

Pentecost 9 / July 25, 2021

Mark 6:51-52

“And He got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”

If you saw what could only be described as a ‘miracle,’ what effect do you think it would have on your life? Would it make you a believer? Would it make you believe more firmly? The point of a miracle seems to be to help us believe something about God and so we would expect its effect would be the deepening and strengthening of our faith. If we could see more clearly, we would believe more firmly. But the problem with that logic is that it puts more emphasis on seeing than believing. It makes faith dependant upon seeing. It says, ‘I will believe only what I can see and only as long as I can see.’ Thomas refused to believe Jesus was risen from the dead until he saw the risen Christ. When he saw he believed! Jesus said, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those have not seen and yet have believed.”* God values nothing more highly than faith. In the letter to the Hebrews it says, *“without faith it is impossible to please Him.”*

Humans understand faith differently than God does. We want to see proof before we believe. We want to see proofs to continue to believe. But that’s not God’s understanding of faith. God wants us to believe before we see. He wants us to take His word and believe. God wants us to see through His word and believe, even when we don’t understand, even when what we see is contrary to what we believe. In the second letter to the Corinthians St. Paul said, *“We live by faith and not by sight.”* We put great emphasis on seeing to bolster our faith, even to create faith, but miracles don’t create faith. Miracles challenge our assumptions, so that we turn to the word for faith and understanding. As Paul said in the letter to the Romans, *“faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.”* Faith and understanding come through the word.

The disciples were a case in point. They saw more miraculous signs than anyone, but they didn’t understand. Their hearts were hardened. Jesus did many miracles. Most people saw one and then Jesus moved on. The disciples saw all of them, but they didn’t get it. They didn’t understand. Their hearts were hardened. They didn’t understand the signs Jesus gave, because they didn’t view them through His word. Their lack of understanding of the signs revealed their lack of understanding of His words and of the words God spoke in the scriptures. He told the three disciples who saw His transfiguration, not to tell anyone what they had seen until after He had risen from the dead. They asked each other what rising from the dead meant. After His resurrection He opened their minds to understand the scriptures and all that was written about Him that He must suffer, die and rise for our salvation. When they understood they were able to tell others not just what they had seen, but most importantly what it meant. Faith comes through hearing and understanding the word of Christ.

This is the second miracle associated with the sea in Mark’s gospel. These two miracles are like bookends. In them Jesus unmistakably shows His divinity, by exercising power over the forces of nature. In the first, Jesus silenced the wind and calmed the waves with a word. This time it happens without a word. Jesus doesn’t have to say a word. He is the word! In the first, Jesus was in the boat when the storm began. In the second, Jesus walks on the stormy sea and gets into the boat. In between there have been numerous other miracles. He has cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead and most recently fed five thousand from five loaves and two fish. In all of these things and especially in the events on the sea, Jesus shows Himself to be God, so we would believe He is our Saviour.

However, rather than informing and confirming the disciple’s faith, the miracles confused and confounded them. First, they asked *“who is this man?”* Now they sit in the boat speechless, which actually was a good thing. A miracle should leave us speechless. A miracle challenges us to question our understanding and consider the thoughts of God. A miracle should astound us so that we ask ourselves, *“who is this man?”* Jesus’ miracles compel us to evaluate our understanding and ask what this means? Jesus’ miracles lead us into the word to find their meaning. Miracles challenge our thinking, so the Holy Spirit may use the word to make our minds obedient to the mind of God and draw us close to God’s heart through faith in Jesus.

A miracle deepens our understanding, informs our faith and makes it stronger, by leading us into the word. What do this and the previous miracle mean? They mean that Jesus is much more than a prophet. They mean He is God! These are the greatest miracles! Jesus shows His divinity by controlling the most uncontrollable part of creation, the sea! We understand what Jesus does for us as our God and Saviour in the word; He dies for our sins and rises for our salvation. The miracle grabs our attention, so that in the word we see that He is our God and Saviour. In the word the Holy Spirit makes our faith strong and resilient to withstand the storms of life. When the miracle was over Jesus' words remained, "*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.*"

The gospels show a consistent pattern of misunderstanding and confusion on the part of the disciples, which culminates in their abandonment of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. They don't understand. They don't understand, because as Mark says, "*their hearts were hardened.*" What is this hardening of the heart? What caused it? What is the cure? Their hearts were hard not because they didn't understand. Their hearts were hard because they were not ready to question their assumptions and change their way of thinking, despite what they had seen. They did not understand, because their faith was not informed by the scriptures. Their understanding was formed their religious environment; the assumptions they were taught from childhood and the traditions developed by their teachers over the centuries.

Which isn't to say they were unbelievers. They had faith, but it needed to be formed and deepened by the Holy Spirit, through the word of God. Their hearts were not hardened, because they were obstinate sinners in rebellion against God. They were devout, pious Jews, who were awaiting the redemption of Israel. They didn't understand, because their piety was not fully informed by the word of God. Their hardening was their resistance to changing their assumptions about Jesus and what the Messiah would do. Jesus' miracles challenged their assumptions. The cure for a hardened heart is knowledge of God's word and understanding of what He actually promises in His word. The Holy Spirit softens our hearts with the word, makes it fertile so faith may grow, mature and produce a harvest of eternal life.

Jesus was patient with the disciples. Jesus is patient with us. He loved them and He loves us. Despite their misunderstanding and misconceptions, the disciples were among the faithful in Israel. Jesus cured their hardness of heart, by patiently teaching them the truth of God's word; challenging and correcting them when necessary. He does the same for us. There are many ideas floating around the Christian universe that come from the human mind, rather than the mind of God. We need to test our thoughts against God's word. Hardness of heart is not misunderstanding. Hardness of heart is the unwillingness to test our assumptions against God's thoughts expressed in His holy word and the refusal to change our thinking. God's word cures hard hearts.

The cure results in a deepening of faith and confirmation of the truths God reveals in scripture. Through the word, we understand Jesus' miracles as signs that He is the Christ, our God and Saviour. The signs lead us to the cross where He made atonement for our sin and the promise of salvation. Jesus did many amazing things, but every one was meant to lead us into the word and give us faith. St. John said in his gospel, "*Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God that believing you may have life in His name.*" The purpose of the word is faith in Jesus as our God and Saviour. God bless us with faith to believe until faith passes into sight in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' Name. Amen