

Jesus Walking on the Sea: John 6:16-21
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, February 5, 2017

Just yesterday our family was in Michigan to attend the funeral of Stacy's grandfather who died last week at age 100. He was closing in on his 101st birthday, and had been in fairly good health until the past couple of months. We had gone to visit him 3 weeks ago, and we're grateful we had that opportunity to see him and talk with him before he passed away. He was still able to talk about his fighter pilot missions in World War II and family memories and politics. We also talked with him about the Gospel and about heaven.

Last week he was moved into a hospice facility, and the day before he died he wrote out a handwritten letter to a long-time friend of his—a man in his 90s—the two of them had been friends since they were young. He wrote, Dear lifelong friend, my time is short. Indeed, his time was very short at that point.

It's remarkable to live that long and to still have a sharp mind. It's been remarkable over the years, in our visits with Erick, to hear the stories of his long life. In our visit just 3 weeks ago we heard the story about his courtship with the woman who became his wife, Stacy's grandmother. They were dating seriously when Erick headed off to the war. And they parted with the understanding that if he returned, they would get married. He was involved in quite a bit of combat as a fighter pilot, and so was very fortunate to return home alive. He and Violet were married within 3 weeks of his arrival back in the States.

The funeral yesterday was a meaningful one. Family came in from around the country to celebrate Erick's life. The Gospel was proclaimed in Scripture readings and songs and in the message that was shared. Funerals are always a good reality check, a good reminder that this life is not going to last forever. Even though 100 years seems like a such long time, it's just a blink of an eye in light of eternity. And so it would be entirely appropriate for any of us, no matter what age, no matter what the state of our health is, to say to others, like Erick wrote in that letter, "Dear friend, my time here is short."

And as that realization sinks in, it drives us to other soul-searching considerations. Namely, what is going to happen when I die? What is there beyond this brief existence on earth? What's next? And the answer to those questions is all wrapped up in who you believe Jesus is. And that's why our study of the Gospel of John is so important for us all.

Do you remember the purpose of this Gospel? John states it near the end of the book, in 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many

other signs in the presence of the 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, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Do you want life, friend? Do you want eternal life in heaven? Then it’s necessary for you to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, for He is the only way for you to be forgiven.

I was asked to pick out a couple Scripture passages and read them at the funeral. And one of the passages I read was Romans 5:1-11, which speaks of Christ’s death for us which reconciles us to God. We were enemies of God, but there can be peace with God through the reconciliation that Christ brings. To believe in Jesus, who He is and what He’s accomplished for hell-deserving sinners such as us . . . to believe in Him is to have life, eternal life.

And John the Gospel-writer has recorded these things for us, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in order for us to see who Jesus is and believe in Him. I pray this will happen today. I pray that not-yet-believers will see and believe today. And I pray that already-believers will have an increased faith and assurance in who Jesus is.

The passage we’re studying this morning is the account of Jesus walking on the water. I mentioned last week that all 4 Gospels record the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Well, Jesus walking on the water is found in 3 of the 4 Gospels. And each account is relatively short, so I want to bring by reading them all for us since I’ll be referring to details from each account.

Read Matthew 14:22-33

Read Mark 6:45-52

Read John 6:16-21

Picture yourself in the boat this morning. That’s where we’re going to be as we consider this story together. We’re the folks in the boat. And the question is: what are we to make of this man, Jesus? It’s the account of Jesus walking on the sea. It’s an astonishing and memorable miracle of Jesus, and it’s even much more than an astonishing and memorable miracle, as we’re going to see. It is a revelation of who Jesus is. It is a vivid display, not only of His miraculous power, but of His divine identity.

1) Jesus prays for His disciples

The first thing for us to observe in this text is that Jesus prays, and He prays for His disciples. He sent His disciples away. He sent the crowds away. And He went up by Himself to pray on the mountain. Jesus communes with the Father. He loves the

Father. He submits to the Father. He does all the Father's will. And He prays to the Father.

It doesn't say in these passages what Jesus was praying about, but we can be sure that the disciples were a major focus of His prayers. Jesus prays for His disciples. That should be a great comfort to us. We're the ones in the boat. Jesus has sent us out onto the lake, and He is up on the mountain praying for us. Romans 8:34 says, "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." What an awesome truth that is! Jesus died for us, and He rose from the dead, and He ascended to the Father where He sits at His right hand, and Jesus prays for us!

When we wonder if anyone cares about us, when we wonder if anyone ever prays for us, we can have confidence that there is always Someone who is passionately interceding on our behalf. Jesus, Himself, prays to the Father concerning His disciples.

What kinds of things does He pray for us? John 17 tells us. It is the high priestly prayer of Jesus, and in it He prays for all those whom the Father has given to Him. He prays, "keep them from the evil one." He prays, "sanctify them in the truth." He prays for unity, "that they may all be one." And He prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." We also see Jesus praying for Peter in Luke 22:32, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." These are things Jesus prays for His disciples. He wants us to be protected from the evil one. He wants us to be sanctified. He wants us to be unified. He wants us to see His glory. He wants our faith to be preserved and strengthened.

Surely these were many of the things Jesus was praying while He was on the mountain that night. He had sent His disciples out onto the lake, and He was on the mountain interceding for them. Oh, Father, keep them from the evil one. Sanctify them. Unify them. Establish their faith. Let them see my glory! And in a short time Jesus will manifest His glory to them in a most remarkable way.

2) Jesus sends His disciples into hardships

The second thing we see in this event is that Jesus sends His disciples into hardships. After the feeding of the five thousand, both Matthew and Mark make mention of the fact that Jesus "made" the disciples get into the boat and head out toward the other side. Jesus *made* them go. He didn't give them an option of staying or going. He told them to go, and they went. They

obeyed. And what did they get for their obedience? Hardship. It was not an easy trip. It was not smooth sailing. It was not a peaceful row across a calm lake. The conditions were very difficult. The wind was beating against them, and therefore they could not make progress. This would have been very frustrating. They were probably beginning to wonder if they were ever going to get to their destination.

It reminds me of a trip I took a few years ago to visit Aaron and Aimee Ashoff in Liberia. Some of you remember the Ashoffs. They are now in Greece ministering to the crowds of refugees arriving there. But several years ago they had moved from Pittsburgh to Liberia, serving with Samaritan's Purse, and I went to visit them and minister alongside them for several days. And one afternoon Aaron and I went out to try to surf in the ocean. They lived right along the coast, and we went to the beach with a couple surfboards he had borrowed from some friends. And we gave it a try. The problem was the wind and the waves. We got on those boards and started paddling as hard as we could to get out away from the shore so that we could, then, try to turn around and try to catch a wave. But at one point Aaron said to me, "Ben, don't look behind you." I wondered if there was a shark behind me or something. It wasn't that at all. He was just making fun of the fact that our paddling hadn't accomplished very much at all. I looked back and realized we were only 10 or 20 feet from the sand. Very discouraging!

Well, that was the disciples' experience on this night of rowing. They were making headway painfully. They were straining at the oars. This was a hardship that Jesus sent them right into the middle of.

Now, remember that we're in the boat. We're there among the disciples, and we regularly experience the hardships of obeying Jesus. Jesus tells us to do something, and we do it. And then we find out that the thing He told us to do is a lot harder than we thought it would be. It would be a lot easier if we just stayed at home. That's what we can end up saying to ourselves. As we walk in obedience to the Lord, the wind will often be against us. It will not be smooth sailing. This is a reality check that we need to face up to. If you're a new believer, or not yet a believer, you need to understand that the Christian life is not easy. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a promise that you will live a pain-free, comfortable, affluent life. That is not in the Bible. Our Lord did not have an easy life, and neither will those who follow Him. We need to understand that. We need to be prepared for that. We need to embrace that as an essential component of discipleship.

1 Peter 4:12-13 says this: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though

something strange were happening to you [note: trials are not strange, but normal]. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." As disciples of Christ, we are not to expect ease and comfort in this life. We are to expect suffering and trials in this life. But we also look forward to the glorious life we will have in heaven with Christ, and that hope will enable us to endure the hardships we face now. That's the Christian life. That's discipleship. We obey Him, knowing that obedience will often involve very hard things that will discourage us, frustrate us, and break our hearts. If this point is discouraging to you, the next point should be a great encouragement.

3) Jesus sees His disciples' hardships.

It is true that He sends His disciples into hardships, but He does not abandon them in their hardships. He sees them and has compassion on them and goes to them. The account in Mark includes a remarkable statement here. Mark 6:48 says that Jesus "saw that they were making headway painfully . . ." It's easy to read right over that. But do you catch what's going on there? It says that Jesus saw them. And we have to stop there to ask, how did He see them? They were in the middle of the sea. They were 3 to 4 miles from where Jesus was on the mountain. And not only that, it was dark. It was night time. But Jesus was able to see them. I believe this points to Jesus' divinity. He is God. And He shares in the divine attributes, one of them being omniscience. He is all-knowing, all-seeing, and He compassionately looks right into that boat where His disciples are struggling.

The beauty of this scene is that Jesus sees His disciples in their distress. Even though they felt entirely alone, Jesus was intimately aware of what they were going through. He knew exactly what their situation was. He saw the strain of their muscles pulling the oars. He saw the sweat on their faces. He saw the concern and frustration in their hearts. Jesus is a compassionate Shepherd, as we saw last week in the feeding of the 5,000.

I know that some of you are going through severe trials right now. Some of you have been through very difficult trials recently. Others will certainly encounter various hardships in the near future. What we need to know is that Jesus sees us in our difficult circumstances. He has sent us into these storms, and He looks on us with compassion as the wind is against us. He sees that we are making headway painfully. I want to encourage you this morning with the truth of Jesus' sovereignty and omniscience. He is in control over your trials, and He sees and knows every detail of what you're going through. Therefore, have hope. As

bleak as your circumstances may seem, Jesus has a good and gracious plan to build our faith and to glorify His Name.

4) Jesus manifests His glory

This leads us to the fourth point. Jesus manifests His glory. That's what this amazing miracle is about. Jesus sees His disciples in their distress, and He goes to them in order to show them His glory. It was about the fourth watch of the night, which is between 3am and 6am, and they had rowed 3 or 4 miles. And they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat. It's an astonishing statement, said in such a matter-of-fact way. Jesus was walking on the sea!

People have tried to come up with all sorts of interpretations of this that remove the supernatural element of it. They'll say that "walking *on* the sea" should actually be translated "walking *beside* the sea." Maybe Jesus was walking along the shore, or walking in the shallow water near the shore, and to the disciples it looked like He was walking on the water. Or maybe He was walking on a sand bar that jutted out into the lake. But none of these suggestions account for what the text actually says. They all come to the text with the presupposition that supernatural events simply cannot happen.

The question, then, that confronts today's skeptic is the same question that confronted the disciples on the boat that night. Could this man really be who He says He is? Could it be that God's own Son came to earth and took on human flesh and proclaimed the Gospel and showed His authority over demons and disease and death? Could it be that He demonstrated His authority over nature by turning water into wine and healing the official's son and healing the man at the pool of Bethesda, and even by walking on the water?

That is the only legitimate way of reading this text. The boat was out in the middle of the sea, and Jesus went out to them, walking *on* the sea. Jesus had been *on* the land, and now He is *on* the sea. It is a remarkable, supernatural, miraculous event.

Another curious phrase that shows up only in Mark is the statement that "[Jesus] meant to pass by them" (Mark 6:48). What does that mean? On the surface, it sounds cold-hearted. Jesus sees the disciples in their distress, and then He goes all the way out there just to pass by them?! He's not going to help them?

Something very profound is going on there, and the significance of it starts to emerge when we look at the Old Testament background. In the Old Testament, God, and God alone, walks on the sea. In Job 9 there's a reference to this. "[God] alone stretched out the heavens and trampled on the waves of the sea" (Job 9:8). And later in Job when the Lord answers Job

out of the whirlwind He says, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?” (Job 38:16).¹ Only God can do something like this. That’s one piece of the Old Testament backdrop. Only God can trample on the waves of the sea. Jesus is trampling on the waves of the sea. Inescapable conclusion: Jesus is God.

The other striking Old Testament connection is in the word “passed by.” In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, this same word is used in Exodus 33 where the Lord makes His goodness “pass before” Moses. The word is used four times in that context.² In response to Moses’ request, “Please show me your glory,” the Lord said, “I will make all my goodness *pass before* you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory *passes by* I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have *passed by*.” (Exodus 33:19-22, ESV)

You see, Jesus intended to pass by His disciples, not because He didn’t care about them, but because He wanted them to see His glory. This was Jesus manifesting His glory for the disciples to see. He was causing His glory to pass by them.

And Jesus declares His glory not only with His miraculous actions, but with His words as well. Look at verses 19-20 in the passage in John 6. The disciples were frightened. But then Jesus says to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” The statement, “it is I,” translates two Greek words, *egō eimi*—“I AM.” Thus, Jesus not only does something only God can do, He also speaks in a way only God can speak. He not only possesses God’s power, He also bears God’s Name. Jesus is the great I AM, alluding back to the Lord’s declaration in Exodus 3:14, where the Lord says to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.” Jesus is using that language to point to His divinity. In both word and deed Jesus manifests His glory to the disciples.

There’s a lesson here for us. In the midst of the storms of life, be on the lookout for ways that Jesus will manifest His glory. The encouragement to us is that we should have our eyes wide open to see how Jesus is going to show us His goodness and His glory in the middle of the most difficult times of our lives. Let’s not miss it. Instead, let’s be anticipating and expecting that Jesus

¹ Also see Psalm 77:19; Isaiah 43:16; Habakkuk 3:15.

² Exodus 33:19, 22 (2X); 34:6

is going to make Himself known to us in our trials, and let's be watchful to see how that is going to happen.

The other encouragement here is to see our Lord Jesus treading on the very waves that are causing a hardship for His disciples. Those waves are no hindrance to Almighty, omnipotent Jesus. He controls those waves and can calm them at any moment. He is sovereign over everything that brings us trouble! He was in control of the wind and the waves that were keeping the disciples from making any headway. And He is in control of the wind and the waves that are plaguing your life today. The things that make you think, I'm not getting anywhere in life. I'm not making any progress. I'm getting absolutely nowhere. Jesus is bigger than all of those things. He tramples on them. And He can remove them at any moment. But He sends you into those storms in order that you might see Him and know Him in a way that is impossible otherwise.

5) The Disciples' Reaction

The fifth thing to observe here is the disciples' reaction. And we have to give some thought here to the complexity of their thoughts and feelings at this point. What was going on in their hearts as Jesus revealed His glory to them? Well, they were first frightened. But then after He spoke to them, they were glad to take him into the boat. That's in John. And in Mark they went from terrified to astonished. And in Matthew they went from terrified to worshipping. Those are the 3 accounts trying to describe the complexity of the disciples' reaction to this.

One question that comes up in our minds is, why were they astounded if they had experienced similar things already? They had seen Jesus turn water into wine, they had seen Him heal the sick. That very day they had seen Him feed thousands of people with just five loaves and two fish. By now wouldn't they just say, Wow, and He can walk on water, too! But they were surprised. They were completely astonished. They could hardly believe what they were seeing, and they were frightened, terrified.

Mark gives us an explanation on this point. He gives this reason for their astonishment, in Mark 6:52, "for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." You see, the disciples' hearts are a mixture of belief and unbelief, perception and confusion.

Matthew's account fills out the picture for us. In Mark and in John, the part about Peter stepping out of the boat onto the water is not included. But Matthew records that. Matthew tells us that part of the story, about Peter stepping out in faith to walk on the water toward Jesus, but then seeing the wind and getting scared

and beginning to sink, and then Jesus rescuing him and then rebuking him for his lack of faith.

And the other thing that Matthew includes that Mark and John do not is the mention of the disciples worshipping Jesus after He got into the boat. Matthew 14:32-33 says, "And when they [meaning Jesus and Peter] got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."" That sounds pretty different from what Mark records, about their hearts being hardened. But I think this points to the mixture of belief and unbelief in the hearts of the disciples. They were hard hearted and lacked understanding. But they also came to a point of worshipping Jesus as the Son of God.

Again, this is us in the boat with our fragmented hearts. We are slow to understand. But by His grace we are also coming to a place of seeing Him for who He is and worshipping Him as the Son of God. We, too, are hard hearted. We can easily miss the amazing things God is doing around us, because we can be dense in our thinking. We lack understanding, lack spiritual perception. But He is revealing Himself to us, and we ought to be astounded at His identity and power and goodness to us. Let this be a reminder for us to be always on the lookout for how Jesus is providing and protecting and guiding and revealing. Jesus is doing miraculous things that attest to His identity and reveal His glory, if we have eyes to see.

To conclude, let me ask you: Where are you today, as you picture yourself in the boat? What do you make of this man, Jesus? Are you terrified of Him, as though He were a ghost? Are you skeptical, doubting that this account is even true? Are you hard hearted? Do you lack understanding? Are you missing the miraculous things Jesus is doing right before your eyes? Or do you receive Him today as the great I AM, the One who tramples on the waves of the sea, as the One who shows us His glory in the midst of our struggles? In response to this we should cry out to Him in repentance and faith. We should cry out to Jesus like the man in Mark 9 who says, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). That's what we need Him to do, and that's what He will do for His disciples as He prays for us and sends us into hardships and sees us in our hardships and comes to us to manifest His glory for us to behold Him. This is our mighty Savior and our compassionate Shepherd.