Text: Mark 6:45-56

**Introduction**

“And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass them by…”

There are two images in that passage that I want to meditate on this morning. But I think we need to sharpen the language up a bit first. I’m sorry if you’ve heard me in Bible Study on this. It is not that our modern English translations of the bible are wrong. They aren’t. They are just boring. The vigor and color that these books were written with, passing through too many scholarly translation committees, has been drained out. My image for this is sanding the sharp places away. The gospel texts as I’ve translated and read over the years have sharp points and are often painful to read. They snag on our sins and desperations. Our translations have sanded down those points to a smooth non-snagging surface.

We do this all the time. Not just in biblical translation. We are used to euphemism in most important areas of life. It helps us get through the day without making everyone mad. It calms the surface of civilization. It allows us to win friends and influence people, or at least keep our jobs. It might be the bedrock of marriage. And the core strategy of euphemism is to grind off those sharp edges. Instead of selectively crushing baby parts to get livers and intact heads for medical research, Planned Parenthood preserves the products of conception for medical purposes. One reminds us of what is really going on. The other soothes us back to sleep. Might even be a good thing.

Live on this earth long enough and euphemism might become the only way we can express ourselves. First we get ground down by others. Euphemistically raised right and mentored into polite society. Then we can grind ourselves down so we can slip through life without a snag.

**Text**

It is not today’s text, but the great biblical translation example would be slave. The Ancient Roman world existed on slavery. Yet our translators will never use that word. They always use servant as if what was being described was a genteel PBS period piece. We sand down the Apostle Peter’s paradox, “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. (1Pe 2:16 ESV)” We don’t equate freedom and being slaves of God, although that is the apostle’s point. We only find freedom in slavery to the one who loves us. The one who loved us enough to become the slave of all, as we marched him to the cross. Nietzsche was acute; it’s a slave religion. Even if he missed how the Kingdom of Jesus turns everything upside down.

And there are many other such Euphemisms in our translations. Don’t get me started on Bishops. We are deeply uncomfortable with wrath, especially if the subject is Jesus or God. Wrath just becomes just anger. God becomes like Marvin the Martian “I’m getting very angry” at Bugs Bunny; and not like a King whose wrath means something, like someone who could unleash a global flood, and yet makes covenant to never do that again. Our conception of God gets sanded down.

With the two phrases today it is not quite as acute as those, but there is still a sanding down. “Making headway painfully” might be better heard as “being tortured while rowing”. The word comes an old method to test the purity of precious metal. Grinding the metal across a Lydian stone or touchstone. It’s the test that reveals. The word came to mean simply torture. “He saw that they were being tortured in their rowing, for the wind was against them

The second phrase the way our translation renders it obscures something as well. “He meant to pass them by.” It’s a strange phrase so it is going to catch out ear. What does it mean to pass by? Why would Jesus mean to do that if his disciples were being tortured? But the meant softens the impact in my reading. He desired, he wanted, he willed to pass them by. “He saw that they were being tortured…and he desired to pass them by.” I’m hoping that is a little different on your ear. Maybe has you a little queasy at some implications.

Because it does me. I can’t tell you how many times in my Christian life that the testing felt like torture. Jesus, you’ve got to be kidding me, that way. If I walk that way that is two steps forward and three-steps back. I’ll be flapping my arms and exhausting myself and I’ll be in a more desperate position than I was at the start. Is that what you want? Do you really want to drag my face across this stone? Are you going to show up? Or are you going to sit this one out as well. Do you desire to pass by? Do you want to keep up the torture? Is this your desire?

Before I get struck by lightning in this pulpit or can’t dig myself out of a hole, I probably should stop that riff. But first a couple of thoughts. If you’ve never been there – you aren’t trying hard enough. Not that your salvation is dependent upon anything but grace, but if you’ve never felt tortured or like you were rowing against a wind that was blowing you back faster than you could row, you need to examine your spiritual life. Because the way that Jesus describes the Chistian life is taking up your cross. The Christian life is a cruciform existence. The promise is psalm 23 – still waters and green pastures. And there are certainly such moments even in this world. But in this world growth comes through the trial. If we are not willing to endure the trial, we are spiritually at risk of being the seed that fell on rocky soil. Swiftly and gladly responding to the grace of God, but withering when this world presses back. And it will press back. It will drag you across the stone to reveal and refine. It will blow against your faith with all it has.

**Moral**

The second thought is about that passing by. When you see God passing by it really leaves you with three choices. The first is letting him Go. He’s just a ghost. A little scary, but immaterial. Let him pass by in the fourth watch of the night as a ghost. Maybe in the morning you can be like old scrooge and convince yourself it was just last night’s microwave burrito. With time, God’s passing by and that discomfort could be nothing but a distant memory that settles into nothing but a strange night. Something like Anthropologist Tanya Lurhrmann described in her book “When God Talks Back”. Dr. Lurhmann will tell you plainly about her mystical experiences and talking to God after learning from the Charismatics as the Vineyard, and will just as easily write, “just having a strange and powerful experience doesn’t determine what you believe. I walked off that train with a new respect for why people believed in magic, not a new understanding of reality. Sometimes people have remarkable experiences, and then tuck them away as events they can’t explain… As for me, I never did figure out what was going on”. When God passes by, you can hope he goes faster and soon forget about this torture.

The second choice would be crying out and letting him in the boat, but not really listening. Like the disciples not really understanding about the loaves and the fishes and the feeding that immediately preceded this. The bread of life that has just climbed into your boat with you and ceased the winds. He fed them. Gave them what should have been the strength to row. He desired to pass by. He wanted to let the testing continue. But He doesn’t. Jesus climbs in the same boat. And he tells us to “take heart, do not be afraid, I AM.” Jesus meets the test for us. He carried the cross for us. “But their hearts were hardened.”

We are familiar with this. This is when we might even accept everything the church teaches, but it doesn’t change our actions and behavior. God passes by and comes into our life, and we continue as if nothing has changed. That might be the issue with much of the American church. When the call goes out for service instead of saying “here am I, send me”, or less dramatic “I can do that”, we slink away hoping that someone else will do it, or that eventually people will stop asking. We think that Jesus needs to conform himself to our boat instead of recognizing that this is the hour of our visitation. That we are the ones being tested by I AM.

**Christological**

But the Call of Christ - what he actually wants as our response is not dismissal, or a passive acknowledgement, but an active trust. “Take heart, Do not be afraid, I AM.”

He desired to pass by because Jesus wants you to know who he is. And that knowing often comes in the midst of the trial. But this Jesus will not leave us by ourselves. This one is the Spirit that Hovered over the waters at the dawn of all. This is the one who promised never again by water. This is the one who Job acknowledges as “he alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea”(Job 9:8). This is the one the psalmist on the day of trouble sang, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” (Psalm 77:19) This Jesus got into our boat, becoming incarnate of the virgin Mary he became man. This Jesus is the same one who desires to be in your boat. To dwell in your heart. And this Jesus is God Almighty. “I AM is with you. Take Heart. Do not be afraid.” This boat will make the shore.

He desired to pass by because he doesn’t just want you to know that, he wants that to give you strength. Yes, our path could be torturous beating against wind and wave. It can be a call to the cross, a cruciform existence. But this is what “I AM” has desired. He could have come in power and command. He could have accepted those 5000’s desire to make him an earthly king. He could have given in to the world himself. But he didn’t. And because the world did not enthrall him, we get heaven. Our walk, even past Calvary, is heavenward all the way. “Take heart, he has overcome the world.”

**Eschatological**

And He desired to pass by because he want us to experience a foretaste of the world to come. The winds ceased at his word and as many as touched the fringe of his cloak were made whole. All the devil, the world and our flesh can actually do is scare us into distrust. All Satan tries to say is, “He doesn’t have the world in his hand. He can’t quiet the waves You Sparrows, he doesn’t have you. He can’t calm the winds you fly in. Make a separate peace now. Be afraid. You aren’t going to make it.”

“Take heart, do not be afraid, I AM”. Jesus is in the boat with us. He sits at the right hand of God. And at the proper time, he says the word, and all idols than shall perish, and Satan’s lying cease, and Christ shall raise his scepter, decreeing endless peace.

“Be not afraid. It is finished.” We don’t need to fear sharp words. We don’t need Satan’s euphemisms. As Luther would say – a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. And the deepest thing is “Jesus loves us.” We may not understand all of the why when he passes by, but we know the who. It is Christ who gave himself for us. Don’t harden your hearts, but trust them to him. Amen.