



Catalog No. 1355

John 6:16-21

17th Message

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October 10th, 2004

CROSSING TO SAFETY

We come this morning to another familiar story in chapter 6 of John's gospel, the account of Jesus walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea began to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened. But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. (John 6:16-21 NASB)

This chapter begins with John's version of the feeding of the five thousand, a story that appears in all four gospels. In this, the second scene of chapter 6, Jesus walks on water. Next we have the bread of life discourse, which seems to be connected to the multiplication of the loaves. John places this account of Jesus walking on water between the miracle of the feeding and the discourse.

There are several explanations for this. In early Christian transmission, this story is linked with the feeding of the five thousand. This is where we find the story in Matthew and Mark. It explains how Jesus and his disciples returned to Capernaum. The story is used as a device to give a literary structure to the entire chapter. (This is suggested by D. A. Carson: 16-21 "is tied to 1-15 in much the same way that vv. 59-71 are tied to 22-58 to form an ABCAB structure – i.e. A=6:1-15; B=6:16-21; C=6:22-26; A=6:27-58; B=6:59-71."¹)

But the most important reason for its inclusion here is its tie to the Exodus theme which we talked about last week and to which we return this morning. Verse 15 ends with the crowd clamoring to make Jesus king. But Jesus wants nothing to do with that and goes off by himself to be alone with the Father. Leaderless and left to themselves, the disciples decide to escape the crowd and return home to Capernaum under the cover of darkness. Mathew and Mark record that Jesus made them get into the boat and leave. Their return in darkness is a reminder of the gospel's light and darkness theme.

The Sea of Galilee is twelve miles long and seven miles wide at its widest point. It is quite common for storms to come up very quickly on the lake, and such was the case that night. The storm may be pointing to the doubt and perplexity that Jesus

had blown into the minds of the disciples with his latest sign. One can imagine their utter confusion.

After rowing about three miles or so the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea. He was walking either on or by the sea; the preposition can be read either way. The disciples' terror lends credence to the fact that Jesus was doing something extraordinary. This is the fifth of seven signs in John. Once again, Jesus circumvents the natural order of creation.

Jesus does not say much to the disciples, but what he does say is very significant. Literally, he says, "I am; do not fear." The disciples are glad to take Jesus into the boat. They receive him, and as a result they are immediately where they want to be.

As we have already seen, chapter 6 centers on the feast of Passover, the time when the Jews remember and celebrate their deliverance out of the bondage of Egypt and the giving of the Law to Moses. The Exodus story includes Israel's journey into the wilderness, their supernatural feeding on manna from heaven, Moses going up on a mountain to meet with God, and their passing through the sea. When Moses stretched out his hands, the waters parted and the people crossed to safety on dry ground. Then Moses stretched out his hands again and the waters returned to their place, engulfing and destroying the pursuing Egyptian army.

John 6 describes the new exodus. Jesus goes away from Jerusalem, into Galilee, and out into the wilderness. He goes up on a mountain, just like Moses. He feeds the people supernaturally by multiplying bread and fish – new manna from heaven, the bread of life. And now he takes his disciples safely through the sea in the midst of a storm.

As God's people, all of us are involved in an exodus story. On the journey out we move away and detach ourselves from Egypt, Jerusalem, home, or wherever we have been held in bondage, slavery and death. On the journey in we learn to feed on the bread that Jesus provides, on food that nourishes our souls, given to us in abundance. This is a place of freedom, redemption and life. On the journey down or inward we go into the wilderness, the place where our faith is tested and deepened. Philip was tested on the mountain when he asked Jesus where they could get enough food to feed all the people. In this story the disciples are tested again, this time on the sea.

As we begin our exodus journey with Jesus we are never sure where he will take us. We feel uncomfortable because we must begin by leaving something we know for something unknown.

Then we have to learn to nourish ourselves with things that are invisible and unseen. But the most uncomfortable part of the journey is when we are in the wilderness and the storms begin to blow. The story of Jesus walking on water illustrates another dimension of our exodus story: crossing stormy seas to safety. What is Jesus trying to teach the disciples? What is he trying to teach us? We will look at three things: fear, the powerful presence of God, and trust.

Anxiety, doubt and confusion assail us when Jesus leaves us seemingly alone in the wilderness and the storms begin to blow. But one word, fear, says it all. The disciples were not afraid until they saw Jesus walking on the water. Matthew says they were afraid because they thought Jesus was a ghost. The storm made them utterly fearful.

This is our natural human response to blowing winds and crashing seas: fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of inadequacy, fear of the unknown, fear of being alone, fear of loss, fear for our safety, fear of death. The winds come up suddenly and fear reaches out with its strangling arms to paralyze us. We tumble into depression, worry, anxiety or isolation. Or else we run back to the places from which Jesus has called us: relationships, moods, attitudes and addictions. We stretch at the oars and row to get where we want to be but we can't make headway. We don't have any resources and the winds are too strong. And for some reason this always seems to happen at night, when we are surrounded by darkness and there is no one to call on. Testing in the wilderness or a storm in the crossing always evokes fear.

I know the fear of being at sea when strong winds come up suddenly. One sunny afternoon I was in a boat with a number of young men, enjoying lunch off the coast at Santa Cruz. Suddenly the wind rose and we were caught too far from shore. We were blown twenty miles south. We could not get back to land until we had fought the winds for two hours. I know the fear of hearing the phone ring at three o'clock in the morning and learning that my brother had just been killed in an automobile accident. Even today when the phone rings late at night my first response is fear.

How do we overcome this kind of fear? We need to know the power and presence of God. We need eyes to see Jesus walking on water, even though that too can be a fearful sight. We need to rest in the God who controls and calms the storm. The amazing thing is that Jesus is in the storm, but he is using it for his purposes and our good.

Many Old Testament passages make reference to the sea. The sea is often used as a metaphor for chaos, disorder, evil and untamable forces, but it is God who controls and stills it.

**By awesome deeds You answer us in righteousness,
O God of our salvation,
You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of
the farthest sea;
Who establishes the mountains by His strength,
Being girded with might;**

**Who stills the roaring of the seas,
The roaring of their waves,
And the tumult of the peoples. (Ps 65:5-7)**

**You rule the swelling of the sea;
When its waves rise, You still them. (Ps 89:9)**

**The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
The floods have lifted up their voice,
The floods lift up their pounding waves.
More than the sounds of many waters,
Than the mighty breakers of the sea,
The LORD on high is mighty. (Ps 93:3-4)**

Psalm 107 has a number of powerful allusions to the sea.

**Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on great waters;
They have seen the works of the LORD,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the
depths;
Their soul melted away in their misery.
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,
And were at their wits' end.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
And He brought them out of their distresses.
He caused the storm to be still,
So that the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they were quiet,
So He guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people,
And praise Him at the seat of the elders. (Ps 107:23-32)**

When we are fearful, what we need to hear are the very words that Jesus spoke to his disciples: "I am; do not fear." "It is I; do not be afraid." Even though his words were few, they are powerful and full of significance for us. This language is often used in Isaiah 40-55, where we also encounter new exodus themes. Invariably the words "I am" in this prophecy are connected with "fear not."

**'Do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,
Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'**
(Isa 41:10)

**"For I am the LORD your God, who upholds your right
hand,
Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.' (Isa 41:13)
But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob,
And He who formed you, O Israel,
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;**

I have called you by name; you are Mine!” (Isa 43:1)

“Do not fear, for I am with you;

**I will bring your offspring from the east,
And gather you from the west.” (Isa 43:5)**

**Thus says the LORD who made you
And formed you from the womb, who will help you,
‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant;
And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.’ (Isa 44:2)**

In chapter 4, Jesus disclosed himself as the “I am” to the woman at the well, and now he discloses himself to the disciples. At the end of chapter 6, Simon Peter believes in Jesus as the “Holy One of God.”

When we are on the open seas, in the wilderness, God comes to us to show us his power and his presence. He is the “I am” who controls and stills the seas. This is that we need to see, hear, and know: the powerful, constant, awe-inspiring, breathtaking presence of God, no matter where we are or what comes upon us.

But this is not an end unto itself. The end is not to see the power and presence, but to trust in it. Jesus did not walk on water just to impress the disciples. He manifested his powerful presence so that they would put their trust in him.

The purpose behind testing in the wilderness, on the seas and in the storms is to deepen and grow our faith. We need to live in dependence on what God supplies rather than our own strength, our own ability and understanding. It does us no good to acknowledge and praise the power and presence of God if we leave here this morning depending on ourselves. This is the whole point of exodus journeys.

Frederick Buechner shared the following story in one of his books:

I was sitting by the side of the road one day last fall. It was a dark time in my life. I was full of anxiety, full of fear and uncertainty. The world within seemed as shadowy as the world without. And then, as I sat there, I spotted a car coming down the road toward me with one of those license plates that you can get by paying a little extra, with a word on it instead of just numbers and a letter or two. And of all the words the license plate might have had on it, the word that it did have was the word T-R-U-S-T: TRUST. And as it came close enough for me to read, it became suddenly for me a word from on high.²

Trust has never been easy for me simply because I have seen very little evidence in my life to convince me that I should trust. Most of the influential people who could have encouraged me to trust have had just the opposite effect on me. So I have a hard time thinking or believing that anyone is for me. That’s why I take the John Wayne approach. I take matters into my own hands, with six-guns blazing.

Do you find it difficult to trust? This is what God wants from us. He is not perfecting our bodies, our minds, or our personalities. He is perfecting our faith in him. James in his

letter says that this is what makes us perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

On that dark night on the Sea of Galilee the disciples received Jesus into their boat. That is what we do when we decide to trust God. And then Jesus takes us where we want to go—to the safe harbor where we experience peace and rest because the great “I am” is with us.

I will close by reading an exodus story from Carlo Carretto:

Now here I am in front of you, and you have your dreams too, or have had them. And I can tell you something.

That mistaken injection that paralyzed my leg was not a stroke of bad luck. It was a grace.

Let’s be precise. There’s no point in pious platitudes.

It was bad luck, yes. It was a misfortune. But God turned it into a grace.

I had a useless leg. I could not climb. So I got a jeep and became a meteorologist.

Through no wish of my own, there I was where I belonged: in the desert.

Instead of trudging through the snow I trudged through the sand.

Instead of mountain passes I came to know caravan routes. Instead of chamois I saw gazelles.

Life suddenly appeared to me as it was, an immense personal exodus. Now I saw the desert as an extraordinary environment of silence and prayer.

My crippled leg helped me to “stand firm” (Jas 1:12).

I the runner—now stood firm.

I who’d always tried to do two things at once—now I stood firm.

No doubt about it, it was a plus.

Deep down inside I began to understand that I hadn’t been cheated.

Misfortune had thrust me upon new paths.

Brothers and sisters before me with your misfortunes, I testify to you of one thing only.

Today, thirty years after the incident that paralyzed my leg, I don’t say it wasn’t a misfortune.

I only say that God was able to transform it into a grace.

I have experienced in my flesh what Augustine says: “God permits evil, so as to transform it into a greater good.”³

We are all on an exodus journey. Each one of us has an exodus story, a story of grace and faith. God is calling us out, away from Egypt. He is calling us in, that we might feed on him. And he is leading us into the wilderness so that we might learn to trust in him. He is asking us to take him into our boat and to make him the captain of our vessel. When we do that he quiets the storms within our hearts and brings us safely to shore. That is when we begin to know the meaning of his words, “I am; do not fear.”

1. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 273.
2. Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 149-150.
3. Carlo Carretto, *Why, O Lord?* Quoted by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1990), 242.