

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Water"  
SERMON TEXT: Mark 4:35-41 and 6:45-51a  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 16, 2018, at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

On August 19, when we celebrated Men's Ministry Sunday, Alan Livingston gave the sermon. In that sermon, Alan told about his experiences as a volunteer cleaning up after Hurricane Maria hit the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Alan spoke thoughtfully about the role God does or doesn't play in disastrous situations. Today, as Tropical Storm Florence is wreaking havoc on the Carolinas, we're back at that theme of the divine role in the midst of life's storms.

For five weeks in this Jesus 101 series, we've been progressing through the early chapters of Mark, and we've been reviewing the basics about Jesus. We've heard Jesus preaching the good news, we've seen him healing the sick, we've witnessed him interpreting the law, we've observed him calling the disciples, and we've heard him teaching. This series has paired Jesus with traits of his life and ministry that have offered us both grace and goals, compassion and challenge. Today is no different, as we explore "Jesus & Water."

## **1—THE DANGER OF WATER**

Let's begin with the water side of this pair. Specifically, let's begin with an acknowledgement of the danger of water. In the story in Mark 4, the water was stirred by a fierce windstorm, so that the waves beat into the boat, and the boat was in danger of being swamped. The disciples were greatly worried that their boat would be capsized and that they would perish.

Whether or not we personally have ever had that kind of intense watery experience, we've mostly likely seen it depicted in movies. I think back to the George Clooney film, *A Perfect Storm*, in which the New England fishermen, desperate to make a living, made the fatal decision to take their boat far out from the

coastline in search of a catch. Or, you remember *The Titanic*, in which Leonardo DiCaprio's character Jack died from hypothermia and drowning like some 1500 others did in that 1912 tragedy. Just recently, I finally got around to watching the 2012 movie, *The Life of Pi*. Fortunately, in that beautiful and fantastical film, the main character doesn't die in or from the water—although, he had some very close calls on his long and treacherous ocean voyage.

As this weekend's events in the Carolinas so vividly remind us, today's water dangers are less likely those that affect our boats and more likely those that affect our homes. Even here in Utah, two households connected with our church just recently had flooding in their basements. It's hard to imagine that flooding would be possible in our parched-dry state, but it was. Indoor and outdoor plumbing has problems sometimes that wreak havoc on our properties and our psyches.

Do you remember in 2015, when 16 homes over on the northeastern bench of Ogden had some terrible and mysterious flooding that lasted all summer? There was no rush to claim liability, but I think the cause was finally determined to be connected somehow with the water piped from Pineview reservoir to Ogden and held in a storage tank up on the hill. Even though no one died, the physical damage to those homes, the loss and displacement of possessions, the uncertainty and uncontrollability of the cause, and the financial set-backs had to have been extremely traumatic to those residents' well-being.

While water has many wonderful qualities and is essential to life, water also has a dark side that has this power to hurt us physically, financially, and spiritually. In Psalm 69, for example, the Psalmist cries out, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck . . . I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me . . . Do not let the deep swallow me up" (vv. 1-2, 15). In ancient biblical understanding, water was symbolic of chaos. It's no mystery why Noah's ark and the flood narratives of other cultures and religions have been passed along for centuries and even millennia. Like the people in the Carolinas, generation after generation needs to hear the stories of devastation, so they will take action

and protect themselves from danger. Whether it's actual H<sub>2</sub>O or water as a symbol for other terrible things that threaten to drown us, water definitely has the power to damage and destroy life very quickly.

## **2—JESUS IS WITH US IN THE DANGER**

So, that's the bad-news part of "Jesus & Water." Now, let's get to the good-news. In both Mark 4 and Mark 6, Jesus defies and overcomes the dangerous powers of the water.

In Mark 4, Jesus was in the boat with the disciples. Tired from all his ministry efforts, Jesus was taking a nap when the storm arose. His disciples were terrified and couldn't understand how Jesus could sleep while the waves were beating against their boat. When they awakened him, Jesus simply rebuked the wind, and sea became calm. The implication is, of course, that Jesus can calm whatever storms we face and simply make them go away.

In the story in Mark 6, Jesus had sent the disciples ahead of him in their boat. Jesus remained on land a while longer, so he could have some private time to pray. Later, when Jesus was ready to reunite with his disciples, he could see their boat from the shore, and he could tell that they were straining their oars against an adverse wind.

No doubt, the water was at least choppy and difficult, but, in this story, it probably wasn't life-threatening. What was a greater concern than waves that could inundate and capsize the boat was the fact that the water separated the disciples from Jesus. He was on land, and they were at sea. The water was the barrier in between them, and the disciples thought they had to do all the work to get the boat back to where Jesus was. The disciples were trying to go where they needed to go, but they were struggling. This was both a physical problem and a spiritual one.

The good news of this story is that, when Jesus arrived on the scene, the problems disappeared. But it's interesting that, in Mark 6, Jesus didn't command the wind to stop or alleviate their watery struggle right away. Instead, Jesus came near to them in the midst of their struggle and got into the boat with them. Only after Jesus was there, involved in the experience himself, did the wind cease and the waters calm

down. It's as if Jesus wanted the disciples to learn that they could survive a little turbulence as long as they knew Jesus was close.

This story does make you wonder, however, if the disciples suffered more than they needed to. Because they weren't expecting Jesus to come walking on the sea, they didn't recognize him immediately. They thought he was a ghost, which terrified them. Maybe because of the annoyance of the wind, maybe because the storm created poor visibility, maybe because they were exhausted from rowing, or maybe because they still had a lot to learn about Jesus—the disciples' anxiety actually increased when they saw him walking on the water.

I dare say that there might be lots of times in our lives when Jesus comes to us in astonishing manners that we don't immediately recognize. We expect the divine one to behave in certain ways and not in others. We're surprised and frightened when God doesn't fit into the little box we've drawn in our minds. Sometimes, like the disciples, we expect Jesus to obey the laws of gravity and the norms of our society. Other times, maybe we don't recognize the divine because we expect God to be super spiritual, when God might actually come in the flesh of Jesus or the helping hand of our neighbor.

The classic story about this tells of the man whose house was caught in a flood so that he had to climb up on his roof. After he prayed for God to rescue him, first responders appeared several times to assist the man to safety. But each time, he turned them away, saying, "I prayed that GOD would rescue me." Eventually the man drowned. When he arrived at heaven, he asked why GOD hadn't answered his prayers. Irritated, God responded, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter, didn't I?"

If you've been watching the news coverage of Tropical Storm Florence, you've seen lots of boats and helicopters. God has been busy sending all kinds of people to the rescue. And Jesus was busy even before that, speaking through the voices of meteorologists and governmental authorities to suggest and even mandate that people evacuate from dangerous areas. All these ways of helping are God's ways of working for our good. All these ways are Jesus' divine-human presence among us, alleviating our suffering.

Of course, there's also the possibility that we're looking for two boats and a helicopter when the way Jesus will actually come to us is like a barely recognizable spirit. Sometimes, the only way the storms will calm down is when we accept that Jesus is already there with us, even in our doubts and fears, our losses and our griefs. Sometimes, the real-life dangers actually do destroy and kill, and the only relief available to us is to believe that the spirit of Jesus is in the boat with us, offering spiritual comfort to us by his divine presence which lived much before and will continue long after the current crisis is over. We began this worship service by singing, "O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."<sup>1</sup> In some cases, that is the hope that Jesus offers us: that our shelter in the stormy blast will be our eternal home.

### **CONCLUSION**

It seems to me that the Gospel of Mark is trying to tell us that, when dangerous and deadly things do happen to us, the belief that Jesus is with us can ease our suffering. That's the good news about Jesus and water.

I'm going to conclude this sermon with a prayer that was written by the United Methodist bishop of North Carolina. In the days leading up to Tropical Storm Florence, Bishop Hope Ward wrote this on her conference's website:

Loving God, the source of strength and restoration and healing,  
we pray together for all who suffer in our communities today.  
In the wake of wind and waves, destruction and flooding,  
make your presence known through our generosity to our neighbors, near and far.  
Give us the vision and patience to live and labor faithfully  
through this season of response and recovery.  
As we clean up and rebuild, give us your joy and peace.  
Give us, above all, the love for one another that is your best gift always.  
In the name of the Triune God, we pray. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Isaac Watts, 1719.

<sup>2</sup><https://nccumc.org/bishop/a-meditation-prayer-for-hurricane-florence/>