

Mark 6:45–52 as a Fear-Increasing and Fear-Decreasing Passage: A Homiletical Analysis From a Biblical-Theological Perspective

Maarten Kater

Abstract

This article wants to show that it is fruitful for homiletics to continue to listen to what is offered from a biblical-theological perspective, especially when it comes to addressing a life of fear. After a short introduction, an overview is given of some important homiletical-exegetical notes, followed by the insights obtained from a focus group following a sermon on Mark 6:45–52. Finally, a number of homiletical insights received from listening to this text will follow.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, it is very important to analyse from different points of view what we are talking about when we use the phrase, “fear of God,” in particular, and the word “fear,” in general. We can learn much from Biblical scholarship on the thought-provoking expression, “the fear of the Lord” as well from psychological analyses of different kinds of fears and phenomenological approaches when observing a fear-filled world.¹

I begin by analysing some Dutch sermons on Mark 6:45–52 in order to see if fear is addressed in these sermons and, if so, how it is dealt with in this remarkable part of the Jesus story according to Mark. After analysing these Dutch sermons, I preached myself on this portion of Mark. Why? Not, because I see myself as a better preacher, but because I fear sermons that are too balanced, too egalitarian: “Yes, you have fear, but Jesus is there, so you have not to fear anything any longer; the Lord bless you, go in peace.” After the Sunday morning service, I organized an interview with a focus group (men/women, youngsters/elderly, easy/difficult path of life) in order to learn what they experienced while listening to the sermon. I will present some instructive reflections from within that group in order to highlight some homiletical lessons from them.

All in all, this contribution intends to show how certain notions from this part of the Jesus story could be very helpful in addressing in our sermons the fears of our audience. I hope to

¹ Cf. the keynote lectures of Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Anatheia Porter-Young and Traugott Roser.

demonstrate that preachers are often enticed to try to silence another's fear too early. This leads to a kind of estrangement – we do not give a deep attention to “the homiletical situation” of killing fear – and this soothing does not work at all.²

1. Outline with insights from Mark³

Mark 6:45 Καὶ εὐθὺς **ἠνάγκασεν** τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ ἐμβῆναι εἰς τὸ πλοῖον καὶ προάγειν εἰς τὸ πέραν πρὸς Βηθσαϊδάν, ἕως αὐτὸς **ἀπολύει** τὸν ὄχλον.

Mark 6:46 καὶ ἀποταξάμενος αὐτοῖς **ἀπῆλθεν** εἰς τὸ ὄρος προσεύξασθαι.

Mark 6:47 καὶ ὀψίας γενομένης ἦν τὸ πλοῖον ἐν μέσῳ τῆς θαλάσσης, καὶ αὐτὸς μόνος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

Mark 6:48 καὶ ιδὼν αὐτοὺς **βασανιζομένους** ἐν τῷ ἐλαύνειν, ἦν γὰρ ὁ ἄνεμος **ἐναντίος** αὐτοῖς, περὶ τετάρτην φυλακὴν τῆς νυκτὸς **ἔρχεται πρὸς αὐτοὺς** περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ **ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν** αὐτούς.

Mark 6:49 οἱ δὲ ιδόντες αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης περιπατοῦντα ἔδοξαν ὅτι φάντασμα ἐστίν, καὶ ἀνέκραζαν.

Mark 6:50 πάντες γὰρ αὐτὸν εἶδον καὶ ἐταράχθησαν. ὁ δὲ εὐθὺς **ἐλάλησεν** μετ' αὐτῶν, καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· **θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε.**

Mark 6:51 καὶ **ἀνέβη** πρὸς αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ πλοῖον καὶ ἐκόπασεν ὁ ἄνεμος, καὶ λίαν [ἐκ περισσοῦ] ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἐξίσταντο.

Mark 6:52 οὐ γὰρ συνῆκαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις, ἀλλ' ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ καρδία πεπωρωμένη.

⁴⁵Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. ⁴⁷Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” ⁵¹Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵²for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

² This term is especially coined by the German homiletician, Ernst Lange. Cf. Jan Hermelink, Die homiletische Situation. Zur jüngeren Geschichte eines Predigtproblems, Göttingen 1992.

³ I have marked the aorists in which the moving picture in this story becomes clear: Jesus is on his way.

Homiletical-exegetical notes

My first reading of this passage strikes me in various manners. I would like to share three of them. Firstly, the moving picture comes to my mind when reading the aorists which Mark used in telling this story. The structure of this pericope reveals the ongoing action of Jesus. Jesus is on his way, even as we do not see one single sign that this is true. No one should be in any doubt that Jesus sees us, although we experience nothing but storm and all circumstances seem to be against us. What really matters is *καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτοὺς* before *οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες αὐτὸν*. Secondly, too often we suffer from certain setbacks because we reckon on tailwind when we are going in Jesus' way. The word *ἠνάγκασεν* seized me: he “forced” them to have their take off from the shore. They experience headwind *while* they were doing his will. Thirdly, I wonder how it could happen that they are so embarrassed by seeing Jesus, while he was going out to them. Of course, they were exhausted from great bodily efforts and psychic tensions. Nevertheless, Mark's commentary was not a medical explanation nor a psychological report, but a theological one: “for they had *not understood* about the loaves.”⁴ What is going on here? “Their hearts were hardened.” Definitely the same expression is used when Jesus was grieved and angered by the hardness of heart of the Pharisees. Jesus' friends are put on par with these enemies? How painful.

During the process of meditating on these aspects I realized that ultimately this story should be read from the end (eschatological) too. We worship *this* Jesus as the crucified One (night, all things we ever believed seem to die, our love cries for great loss and our hope has gone) and the risen One (dawn, his resurrection is his ultimate “walking on the water”!). This reading from the end of Mark does not level the tension (“Hey guys, this story is of great trouble, but now He is the living one, so do not trouble and do not fear”). Quite the reverse: the last word of this Gospel is: “they were afraid”! The reality of a fear-filled world is obstinate. Yet, from the other side of the grave, in his eternity Jesus still is coming. And as the book of Revelation shows us, his footsteps are so often frightening to us. Nevertheless, Jesus, the last and everlasting word for all who are “on board,” is present.

Special attention must be given to the mysterious expression, the curious statement, “He was about to pass them by.” Our audience will have connotations like “what in the world is he doing now? He only came to wave to them without any help for these troubled men?!” It seems to me that those commentaries are right by pointing to this “pass by” as a *terminus technicus* for “revealing” (Ex 33:19, 22; 1Kings 19:11).

⁴ This “sea-session” should be connected with two other parts like a triptych: on the one hand Mark 4:35–42 and on the other hand Mark 8:10–21, that is, assuming the connection between this ‘sea story’ and the ‘eat story’ is historically true. Opinions among commentaries are (of course) divided.

Jesus as the “It is I” (representing the basic revelation of God in the theophany at the burning bush, Ex 3:14) comes unto us in the *performative words* of a sermon and He surely will decrease our fear in due time. It’s a very exciting experience that the *object* of fear ultimately becomes *the subject* of another ‘happy fear’ just by showing who He is. Jesus speaks words of great comfort and when He comes on board everything will change. Jesus’ words are performative: “Don’t be afraid” is not just a couple of kind words, but these very words do what is said. Since fear increases as long as one does not recognize the One, “I am He,” surely it will decrease by these very words. Preaching as “Naming God” (Rudolf Bohren). Ultimately this is not a story about our fears, but of “fearing God.” It is an epiphany, a story of the appearance (manifestation) of a divine figure.⁵

2. Overview with Insights from a Hearers’ Response

In order to evaluate the sermons, I asked the focus group to reflect on five questions. For each question I sketch the backdrop of that question (i.e. why I asked them that particular question), and I give a concise summary of the variety of reflections I received.

1. *Did our “Fear-Filled World” get enough profile so that what was said addresses you/appeals to you?*

Backdrop: This question is asked in order to know if the hearers were able to be drawn into this story from their “homiletical situation.”

Reflections: The most exciting insight for me is that fear increases while Jesus comes nearby. The concrete examples of headwinds were helpful and recognizable, especially because I was listening with my sick colleague in my mind. Apart from what has happened last week, I would like to suggest you should have dealt more with the problem of living in a world which seems to be so empty of God. The world full of fear makes me aware of the fact that although God seems to oppose me, nevertheless He is on his way to help me.

⁵ Cf. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark. Interpretation: a Bible Commentary on Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville 1983, 130; Joachim Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, Band 1, Zürich 1978, 267.

2. *Jesus came in order to pass by them, i.e. getting more acquainted with Him (revelatory). Did you feel/realize for yourself Jesus passing by you during the sermon? Does this knowledge comfort you/serve as a wake-up call/frighten you?*

Backdrop: Preaching is a kind of re-present-ion. There is a world of difference between listening to an old story and remembering that this story is an ongoing story in the present, because Jesus as the resurrected Lord is still here.⁶

Reflections: During the sermon I feel like the Spirit speaks to me indeed. I did not think about this in relation to this sermon, but Jesus has passed by me during my whole life. At first glance I was confused that Jesus was about to pass by them, so it was a great surprise that you explained this just as coming to the end of revealing himself more. I did not get it, I was wondering why Jesus did not come immediately on board. At the outset you said “this is nothing but mean”: people pass by and then you asked “isn’t it?” and I agreed, but afterwards I understand the meaning of “passing by them” as graceful. To be honest I realized myself that he came during the morning service just when you spoke very emphatically: “It is I”!

3. *“It is I. Don’t be afraid!” What did help you the most: Explanation of these words (YHWH, His story) or repeating these very words several times during the sermon (in order to the ‘now’)?*

Backdrop: A sermon is not just meant to give information, but has to do with faith formation. According to the speech-act theory (philosophy) words are *performative* and do not have only illocutionary character.

Reflections: The explanation of the phrase “It is I” as YHWH revealed himself, as was shown from other OT-passages, helps me, but I do really like to hear such short sentences again and again during the sermon. Repetition makes these words much stronger. Your question: “do you really perceive this voice in your midst this morning ...”; “It is I, my dear ...?” was a very evocative moment. No, I don’t like the reiteration, because otherwise it seems to function as a mantra. I prefer the second option, too many words of explanation devalue the power of a short sentence. No preference.

⁶ Theo Pleizier, Hearing Sermons and the Vision of God, in: Lucy Hogan/Theo Pleizier (eds.), *Preaching As Picturing God in a Fragmented World* [Studia Homiletica 8], Delft 2012, 181–191.

4. Statement: *A hardened heart is a heart which is too little impressed with/overwhelmed by who Jesus is and as a consequence filled with too much fear.*

Backdrop: Mark's comment is an explanation of what really was at stake in this story. I would like to know whether or not the audience has felt this as a shocking, striking remark.

Reflections: All the respondents agree with this statement, although some of them uttered that we are not in the position to condemn the disciples.

5. *Was I really one of you (communion) during the sermon, so that you feel my own being touched (harsh side and soft side of the pad/sponge) by this story as His story?*

Backdrop:

In my sermon's introduction I used a sanding/scrubbing pad (abrasive sponge) as a *metaphor* in order to answer the question I start with: does this portion of Scripture function as the harsh side or the soft side of this pad (sponge)? I asked this because too many people start by saying to themselves either "Oh, such a wonderful story: our Jesus could walk on the surface of the lake. Wow!", or in the opposite way: "This story nobody could believe to be true in the 21st century: a man walking on the water. Preacher preach, but I could not believe one single word of this story."

Why did I ask about this pad/sponge? Because first of all I felt some *embarrassment* when reading the text for the first time in my preparation. Puzzling questions struck me: "Is it me, who has too much fear, because I do not really know who Jesus really is? Do I not recognize the 'I am He' while He comes to me in the words of Scripture or otherwise? Does all my fear actually come from my hardened heart?" So, then, this is the harsh and rough side of this story.⁷ The softening and comforting side is: He comes in order to pass by, and to speak the marvellous words "It is I" in order to comfort me, although my nerves still are very strained: existential (stand outside myself, literally!). And in the end and ultimately he comes "on board"!

Reflections: All agree that I was one of them and this makes the sermon for them: upright, vulnerable, existential involved, otherwise you would have been a stranger crossing our path and now you were walking with us in this dialogue.

⁷ Cf. *David Kelsey* writes on the danger of 'domesticating God' in "Picturing God Theologically in a Fragmented World," in: idem (note 7), 21–34, especially 27 on radical otherness and radical intimacy.

3. Homiletical insights through the window of this text

Ultimately, we look from a biblical-theological perspective through the window of this text in order to see some homiletical notions or guidelines – although not a full set – which could be helpful for our preaching practice in general and for addressing fear in particular.

1. Style:

- Use the Greek *aorists* to show what matters (may be in *staccato* sentences) in order not just to retell the well-known story (that's very boring!), but to let the audience “feel” the tension in this story of a “fear-filled world” and are drawn in the *special structure* of the sermon.⁸
- Use the *imaginative* material of this pericope (images, words, echo, and references from the Old Testament).⁹

2. Arrangement:

- Consider at which time you will bring in Mark's commentary (V. 52). This is important because the homiletical room for “screaming” in great fear can be closed too early.
- What will be the best moment in this story to start with? My suggestion is to start in the midst of the story: screaming disciples, Jesus at hand and they were shocked full of fear.
- Suggestions for a possible outline:

A. Theme/Focus: *Jesus Comes into our Fear-filled World:*

Three aspects could be highlighted:

- Our Fear Filled in the Absence of our Master.
- Our Fear Fuelled in the Approaching of our Master.
- Our Fear Stilled in the Presence of our Master.

B. Theme/Focus: *Jesus Is Coming in His Way!*

In sum: Behind the Screens, On Our Scenes, With His Means.

⁸ Wilfried Engemann, “On Man's re-entry into his future, The sermon as a creative act,” in: Gerrit Immink/Ciska Stark (eds.), *Preaching. Creating Perspective* [Studia Homiletica 4], Nieuw-Lekkerland 2002, 25–49, 40.

⁹ Some illustrations: sea and water, storm, journey to the other side, passing by, the ‘I am He’ or ‘It is I’: burning bush, exodus, and Deutero-Isaiah's pictures, even paintings, of the ‘I am He.’

3. Focus on some details:

As an example: “shortly before dawn,” i.e. dark decreased/night abandoned. This in relation to the central motion and notion: “Jesus comes.” This is like the “exodus” early in the morning (Ex 14:24).¹⁰

Preaching always is a kind of remembering, resounding, recalling.

4. We preach after Good Friday and Easter. From an eschatological point of view the threatening ‘water’ is also a symbol of the ultimate dreadful death, and the ‘walking on the sea’ a picture of the resurrection. God rather finds his way even over the sea (Ps 77:20, Job 8:9). The power of the future comes in our sermon (eschatological aspect). The anticipating of the future shapes the present.¹¹

5. Addressing fear:

- Fear as a faith apprenticeship: although we live in obedience to the Lord, nevertheless darkness hit us, headwind against us and an apparent absence of the Lord (as they were forced into the boat!)
- Fear (terror) increases when one comes aware that a ‘fantasmos’ has to do with God himself; not that simplistic talk, “Here is God, and now your fear must be silenced.”
- We do not live in a “haunted house” as such: Jesus comes in our world filled with fear.
- In our fears sounds and resounds the Name “It is I.”

6. Other aspects of the multifaceted activity of what preaching is about:

- Offering space for fear-filled people. The preaching of (this part of) the Gospel can be an opening up of a “homiletical space” wherein someone is allowed to scream his or her fear and while screaming may hear the “I am He.”¹² Or, to use another metaphor, preaching can be a “being drawn into the cloakroom” where a person’s fear would be changed in character. The same fear can be experienced in another way by different feelings.

¹⁰ *Gnilka* (note 6), 268–269: “Die Zeit vor dem Morgen ist die Zeit Gottes.”(cf. Isaiah 17:14; Ps. 46:6). *Walter Grundmann*, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, Berlin 1959, 143, indicates this moment the time of the morning prayer.

¹¹ Cf. *Paul Scott Wilson*, *Textual Perspectives: Preaching as an Event of Hope*, in: *Immink/Stark* (note 9), 50–59.

¹² Cf. *Leif Andersen*, *The Language of Hopelessness in Preaching: Pastoral Care in the Preaching of Hope*, in: *Cas J.A. Vos/Lucy L. Hogan/Johan H. Cilliers* (eds.), *Preaching as a Language of Hope [Studia Homiletica 6]*, Pretoria 2007, 203–213; *Alexander Deeg*, *Preaching God’s Wisdom: Response to Marilynne Robinson*, in: *Jan Hermelink/Alexander Deeg* (eds.), *Viva Vox Evangelii – Reforming Preaching [Studia Homiletica 9]*, Leipzig 2013, 43–53, 52; “Christian preaching needs a new language again and again – a language that interrupts and disturbs. That breaks open the boundaries of this world and opens up a new perspective. Martin Luther once called it the ‘nova sprach de resurrection mortuorum’, the ‘new language of the raising of the deads.’”

Therefore, in my opinion Walter Brueggeman is too fast in concluding:

“This is not a happy miracle tale, but an exposé of the feebleness of the church where Farao still operates. The story will not lie about us. But the story does not lie about Jesus either. [...] The storm cannot resist him. The chaos is no force against him. *Fear is undone by his Easter*, “Do not fear” [...] Jesus and his “do not fear” continue to be uttered and will finally utter us beyond fear. Quit watching the storm and listen!”¹³

- Showing what’s going on behind the screens and on our scenes (the preacher is not like an archivist, but like an astronomer: interpreting reality from the perspective of our texts).
- Facing our hardened hearts (cf. 3:5; 8:17) when we are blinded by our unbelief.
- Unmasking our “fantasma”, i.e. what we see when we do not take Jesus seriously as the Son of God (Mark 1:1).¹⁴ “Discipleship is more endangered by lack of faith and hardness of heart than by external dangers.”¹⁵
- Presenting the “It is I” as real presence, Jesus literally is *inter-esse* (being in their midst). There ultimately is no sinister or shady silence in the midst of our fears. The encouragement is that God does not forsake us when our hearts are hardened. “God continues to take the initiative [...] God comes to us in the night when we are making absolutely no headway.”¹⁶

Hopefully these guidelines offered in this homiletical analysis from a biblical-theological perspective will be inspiring to address fear in a fear- filled world in a pastoral, theological manner.

Maarten Kater, born 1962, is Professor of Practical Theology at the Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, Netherlands.

mjkater@tua.nl

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text. Sermons and Prayers by Walter Brueggemann*, Minneapolis 2004, “Uttered Beyond Fear”, 51–57, 56.

¹⁴ Grundmann (note 11), 141, refers to Rudolf Otto, the famous writer of *The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige)* and quotes him from his *Reich Gottes und Menschensohn*: “Typus des in Stunden der Not und Todesgefahr aus der Ferne in Phantom erscheinenden und helfenden Charismatikers. Der Charismatiker erscheint, obwohl er selbst am fernen Orte ist. Er erscheint halluzinativ sichtbar. Im Unterschied zu zauberhaften Vermögen der Yogis handelt es dabei im einen *Akt tröstender und helfender Gegenwart*, nicht um ein Zurschaustellen übernatürlicher Kräfte, sondern um eine Gnadengabe *gewillt, verborgen zu bleiben, verliehen zu Heils- und Liebeszwecken und verbunden mit gottgeweihtem und geheiligtem Leben*” (italics added).

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids 2002, 201.

¹⁶ Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark. IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, Downers Grove 2007, 133.