

## John 6:16-24

\_\_\_\_\_ There we were, lying in bed at the end of a long day, too exhausted to move and looking forward to a good night's sleep. The kids were all in bed, the demon-possessed dog was not barking, for once. All was quiet. And as I was lying there in that half-way place, somewhere between asleep and awake, the softest little voice spoke, stirring me from me near-slumber.

“Daddy?”

I lifted my head and tried to make out where the voice was coming from when it sounded again.

“Daddy?”

It was my daughter, whom I could not yet see, but who seemed to be standing only inches away from my right ear. “What is it?” I whispered, trying not to wake up Lisa, and squinting my eyes slightly to try and catch at least the silhouette of her face.

“I’m scared.”

To which I responded with the *pointless* question, “Of what?” My daughter then attempted to explain to me what was scaring her - and I then proceeded to systematically and academically dismiss her fears which, of course, was equally pointless and did not bring about the result that I hoped that it would. At the end, no matter what I said, she was scared and no amount of explanation in the world was going to take that away.

So I then did the thing that I should have done in the first place - I got out of bed, walked her back to her room, tucked her in, and then sat there with her for a little while until she fell asleep. After she was completely out, I carefully got up and made my way back to my own bed for the rest of the night.

That scene has been played out, probably by almost every parent that has ever had the privilege of raising children, and more than one time, I’m sure. But there are just certain occasions when what our children need, and when the best thing we can give them, is the gift of our *presence*.

Of course, we can do that on all sorts of occasions, and for lots of reasons, not the least of which is to provide *comfort* and *assurance* to them when they are scared or hurting or struggling or confused. There is just something about our *being there* - right there - where they can see us, and hear us, and touch us, and even smell us - but there is a comfort and reassurance that can come from our being *there, with them, beside them* - that goes beyond words, beyond logic and reasoning - but can make all the difference in the world.

And that reality, the power of presence, is one among several realities to be found in the verses before us this morning....

Now, as many of you will know, we have been in John's Gospel for a little while now. And we have seen how John has been aiming this miniature biography of Jesus, in the first instance at least, at the scattered Jewish peoples all over the then known world - including in the city of Ephesus, where John was most likely living and pastoring when he wrote these verses.

In order to accomplish his stated goal of seeing God use these Scriptures to reveal the true identity and mission of Jesus - and so engender faith in his readers - John has worked carefully to show aspects of Jesus' divinity and humanity and, at the same time, he has worked to help his readers see how and why Jesus was put to death by his own people - and yet, how even this was all part of God's great plan and purposes.

And so, in chapter 5, we saw the emergence of the "official" opposition (by the Jewish religious authorities) that will eventually lead to Jesus' death and, alongside that, we have seen Jesus' *response* to his opponents which demonstrated, among other things, how they were out of step with their own traditions and, in fact, did not even understand their own Scriptures or leaders - including and especially *Moses*.

Last week we moved into the first part of chapter 6 where we saw Jesus doing and saying things which revealed that he was a prophet "like Moses" and yet which also showed him to be a prophet that far *surpassed* Moses. In particular we looked at the story of the feeding of the 5000 and saw how what Jesus did on that occasion was a conceptual parallel to the time when God provided "manna" - a breadlike substance - for his people in the wilderness, through the ministry of Moses.

More will be said and done over the next couple weeks with this connection between Jesus' feeding and the manna feeding in Moses' day, but before we get stuck into that, I want us to take a look at chapter 6, verses 16-24, which shows us *another* parallel between the ministries of Jesus and Moses. Before we look at that, let's pray together.....

(Pray and read John 6:16-24)

At the end of the previous passage - John 6:1-15 - you will recall how the crowd that Jesus had just fed were declaring him to be "the prophet" about which Moses spoke in Deuteronomy 18 and, as a result, wanted to take Jesus and make him a king - i.e., force him to begin acting as their ruler - believing that this was God's plan and purpose to establish through his promised prophet a *political* kingdom. Jesus, of course, resists this and disappears, which then sets us up for the account before us this morning.

Now, the fact that they get up that evening and pile into the boat and begin heading across toward Capernaum indicates that, before he withdrew from the crowds, Jesus must have left some instructions with them that they should wait until that evening, and then make their way across the sea to Capernaum and that, sometime after that, He would meet them there. Why Jesus had them leave in the evening is not certain. It may have had something to do with the temperatures, it may have had something to do with his wanting them to have a bit of a break by slipping away a little more inconspicuously.

At any rate, the disciples leave without Jesus. And as they head out into the sea, at night, in this oversized rowing vessel, it is important to remember that among these disciples are some professional fishermen and accomplished boatsmen, and people who would have been familiar with the Sea of Galilee - including its unique weather patterns. Some scholars, commenting on this, have noted that the Sea of Galilee is some 600+ feet *below* sea level and so, for reasons which I do not understand (not being a meteorologist) it is apparently prone to frequent and sudden storms rising up with little or no warning - which is what appears to take place in this story.

So the disciples are now rowing across this sea, the wind is blowing hard, and they are, no doubt, not making a great deal of headway against it, but they labor on. And, I might add, there is no evidence in THIS passage of their mental state in the midst of this. It is likely that the inexperienced among them might be quite alarmed at things. And, if this story is a parallel to the account in mark 6, then it may have been even the experienced boatsmen who were feeling a bit frightened and nervous about how things were developing.

Whatever the case, as they are battling through the wind and waves, they catch a glimpse of what seems to be someone walking toward them - **ACROSS THE TOP OF THE WATER**. Now I say glimpse because, if you've ever been on a boat in big swells then you will know what it is like to be traveling from the crest of one wave, and down into a deep trough that can tower up over your head, before you crest the next wave. When you're in that sort of situation you don't get a steady view of anything. And, to complicate matters, when you're in a steady wind, there is the constant spray from the blowing water, as well as the spray that is generated every time the boat smacks back down onto the water's surface. In short, getting a clear sighting of anything is pretty difficult in that kind of situation.

So anyway - the disciples catch a glimpse of what appears to be someone coming toward them across the water - and are frightened by this. Why the fear? Again, if this is a parallel to other Gospel accounts, then as Mark says, it would seem that they were not sure if what they were seeing was real, or was some sort of apparition or ghost. At the very least, this had to be an amazingly *surreal* moment for them all. The sheer *novelty* of what was happening would have been enough to generate uneasiness in the steadiest of people. *None* of these men had ever seen *anything* like this in their lives and that, in itself, would have been quite un-nerving.

Eventually, the figure approaching them gets close enough for them to see that it is Jesus and he greets them with the statement "*It is I, do not be afraid*". Immediately, they breathe a sigh of relief and Jesus gets in. The passage then records quite abruptly that they suddenly found themselves at their destination and the intention, it seems to me, is to communicate that this too is out of the ordinary. A sort of "transportation" miracle, if you will.

Following this we read verses 22-24, which seem to be an effort on John's behalf to provide some sort of corroborating evidence to support the events just described - a kind of "Meanwhile, back at the shores of Bethsaida..." sort of moment.

We are told that the morning after all this has taken place, the crowds awaken to discover that Jesus is missing and so get up and begin looking around for him. But he's gone. And his disciples are gone. Somehow, they work out that the disciples have gone away to Capernaum, and head out after them. And the crowd at this point seems to have grown to include not only the people from the previous day, but also people who have only just arrived by boat from a seaside city named Tiberius.

Well, in thinking about the significance of this account for the people who would have first received it - the people in John's day, we have to remember that it is the *Passover* season, right? As we saw last week - it is that time of the year. The miracle of the feeding of the multitude, followed by the miracle of Jesus walking on the water took place during that season of the year when God's people were *thinking* about the Passover. This all took place as they were remembering the story of Moses and the deliverance of God's people, and their escape from the Egyptians through the *waters*, and their wandering in the *wilderness* and God's provision of *bread* for them in the wilderness - *those accounts* would have been very much on the minds of both the people in the story, when it happened, and of John's readers when they saw the word "Passover".

And so, just as in the days of Moses, when God's people escaped and were delivered *through* the waters of the sea, while their enemies were crushed by the same waters, in this account we see God's people - representatively as the 12 disciples - being delivered from trouble *upon* the sea. And just as God worked through Moses to *control* the waters, so also Jesus shows his mastery of the sea and elements here, walking *upon* the waters, forcing them to submit to him, subduing them beneath his feet.

Again, we see here that Jesus is the prophet who is *like Moses* and yet who also *surpasses* Moses. Moses walked through the waters, to be sure. But he never walked *ON* them. As a result, if Moses was a great deliverer of God's people in his day - which he certainly was - then how much greater of a deliverer will Jesus be - who has surpassed him?

Now, if you want to understand the dynamic here, then you have to understand that the situation in which Jesus found himself, and the one which John was also having to deal with in his ministry, was not unlike what often happens in churches - and I suspect in other fields of employment too - when a new pastor comes in behind a previous one who was much loved and respected by the congregation. Consequently, one of the challenges for the new pastor in a parish with such a long pastoral history is in contending with the "ghost of previous pastors" and with the very strong loyalties and commitments that many in the congregation still have toward these people.

Now, in many ways, that is a good thing, especially if the former pastors were faithful and committed to the things of the Lord because it means, among other things, that God was using them and that peoples' lives were touched and changed. And that's a good thing.

But not all such attachments and loyalties are a good thing. Sometimes the loyalties that remain are not so much a commitment to the former leader as they are an expression and indicator of a person's stubbornness and unwillingness to change and grow. Sometimes they are a sign that a person has stopped listening to God. Sometimes they are a sign that a person has idolized their commitment to a former pastor and rendered themselves incapable of following another and so, in that process, have become the very sort of person that - if their former pastor *were* there - he would have rebuked them for becoming.

Now it's not an exact parallel, but at least some of that sort of dynamic was going on in Jesus' day, and later on in John's day when he was writing about all this. The people were committed and loyal to Moses - who was a good and faithful leader of God's people. But in reality they had not listened closely *enough* to Moses and had stopped listening to God and, ultimately, were becoming the very sort of persons that Moses would have rebuked them for becoming. If Moses were there, and if he had seen the ways that they were using their commitments to *him* and what he said and did to justify their continued resistance to Jesus - he would have been horrified! He would have rebuked them soundly for pitting Jesus over against him - as if the two were somehow rivals, as if they weren't actually serving the same plan and purpose and the very same God.

And so that is the sort of thing that Jesus faced and, John as well. In the face of that kind of circumstance, the challenge was to show who Jesus was, without denigrating or disparaging Moses, or the things that God did and said through him.

Now that *particular* dynamic is not one that we, as the church today, share with the original recipients of this Gospel. Addressing a skewed and misguided commitment to the person and ministry of Moses is not the huge issue for us that it might have been for John's target audience. But there are other implications here which *are* as relevant to us, as they would have been for God's people in John's day.

One such implication is seen in the simple observation that in this story the disciples get into strife precisely because *they are doing what Jesus asked them to do*. Jesus is the one who has sent them on ahead - which is a foreshadowing of what he will do with them in more significant ways later on. But he sends them on ahead and, because they do what he tells them to do, they find themselves in this precarious and frightening situation on the sea. In short, Jesus is the one that has placed them *in the path of this storm*.

Whatever else following Jesus might mean, one thing it surely means is that in following his lead, you will be taken into some hard places, some wilderness places, some stormy and rough places. And when you are in those places, it is expressly NOT a sign that you have been abandoned by God. If being faithful to God finds you in some rough waters, then you can be quite certain that you are not where you are by accident, but by design. You can be sure that everything that is happening TO you, is also happening FOR you. Now that sort of knowledge won't get you *off* the ride, but it just might change your experience OF it.

Another thing to notice here is that the disciples were *out in the storm for quite some time before Jesus showed up*. It seems that Jesus was willing to let them struggle with this thing for a good while. Again, the evidence for this is not so much to be found in this passage but in one of the parallel passages - if it is indeed a parallel. When we go to those passages we see the additional information that the time at which Jesus came to them was around the 4th watch of the night - which would have been somewhere between 3 and 6 am.

In short, Jesus came to them, but he wasn't in a big hurry. Now why was that? Well, I think it's because of the simple truth that *not everything worth knowing can be learned in a classroom*. Some things can only be learned in a crisis. You can't learn perseverance without being in a situation where the thing that you want to do more than anything else - is give up. You've heard me say this before, but you can't learn patience and long-suffering without being in circumstances that are absolutely exasperating. You won't learn that God really *can be* a very present help in trouble - without being in troubling circumstances!. You won't learn the danger of trusting in yourself apart from repeatedly becoming the victim of your own self-reliance.

Jesus led his disciples into hard places, to teach them hard lessons. And if *you* are going to identify *yourself* as his disciple, if you are going to learn what the disciples learned and know that they knew, the you're going to have to be prepared to learn it the *WAY* that they learned it, and in the same sorts of places. As one writer puts it,

*Don't be surprised if you make a commitment to follow the Lord with all your heart and find yourself in difficulty. Don't be surprised..... if you make as a resolution... a prayer to the effect, "I want to follow you Lord more closely than ever before" - don't be surprised if, in the wake of a prayer like that, you find yourselves in trouble, you find yourselves in difficulty, you find your family under pressure, and you find yourselves in work facing pressures and difficulties and trials that you've never faced before—don't be surprised.*

Still another thing to notice here is the close attention that Jesus pays to his disciples. As one commentator puts it, "*...the fact that we cannot see Jesus does not mean that he cannot see us, or is not watching us. The disciples were never out of Jesus sight, although he was, for a time, out of theirs...*" (Milne).

We may look around sometimes, especially when we are struggling, and feel that God is not there, that He's is not paying attention. And the longer we face a particular crisis, the more easily we can be convinced of that. But, as the Scriptures tell us, this is the God who knows when every sparrow falls to the ground, who knows the number of hairs on your head. And this is the God who, knowing those things, will come at just the right time and will make himself known to his people.

The disciples in that boat may have wondered if their master was aware of what was going on with them. But the truth is, He *was* aware, whether they could see it or not, whether they knew it or not. He wasn't off in some corner, oblivious to what was happening. He knew. And He was watching. And he came to them at the right time.

You and I can know, and must know the same thing. We are never out of his sight. Even when we have lost sight of Him, he has not lost sight of us. And He will come, when the time is right. And the thing that you need to know and believe is that there is a place, a perspective, a ledge, upon which you will one day stand, and from THAT vantage point, when you look back across the landscape of your life, and the path that God has taken you on - when you look back on *these things* that trouble us so much right now - these “storms” - you will see the goodness and wisdom and consummate timing of God who has shown us Himself through these very challenges.

Finally, please notice the *power of Jesus’ presence for the disciples*. In this story, Jesus comes to them *amidst* the storm, and even while it is still going on, he assured them OF and BY his presence with them. And they felt *glad* in that assurance, even with everything else going on around them. And that is the comforting thing - to know that God can and does DO these things and that such assurance and calm is possible even in the middle of very hard things.

To be sure, there is no set formula for how he can and does calm and assure his people when they are experiencing fearful and troubling things. One person may pray and see deliverance and know the ministry of God’s presence - that calming, assuring certainty, that peace - and yet retain their difficulty. Others, God may choose to calm in other ways - even by removing the difficulty. But the key is that God can be trusted - as Jesus was trusted - to come to his own and to deliver them through and amidst their trouble. And we can know that when He comes to His own, He brings the strong blessing of his mighty presence and that He is able to lead us to a safe harbor.