

*“Their hearts were hardened.”* That's the how Mark describes the disciples in our Gospel lesson today. And it's a really harsh criticism. *“Their hearts were hardened.”* That's the way that Pharaoh is described during the plague of Egypt. That's the way that the kings of Canaan are described as the Israelites enter the Promised Land. That's the way that the Pharisees are described in the New Testament.

That is a description of, quite frankly, the enemies of God and His people. It is the description of someone who has heard God's Word, who knows God's will, and who has chosen, for at least one brief moment, to ignore it all and do their own thing. *“Their hearts were hardened.”* Hardened to the Lord. Trust me when I say, you don't ever want the Bible to describe you as having a hardened heart.

And yet, it's a description that is well-deserved in this account. Because the disciples seem to have a serious memory problem. It was just a few weeks ago when, in Mark 4, we heard about Jesus sleeping in the boat with them as a storm arose. And then awaking to calm the wind and waves with the simple words, *“Peace! Be still.”* How could they have forgotten so quickly about that event?

Yet today, as Jesus climbs into the boat with them and the winds immediately cease, the text says that the disciples were utterly astounded because they had completely forgotten what happened in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, just a few hours before. They had witnessed miracle after miracle from Jesus. They had witnessed His protection and provision over and over again. Why was this so astounding? Why was this so terrifying?

Well, like most situations, hindsight is 20/20. We think things should be obvious to the disciples because we already know how everything ends. The disciples were in the middle of things and could only go by what they thought they knew and what they thought were seeing... and they didn't get it. They will eventually. So put yourself in their shoes for just a minute. Or better yet, take a look at yourself, because you're not so different from them.

The Gospel today shows us the strains and pains God's people were experiencing, both the disciples in the boat and the crowds on the Sea of Galilee's shore. As the disciples were on the sea, the text says, they were making headway painfully, straining against the heavy winds. Straining, most likely, because this was a sail boat, and yet the winds were against them.

How do you sail against the wind? You don't. You row. You pull out a paddle and you row hard. It is exhausting. These disciples are getting nowhere fast, and it's a strain to make any headway at all. It was late, they were tired, and there was a real fear on their part that they might not make it across safely.

With Jesus' help, the disciples land on the other side of the sea, where Jesus encounters the second group of people today. His fame had spread throughout the region, so when people recognized him, they brought to him their sick and injured. All of those who felt the pains of life were healed by Jesus, even if all they were able to do was grab hold of the fringe of his garment. For the disciples and for those people, there was only one thing that could help as they experienced the strains and pains of this mortal life: the presence of Jesus.

If we look at our lives as a whole, most of us would probably agree that they're filled with many blessings from God. We have family and friends. We are blessed with jobs and opportunities. We have a place to live and food to eat and many other gifts from our Creator.

However, there are plenty of moments when the wind picks up: we get in a fight with someone we love, our job becomes a dreadful burden or is taken from us altogether, the joys of homeownership overwhelm us, our very lives seem to be in jeopardy. Like the disciples, we find that the days become long and we're tired. We're lonely. We're making headway in life painfully.

As saints of God, we know exactly where we can turn for help in these times. We know the protection and provision of God. But as sinful people, we often don't turn to him. Why? Well, let's go back to those disciples in the boat. Why didn't they?

Because their hearts were hardened. They saw the work of God in Christ Jesus. They believed in the work of God through Christ Jesus. They were Jesus' disciples. But once they were alone, they forgot about him. And so they did their own thing.

Getting across that lake became their burden to carry on their own. Jesus was out of sight and out of mind. And even when he showed up at their side, they still refused to believe that he was there. In fact, they were more inclined to believe that he was ghost, come to terrify them, than the savior of the world, come to rescue them in their time of need.

We do the same. We tell ourselves that painful headway is still headway. That we can do it ourselves. And even if Jesus factors into things, we often see him as the disciples did: like a ghost and not really there. Jesus is out of sight and out of mind.

When life becomes work, when hardship befalls us, when suffering enters our world, we have a tendency to close up, to isolate ourselves, and to desire simply to be alone in the strains and pains of our misery. We harden our hearts. Such that an outsider looking at our life might sometimes think, "How can you not get it? How can you not see where your help is? Why have you not learned by now that Jesus is always with you?"

And yet, Jesus doesn't wait for us to call out to him. He doesn't wait for us to soften our hearts hardened by sin. No, he comes to us, in whatever the circumstance. It was the presence of Jesus that brought calm amid wind and waves. It was the presence of Jesus that brought healing to the sick and infirm. And it is the presence of Jesus that comforts us and joins us to his help and healing and life through forgiveness and grace.

From the moment of your Baptism, the Lord's promise is that he will never leave you or forsake you. He continues to make his presence known to you as you receive his forgiving word of absolution, as you are reminded of his promises revealed in his Holy Word, and as you have his very life placed into your mouth in the Lord's Supper. In all times and in every circumstance, Jesus is there: *"I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

In fact, Jesus is not just present with you but has taken the burden of the strain and pain of sin for you. He knows the heartache and hurt that you experience. He has died for you on the cross and has risen from the grave to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And so, not just to the disciples, not just to the crowds of Bethsaida, Jesus says to you: *"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."* Because the strains and pains of life are sure to come. But as a child of God, you know where you can turn for help in your time of need.

Take heart; it is Jesus. Do not be afraid. He steps into the boat with you to bring an end to your strains. He brings his healing touch to you for all your pains of body and soul. He has gained for you the kingdom of heaven and promises you life with him eternally.

Your health and life are forever preserved by the presence of Jesus, so whatever may come for you, you can confidently pray to the Lord the words of the final stanza of the Hymn of the Day today:

"Our hands and feet, Lord, strengthen; With joy our spirits bless Until we see the ending Of all our life's distress. And so throughout our lifetime Keep us within Your care And at our end then bring us To heav'n to praise You there." Amen.