thought he was a ghost, and they cried out. They all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke with them and said, **“Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.”** Then he climbed up into the boat with them, and the wind stopped. They were completely amazed, because they had not understood about the loaves. Instead, their hearts were hardened. When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they stepped out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran around that whole region and began to bring sick people on their stretchers to where they heard he was. Wherever he entered villages, cities, or the countryside, they were laying sick people in the marketplaces and pleading with him that they might just touch the edge of his garment. And all who touched it were made well.

We’ve been following a pretty tight series of chronological events in the life and ministry of Jesus over the past number weeks. He sent out his twelve apostles on a preparatory mission trip, while he himself also went out to preach and teach. Then he heard about John the Baptist’s death. Then his apostles returned. Then he set out with them for the other side of the Sea of Galilee to rest for a while. But the people ran along the shore to meet them at their destination. Jesus had compassion on them and began teaching and healing them. And we heard how Jesus miraculously fed them as the day was winding to a close.

Now Jesus must be bushed, right? He was already seeking a break before he spent the day teaching and feeding all of these people. Certainly he will get some rest now that night is coming on, right? “Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he himself dismissed the crowd. After he had sent them off, he went up the mountain to pray.” All of this activity meant that Jesus had missed out on what he needed most of all—not rest and sleep, but time in prayer, which for Jesus certainly would have also included meditation on God’s word and promises.

This reminds me of a story that people tell about Martin Luther—probably fictional, but it makes a good point. He supposedly said to his friends once, “I’m particularly busy today; I had better spend an extra hour in prayer.” Oftentimes prayer and meditation on God’s word is the first thing to get cut from the schedule if we’re busy, but Jesus shows us by his example that if we don’t have the time, we need to make the time, even if other needs are pressing us too.

Now there is a sticky item to wrestle with here. Mark says here that Jesus told them to go to the other side, to Bethsaida, while John says that they set off across the lake for Capernaum. Furthermore, Luke tells us that the place where Jesus retreated to and near where he fed the five thousand was a village called Bethsaida. So if he was already near Bethsaida, how could he make his disciples get in the boat and go to the other side to Bethsaida? The easiest answer is that there may have been two Bethsaidas. John perhaps hints at this when he sometimes talks about a

Bethsaida that he simply calls Bethsaida and then possibly another Bethsaida that he describes as Bethsaida of Galilee. Bethsaida means “house of the fisherman,” and so it may have been a name used more than once along the Sea of Galilee. Another option is that Bethsaida was both the name of a town along the north-northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee and the name of the region in which Capernaum and Gennesaret were located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee—sort of like how in many states there are names used both for cities and for counties, and oftentimes the city is not located in the county that shares its name.

Whatever the case, it seems that the disciples were instructed to go, and intended to go, from the north-northeast part of the Sea of Galilee over to the western shore.

But it wasn't working. It was already dark, a strong wind was blowing against them, and the waters were rough. Mark tells us that the boat was in the middle of the sea. John tells us they rowed more than three miles and still had a ways to go. They were getting blown off course, rather than making headway directly toward their destination.

Jesus saw them straining at the oars, but did not go out to them until about the fourth watch of the night, around three in the morning! That all by itself tells us not only how much Jesus valued prayer, but also that Jesus's timing is not our timing. Jesus saw them straining at the oars, and let them continue straining at the oars for hours before going out to them.

But then he does go out to them. And just like with many other miracles, like the feeding of the five thousand, I wish I knew how this one worked. The sea was choppy from the wind. So are we to imagine Jesus walking on some sort of invisible road representing the surface of the water when it was calm, with the waves crashing at his feet? Or was all of the water, including the choppy waves, like stone beneath Jesus's feet, so that he was always walking on top of the water—on top of a crest of a wave here, down in a trough between waves there—and never getting wet from the waves at his feet? Or was there a sort of parting of the waves in front of him, not so that he was walking on the lakebed, but so that there was always a calm layer of water where his feet were?

Whatever the case, Jesus walked out to them, but he was actually ready to go past them. It reminds me of a few bicycle rides I had in Austin, Texas, when I returned during rush hour and cars were backed up all along the road I had to take to get to my house. I was rapidly passing all sorts of cars on the sidewalk on my bike, because the traffic was so bad on the road. So too here, the wind was so bad that Jesus was about to pass the boat his disciples were in, even though he was on foot.

You can imagine what it must have been like when one of them happens to look up from the oars, in the dark, and sees the outline of a figure approaching not far from the boat. He is startled and yells out, causing others to look up and yell out. They think it's a ghost or, more properly, a phantasm. That is, they think the devil is playing tricks on them, scaring them with the image of a figure who is not really there, but who could perhaps do them some harm. Seems like kind of a dirty trick on Jesus's part, doesn't it?

But Jesus immediately speaks in such a way that they can hear him over the wind: “Take courage! ... Do not be afraid.” Why? Why should they take courage? When Jesus says those words, the wind does not die down. It is still blowing against them. The sea does not grow calm. It is still rough. It is still dark and difficult to see, and they are still tired. And the voice is still coming from a figure in the dark who is doing something very strange—walking on water. If

someone simply tells you to cheer up, it usually doesn't work, does it? If they say, "Cheer up! I brought you ice cream," okay, now we're getting somewhere, because at least your circumstances have changed somewhat. But Jesus didn't have something to make the disciples stronger and more alert. He didn't soothe the disciples' sore muscles. He didn't have something to make their life easier, at least not yet. He didn't even have ice cream. Why should they take courage?

They should take courage because of what else Jesus said: "Take courage! *It is I*. Do not be afraid." Even though their difficult circumstances have not changed, not yet, Jesus is there in their midst, so things are going to be okay.

There might be something else going on in Jesus's words too. The words Jesus says can certainly be translated, "It is I." The words in Greek are exactly the same words anyone else would have used to say, "It is I." But we might be able to catch what else might be going on here if we didn't always break a rule in English whenever we said, "It is I."

Can you endure a little English grammar lesson with me? Usually with forms of the verb *to be*, like *am*, *are*, or *is*, you're supposed to be able to reverse the sentence and still have it make sense. So "you are a rancher" can be switched to "a rancher are you." "I am a pastor" can be switched to "a pastor am I." "The pheasant is a beautiful bird" can be switched to "a beautiful bird is the pheasant." Often it sounds weird to switch them, but it still makes perfect sense. But for some reason that changes with the pronoun *it*, when *it* is the first word of the sentence. You ring the doorbell and your brother answers the door: "It's you!" or "It is you!" "Yes, it is I!" you reply. And actually, you're more likely to reply, "Yep, it's me!" "It is you" is right, but switch that around: "You is it." "It is I" is right, but switch it around: "I is it." Or even worse, if you say, "It's me!": "Me is it!" It sounds like someone who played hooky instead of going to school, right?

Technically, if we followed the rules consistently, what should it be? Not "It is I" or "It's me," but "It am I." Greek does follow the rules consistently with that, so that's basically what Jesus says in Greek—not "It is I" but "I am."

But when Jesus says, "Take courage! I am."—Jesus who heals the sick and casts out demons, Jesus who feeds five thousand not including women and children with five loaves and two fish—when Jesus says it, it has a very different connotation. "I am"—namely, "I am the One who was before all else was. I am the One who spoke in the beginning and it came to be. I am the only One who is completely independent, whose existence does not depend on the existence of anything else. I am the One who does not change. I am the One completely faithful to my word. I am who I am."

This is the same reason we can take courage in difficult circumstances today, isn't it? Jesus wasn't playing a dirty trick when he approached the boat in the dark. He was teaching the disciples and us a lesson. Even when we are in difficult situations and dark circumstances where we think, if anyone is with us, it could only be the devil and his demons making things miserable for us, and that Jesus must be taking a break and have forgotten about us, Jesus says, "No, it is I. The devil may be here too, but his presence does not matter as much as mine. He is nowhere near as powerful as I. Take courage!"

And not just, “It is I,” but “I am.” “I am here—the one who saw you and knew you before you were born, the one who sees from the beginning of a matter all the way to its end. I am the one who has seen you struggling at the oars this entire time. I am here—the one promised and, since I am completely faithful to my word, the one who came. I am here—the one who gave my life for yours, to fulfill your greatest need, to deliver you from a fate far worse than the one you’re going through. I am here through Word and Sacrament. I am here through the faith I have given you and that I keep alive in you through Word and Sacrament. I am he who forgives all your sins, who rescues you from every evil attack and brings you safely to my heavenly kingdom. I am who I am. Take courage!”

And just in case you have your doubts, just in case courage is slow to come: “Then he climbed up into the boat with them, and the wind stopped.” John also tells us that “immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading” (John 6:21).

When our struggling at the oars in the dark is enough, when it no longer serves a good purpose, Jesus will bring it to an end without any hesitation, without any issues.

Do not let your hearts be hardened like the disciples’ hearts were on this occasion. Jesus is I AM. He is your all-knowing, all-wise, all-powerful Savior. And he is—with you. He is—for you. Take courage! Amen.