

Be Astonished: Part Six
His Authority Over the Abyss
Mark 6.45-56

March 10

David Henderson

We find ourselves this morning in a series on Mark's gospel, in which we're exploring the many different things that Jesus did during his ministry that sparked a response of wonder and astonishment.

Our text for this morning is Mark chapter six, verses 45-52, in which Jesus walks across the water as his disciples struggle in the wind and the waves.

Sometimes we read a passage of scripture and its meaning is completely straightforward. I'd like to suggest that this isn't one of them.

Certainly it is an amazing story of a miraculous moment in Jesus' ministry, and an incredible expression of his divine power. And if any of us had been in the boat and seen Jesus walk across the water and calm the storm we would have been in absolute awe of him.

But I believe the real significance of this passage could be lost on us when we read it two thousand years and six thousand miles distant from the actual event.

You've heard me say that the more we understand of the culture in which Jesus lived the more we will understand what he said and did. That certainly is true in this case.

Remember those 3D pictures that were so popular about twenty years ago? They were called *autostereograms*? They just looked like a jumbled pattern of colored dots, but if you relaxed your eyes and stared at them, all of a sudden a 3D picture popped into view.

I think this passage is like that. It takes a while to relax our vision, to stop looking at what's in front of us so we can really see what it is showing us. But then, all of a sudden ...

So what I want to do is have us step back, immerse ourselves in the way a typical person who might have thought in the ancient Near East, and then come to the passage in a fresh way and let it speak to us with real power.

To begin, let me put before us one of the most painful challenges for us as followers of Jesus when it comes to understanding and trusting the loving purposes of God.

Let me set it up this way.

Some of you may have seen the movie *Dark Knight*, which came out about fifteen years ago. It introduces The Joker as Batman's primary nemesis. It's a really dark movie: it's violent, and noir, and edgy.

But the thing that makes it especially dark is that, when it introduces The Joker, it introduces a dimension of the human experience that we find incredibly unsettling. There is good, embodied by Bat Man, and Lieutenant Gordon, and Rachel, and Lucius Fox. And there is Evil, the opposite of the good, represented by Scarecrow and the mob bosses and their thugs.

But The Joker introduces a third dimension of the human experience. Not Good or its opposite but Randomness. Chaos. Unpredictability. Disorder. It's profoundly unsettling to see a character embody this part of our experience as human beings.

That third dimension of the human experience, chaos, poses such profound challenges for us as believers. Think about this.

On the one hand, here is our God. Seated on the throne. Powerful, purposeful, beautiful. Prevailing over all of creation. Bringing order and peace with every touch.

As Paul says about him in

I Corinthians 14.33

God is not a God of disorder but of peace

Disorder means not having a firm footing, not being solidly anchored. That's the opposite of what God is and what God does.

And peace, meaning that everything is just the way God intends – whole, rightly related, complete, and flourishing – that is the heart of what God is and what God does.

And we look at this world of ours and we see evidence of his ordering touch. We see parts of the human experience that are marked by his love and justice and order and beauty and design. Events unfold around us in ways that drip with divine purpose.

But . . . on the other hand, right alongside those places of order and beauty are the too-numerous-to-count places in our lives and in this world of ours that seem to show no sign of God's ordering touch whatsoever: no order or purpose or design or control. They seem utterly random and accidental and chaotic. They are the picture of disorder.

We experience that realm of chaos, every one of us, within the small sphere of our own individual lives.

Losses that seem random and final.

Events that take a sudden turn for the worst for no good reason.

Things that are already incredibly difficult, and then get worse.

Your best friend suddenly turns against you.

Your girlfriend suddenly breaks it off.

You don't get a place on the team, or in the show.

Someone steals your identity and cleans out your savings.

Someone takes offense at something you've said and you suddenly find yourself cancelled.

Your job is eliminated.

Your biopsy comes back positive.

A random mosquito infects you with an illness that will affect you for the rest of your life.

Your parents suddenly tell you they are moving, or getting a divorce.

The sonogram can't pick up the heartbeat anymore.

You lose your parents in a plane crash or your child in a car crash.

It's not only in our own individual lives that we have a sense that there are whole parts of our lives that are under no one's control. We also experience that in the world at large.

In an article in the Wall Street Journal this week Michael Auslin said,

"Our worry today . . . is the advent of chaos, with many fearing the possible collapse of the post-World War II international order. The wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East, the threatening growth of China's military power, nuclear proliferation, the endless scourge of terrorism, and domestic unrest in the US and Europe seem to herald a new time of troubles, an era of instability and upheaval. (WSJ article, "What Shogun Can Teach Our Troubled World," 3/9/24)

One example among ten thousand we could point to: In Gaza, where over two million people are without adequate food, and a quarter of those are on the brink of starvation, a number of countries have begun to parachute aid into the Gaza strip. And then on Friday some of the parachutes failed, falling and hitting and taking the lives of five of the people who were gathered on the ground waiting desperately for the food. It seems so random and purposeless.

So do

Our broken political system

Near-daily mass shootings

Worldwide human trafficking

Unprovoked wars of aggression
I could go on and on . . .

Side by side in this world, order and disorder, beauty and chaos, design and what seems like utter randomness.

At times it can stretch our trust in a loving and powerful God to the breaking point. Is God in control, or is he not?

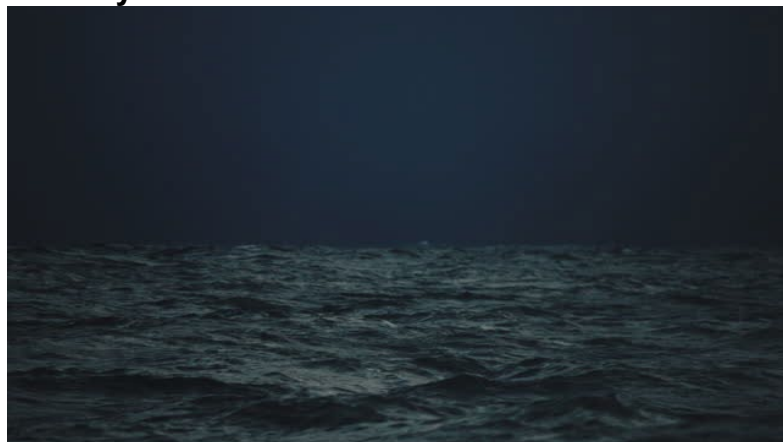
In his book *A Life of Listening*, Leighton Ford shared that when his twenty-one year-old son Sandy died during surgery for a heart problem, on the way home from the hospital, after a long silence, his wife Jean, Billy Graham's sister, said, "Well, either there is a God and he is good, or there is no God. It is just as simple as that."

When we look at the order near at hand, we know. But when we look at the chaos that surrounds us, we cannot help but wonder. *Is God on the throne?*

For the ancient Jewish people, the land represented the realm of order and the sea represented the realm of chaos.

The land could be tamed. It could be controlled. It could be shaped and smoothed, dug into roads, pressed into bricks, plowed into furrows.

The Abyss: World of Chaos



But not the sea. There was no controlling the sea. It blew every which way, at its own whim, and nothing, absolutely nothing, could control its destructive power.

And its depths were dark and inscrutable. They seemed to swallow whatever touched them. Light. Life. Swallowed up in the abyss. Many things went into the sea but few things – with the exception of a few strange and unfamiliar creatures – washed up from their shores.

That's why, for the ancient Jewish people, the sea was not just a forbidding part of creation. It was a living symbol of the chaos that threatened human existence.

In the ancient near East, every creation myth – Babylonian, Ugaritic, Assyrian, Egyptian – was the story of a great battle between the gods and the sea and the monsters that inhabited the watery depths – Leviathan, Rahab, the seven-headed sea serpent.

The Biblical story of creation was completely different. It wasn't the story of equally powerful forces of order and chaos battling it out for supremacy.

In the Bible, a good and loving creator brings everything into existence - In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth – and then brings order and occupants into the universe he has created.

Not the same story, and not the same starting point but it had some familiar elements. One of those was a watery realm without any seeming order or control.

Genesis 1.2

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Then out of the deep God raises up the land, separating it from the sea, beginning to introduce a realm of order into the formless chaos.

Genesis 1.9-10

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

You've probably already discovered that in the Bible, nature is seen from humanity's perspective, not from the perspective of an observer out in the heavens. So, for instance, the sun rises, the moon sets, and stars fall, instead of the earth rotating and meteors striking the earth's atmosphere.

Creation from a Biblical Perspective



In a similar way, the people of the ancient Near East, instead of seeing themselves as people on a ball of earth suspended in space, saw themselves as people on a body of land that was raised up in the middle of and surrounded by a body of water.

The idea that God at creation had raised up land in the middle of the sea fit well with the understanding the Jewish people had of how God was working in the spiritual realms as well, raising up a realm of order, under his loving rule, in the midst of the realm of chaos, and holding that realm of chaos at bay.

Listen how that idea comes through in these passages from the Old Testament.

Proverbs 8.28-29

He gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command.

Jeremiah 5.22

I made the sand a boundary for the sea,
an everlasting barrier it cannot cross.
The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail;
they may roar, but they cannot cross it.

Job 38.8-11

Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt'?

So now there are two realms: the realm of order, over which God reigns, represented by the land, and the realm of chaos, which God holds at bay, represented by the sea.

It can seem sometimes as though God rules over the one but has little sway over the other.

But then God, at the center moment of redemption, leads his people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. And in doing so he brings them *through* the Red Sea, and then again *through* the River Jordan.

He doesn't bring them around the water, which he could have. He brings them through it, showing that even though the realm of chaos exists, God is greater than that realm.

He leads his people right through the sea, defeating the creatures that the neighboring religions believed ruled over those watery depths, Leviathan and Rahab, the sea serpents.

Listen to these passages that express God's decisive mastery over the realm of chaos:

Psalms 77.19 (see also Isaiah 43.16)

Your way was through the sea,
your path through the great waters.

Psalms 74.13-14

It was you who split open the sea by your power;
You broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan.

Isaiah 51.9-10

Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?
Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?

Now, the Israelites didn't believe there were sea monsters, any more than they believed there were ghosts. But their neighbors did, and they may have been tempted to follow along.

But the Jewish scriptures use their neighbor's superstitious language to teach the spiritual truth that God, the God of order, is greater than any power of the realm of chaos.

It's kind of like what I did at the start of this message. I talked to you about Bat Man and the Joker and how different they are from each other, even though neither of them exist.

They are just part of our culture's mythology. But I referred to them as though they were real to make a point about God's power. That's exactly what is happening in the Psalms and Isaiah when they talk about God crushing Leviathan's heads and cutting Rahab into pieces.

So, from the perspective of the Jewish scriptures, the human experience is always going to be a blend of order and chaos. God is greater than the chaos, as he showed in the great moment of redemption, God can walk through the chaos and lead his people through it . . . but the chaos remains.

That brings us to the Christian scriptures, the New Testament – to two places specifically.

First, let me take you to the other end of the story, from the book of Genesis and the account of creation to the Book of Revelation and the account of the new creation, and I want to make sure you see a little detail that many people don't catch, but which is extraordinarily important in the story of redemptive history.

Listen to Revelation 21.1. After the last judgment, and the eradication of all that is opposed to God, removing it from existence once and for all, we read this.

Revelation 21.1

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Part of what awaits us as the people of God, after this brief life, which Teresa of Avila calls "one bad night at an inconvenient hotel," is an eternity in which we will never experience the realm of chaos and disorder again. Chaos will be eradicated from the created order. All of creation in its every detail will reflect the perfect design and purposes of our loving God.

Meanwhile, while we wait for that day . . . and this leads us finally back to the passage we're looking at today . . . meanwhile, life continues to retain this painful mix of order and beauty on the one hand, and of disorder and seeming randomness on the other hand, which can cause us so much struggle as followers of Christ.

But look who strolls with complete authority through the middle of that realm of chaos. Let's look at Mark 6.

Mark 6.45-46

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.

Mark 6.47-48

Later that night, 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.

Mark 6.48-50

Shortly before dawn 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.

The disciples find themselves adrift in the realm of chaos. It's pitch black. The storm is piling up the waves that threaten to sink them and send them down into the deep.

And now suddenly some thing, some one, is coming toward them on the surface of the water.

They cry out; they are terrified. Can't you feel it, especially with what you know now about how Jews viewed the sea? Literally they are churning with trouble, tossed about inside just like the sea around them. The chaos seems to have them in its grip; it's filling them up and it's dragging them down into its depths.

Mark 6.50-51

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.

The Amplified Bible captures something important here that a lot of translations miss. We're used to coming across I Am statements in John's gospel but we can miss them when they show up in the other gospels. Jesus says,

"Take courage! I Am! Stop being afraid."

Jesus uses the exact same phrase that's found in Exodus 3.14 when God tells Moses the name by which he, the Redeemer God, will be known to his people.

Exodus 3.14

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Jesus tells them the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is here with them, right now, right in the middle of the chaos. They need not fear.

He says the same to us.

Then he climbs into the boat with them, and the storm and the sea suddenly hush into calm.

He does the same to our storms.

Jesus doesn't just pass through the chaos. He masters it. He conquers it. His presence and the presence of chaos are mutually exclusive. His very presence brings order and peace.

The pieces begin to come together for the disciples. It must have been about this point that the words of Job 9 would have come to mind, describing the wonderworking God of creation who is the object of their worship and praise.

Job 9.8-11

He alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.

In the ancient world, what you tread on is what you rule over. He, Jesus, rules over the chaos, performing miracles that cannot be fathomed.

He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.
When he passes me, I cannot see him;
when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.

Have you ever wondered why it says Jesus was going to pass them by? That makes no sense whatsoever. He has been praying for them all night. He has been watching them struggle with the storm, straining to row across the sea.

He comes to them because he feels compassion for them. Why would he pass them by? Clearly something else is going on.

This passage from Job tells us what is actually happening. He is not passing them by. He doesn't stand off at a distance when we find ourselves in the chaos. He is passing *before* them, putting his divine glory on display just as he did when he passed before Moses on Mt Sinai, and just as he did in Job 9 when we walked across the water.

He is with them, transforming the realm of chaos into a place of peace before their very eyes.

Mark 6.51-52

They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Their feelings begin to shift from terror to something even more overwhelming and breathtaking. Literally it says, “And exceedingly in abundance ... they were amazed.”

You can’t stack any more superlatives than that in a Greek sentence.

They are absolutely beside themselves with astonishment. Completely stupefied. At a total loss. Why? They’ve gone from having no idea who this is, to knowing exactly who this is.

They have just seen something for which there is no human explanation. Jesus has just done what only God can do.

It is more than just a magic trick, as he strolls across the surface of the sea.

This is a divine claim. And not just a claim to divinity, it is a word of profound comfort for us, as we, like the disciples, often find the prevailing winds of life carrying us away from shore and out into the depths, and we are afraid and overcome.

Jesus walks across the waters. He says, I tread on the chaos! It is under my feet! I am with you in it and I rule over it. Though it seems to have the last word, it doesn’t. I do. Peace. My sisters and brothers. I bring this world’s chaos under my loving rule. And your chaos as well. Peace.

Would you close your eyes, and hear him say to you in the middle of the storm, “Take courage! I Am! Stop being afraid.” And then just reach out your hand to him, to the Lord who alone treads on the waves, and let him take hold of you.