

20 February 2022

St George's Church
9am, 10.30am

I am Undone, but Here I Am (Mark 6:45-56, Jeremiah 29:4-7, Psalms 25:4-5, 32:8)

Introduction

So here is my question. Have you ever found yourself completely undone? You've stepped out in faith, responsive to God's call on your life, you've given it your all, only to be completely undone by circumstances seemingly beyond your control. You were convinced God was calling you to:

- go 'there' and you end up 'here'
- do 'this' and you end up doing 'that'.

When this happens, the danger is we start to doubt ourselves:

- Did I mishear God?
- Am I 'here' and not 'there' because of sin or a lack of faith?
- Is this a test of my endurance and I must persevere against the odds?
- Am I wrestling with dark spiritual forces that are determined to thwart God's call on my life?

Well, here's the thing you are not alone. Sandwiched between two 'Side A', big Jesus stories, namely, the feeding 5,000 and Jesus walking on water, is a lesser-known story of a boat trip that went way off course and Jesus was in the boat.

Context

- Jesus has just fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes
- Crowd respond by wanting to make Jesus king (NB the three temptations)
- *Immediately* Jesus commands the disciples '*Go to Bethsaida*' - direct command – could not have been clearer, – go to Bethsaida and go there now, he wants them out of the scene and fast – direct word from God, clear destination and timeframe – the guidance never gets any clearer than this
- And why the urgency - perhaps because he is fearful the disciples will join in the chorus to make him King
- Long and demanding day and it is already late, but they set out obedient to Jesus' command
- But the *winds were against them*, as they headed up the Lake, so much so they pull down the sail and resort to rowing into the ferocious winds
- Despite their best efforts, the wind blows them off course and away from Bethsaida towards the other side of the Lake
- Obedient to Jesus command they row even harder, all through the night.
- Now well off course, on the 4th watch, (sometime between 3am- 6am) – Jesus notices them, rises from prayer and nonchalantly walks on water to join them

- Far from being thrilled at the sight of Jesus, the disciples are fearful, convinced they have seen a ghost (often a portent of death to a sailor)
- Jesus climbs in the boat, the winds settle, and they end up anchoring on the other side of the Lake at Gennesaret, where immediately great ministry begins.

So here are two more crucial questions:

1. How come Jesus gave a direct command to go to Bethsaida, they were obedient and tried their best, against the odds and yet they ended up anchored on the opposite side of the lake at Gennesaret with Jesus in the boat! Jesus told them to go to Bethsaida, yet they end up in Gennesaret and it seems Jesus is complicit in their disobedience!
2. Secondly, why did Jesus wait until the 4th watch before he lent a hand. After all the disciples were trying to be obedient, it had been a really long day already, they were really up against it, even to the point of fearing death.

So this sermon is my attempt at an answer.

Battling the winds: ‘The wind was against them’

In the past two years anyone who has tried to run a business, get kids to school, visit an elderly relative, or run a church knows that feeling of when the wind is against us. COVID alone has shattered many dreams, good dreams and it certainly feels the wind is against us. But aside from COVID there are the normal everyday disappointments that prevent us realizing what we believe to be a very real call from God on our lives:

- Caring for elderly parents
- Shattering health news
- Redundancy
- Infertility
- Loneliness
- Toxic work environment

Martin Luther King’s most famous speech was his 1968 “I have a dream speech”, but some ten years earlier he preached a sermon where he spoke about shattered dreams. He preached on the life of St Paul and his lifelong desire to go to Spain (Romans 15:24)

He asked the congregation to learn from Paul’s “unwanted and unfortunate circumstances ... in developing the capacity to accept the finite disappointments and yet cling to the infinite hope’

King concludes:

“How can I, confined in some narrow Roman cell, unable to reach life’s Spain, transform this cell from a dungeon of shame to a haven of redemptive suffering”. Almost anything that happens to us can be woven into the purposes of God. It may lengthen our chord of

sympathy. It may break our self-centred pride. Even the cross, which was willed by wicked men, was woven by God into the redemption of the world."

It was this capacity to accept setbacks and disappointments that would lead Paul to write

"But I have learned in whatever circumstances I find myself to be content" (Phil 4)

Jesus joins them in the boat

Jesus does not spare them the rigors of the storm; they end up rowing through the night – and he only joins them on the 4th watch around 3-6am in the morning when they are already way of course.

Why did Jesus wait so long before he intervened, when it would still have been possible to get the destination that he had commanded the disciples to head for. If Jesus can walk on water, there is absolutely no doubt that he can still a storm, yet he allows the storm to continue unabated until the 4th watch.

He wanted the disciples to experience the storms for what it would teach them - deep reliance on him and a mastery of fear. The destination he set for the disciples masqueraded as a physical destination, but in reality, he was

- They were fearful
- Their hearts were hardened – despite the miracle of the feeding of 5,000 they still did not get it
- They did not understand
- Their minds were closed

But we don't battle the storm alone – Jesus looks out for them (psalm 32)

We will experience the same storms as most other people

All that Jesus promises is to join us in the boat and to watch over us.

Would take more than one stormy sailing to address this hardness of heart in the disciples.

Paul **learned** to be content in all circumstances. Similarly, our journey to Bethsaida we too learn to replace fear with hope, rowing in our own strength in a deep reliance on God,

Ultimately God's purposes are not frustrated by the storm. He stills it but not before he has used it to teach the disciples a critical lesson.

They Anchored There

In our disappointment we don't let down the anchor, instead we drift, hopeful of a wind change, trying to reclaim the original destination, hectoring God to deliver on his promises.

Having stilled the storm, you would have expected a verse that reads a bit like this: *'Jesus caused a gentle wind to blow up which took the boat all the way back to Bethsaida.'* But the verse is missing! Instead:

They anchored there _ Today's Old Testament reading is taken from Jeremiah where God is addressing the people of Israel who are now living away from home in exile. He commands them to 'drop their anchors' to marry, to have children, to farm the land and work for the good of the city.

How do we deal with our disappointment? Jesus is far less interested in the destination – what we are doing, but rather in what we are becoming. And as I have found, one of the greatest teachers of humility and faithfulness is learning to accept disappointment. Learning to master our disappointments by dropping anchor wherever, whenever, whoever and whatever God places us.

The disciples anchored there, and great ministry began.

Conclusion

So how do I reconcile the fact that Jesus said go to Bethsaida and they end up in Gennesaret on the other side of the lake with Jesus in the boat.

First, by acknowledging that God is mysterious – he does not want me to figure him out or turn him into some kind of 'if then else' algorithm. God is mysterious – get used to it!

What he does want is to hear me say 'Here I am Lord, wherever I find myself.

Don't let the bitter bile of disappointment and broken dreams blind you to the possibility that God is birthing a new dream. Is it just possible that whatever the disruption, that Jesus is using this to form a new destination in heart?

It may involve giving up a treasured dream. A godly dream. Afterall Paul never got to Spain. But he learnt contentment in *every situation. Even his prison cell became a place of redemption*

Allow God to open your closed mind to the possibility of a new, but different dream, that he may well be realizing your dreams but in very different ways.

So anchor your boat, wherever it may be and quietly utter the following prayer:

I am undone Lord. But here I am!