

John's Gospel - Jesus Walks of Water

by John Vissers

Jesus walks on the water to his disciples, revealing his divine identity and presence, and calming their fears and uncertainty.

Duration: 37:43

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Jesus walking on water and the disciples' reaction to it. The disciples were initially terrified when they saw Jesus approaching them on the water, possibly because they didn't recognize Him or because they were overwhelmed by the miraculous sight. The preacher addresses various interpretations of the story, including one that suggests Jesus was actually walking along the shore. However, this interpretation raises questions about why the disciples would have been rowing in the storm for so long if they were close to shore. The main point of the sermon is to highlight the disciples' fear and their need for Jesus in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Transcript

Chapter 6 and reading verses 16 to 21. We've been in John's Gospel since last September and tonight will be the last message in John's Gospel, at least we're going to take a break for the summer. I had thought by this time we might be a little further than the middle of chapter 6, but here we are in the middle of chapter 6 and our passage this evening deals with Jesus walking on the water.

So John chapter 6 starting at verse 16. When evening came his disciples went down to the lake where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark and Jesus had not yet joined them.

A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rode three or three and a half miles they saw Jesus approaching the boat walking on the water and they were terrified. But he said to them, it is I, don't be afraid.

Then they were willing to take him into the boat and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. Then on to verse 22. The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples but that they had gone away alone.

Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. Amen and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight.

Let's bow together in prayer. Lord we ask this evening that you would prepare our hearts and our minds to receive your word. Silence within us any voice but your own voice that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives.

Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen. In one of his books Jimmy Carter describes the difficulties that he encountered and the problems that he experienced with the press when he was president of the United States in the late 1970s.

The press was often very critical of him. They often complained about him. They ridiculed him.

They complained about many of his public policies and they also ridiculed him quite frequently for his openly public profession of Christian faith. And Jimmy Carter and his aides realized as he tells the story in this book that it seemed that no matter what they did they were not going to be able to get the press on their side. That no matter what they did there was always this criticism there no matter what they did they would never get the support of the press in the United States which led one of his aides to conclude the following.

One of his aides said this if the president were to walk on water the headline would read Jimmy Carter can't swim. Well the headline of our passage this evening is different. The headline tells us that Jesus walked on water.

It says Jesus walked on the water on the Sea of Galilee to his disciples. And the story which we find here in John chapter 6 is also found in Matthew chapter 14 in verses 22 to 36. It's also found in parallel in Mark chapter 6 in verses 45 to 52.

And in each instance as the gospel writers tell the story they take great care to remind us that it took place after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. After the multitude had been fed after they had been satisfied after they had been fed with the loaves and the fish. Then we read that the crowds tried to take Jesus by force and make him king.

And verse 15 of John chapter 6 says that Jesus when this happened withdrew from them as we saw the last time as we looked at this passage in John chapter 6. He withdrew from them into the mountains into the hillside to pray to be by himself. And now in verse 16 it says when evening came the disciples went down to the Sea of Galilee and they got into a boat in order to sail across the lake to Capernaum. Now at first glance it might seem rather strange that they would do this.

It might even seem rude that they would head back without Jesus. But Mark in the parallel passage in chapter 6 and verse 45 makes it clear that the disciples were not abandoning Jesus. They were not being disloyal.

They were not forgetting about him but that Jesus himself had instructed them to go on ahead home. And so what's happening here is this sets the stage then for what is the fifth miraculous sign of John's gospel. The disciples now are going to be confronted in a very personal way and in a very real way with the power and with the presence of Jesus in their lives.

The miracles that Jesus has performed to this point have been very public. They have been done out in the open so that all kinds of people saw them. But now Jesus walks on the water to rescue his own disciples and to reveal his presence, to reveal his power, to reveal his identity to them.

They now have an experience which draws them into a deeper relationship with their Lord and they come to understand in a more profound way who he is and what he is about and what he has come to do. Now as we think into this passage together this evening I want to suggest to you that there are three key phrases here that I think we can lift out of this passage and hang our thoughts on together this evening. And I'd like us to look at each of these phrases to get at the heart of what I think this important passage in John's gospel is about tonight.

So let's come then to first of all in verses 16 to 18 and particularly this first phrase, it was, now dark. The passage opens by telling us that when evening came, the text says, the disciples of Jesus went down to the Sea of Galilee, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark and Jesus, it says, has not yet or had not yet come to them.

So the night came on. They began to make their way across the lake. The night comes, it's dark, and a great storm begins to blow and it says the disciples were alone in the boat when the storm blows up.

Matthew and Mark tell us that the wind was against them and that they were rowing against the wind in this storm till about three o'clock in the morning, probably rowing for about six or seven hours. So here they are fighting a storm in the middle of the night in the middle of the lake without Jesus. And John underlines this by saying it was dark.

It describes their outward circumstances, but I want to suggest to you that it in fact describes, and it's intended to describe, much more because it describes the situation in which they find themselves as disciples in the world. You'll remember that one of the great themes of John's Gospel is darkness and light, and John takes great care to develop that theme right from the first chapter through to the end of his Gospel. You remember in John chapter 1, Jesus is the light of the world who shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.

And then in John chapter 3, you remember that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. John underlines that fact, and he learns from Jesus that is Nicodemus the verdict that light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light. And in John chapter 8, a couple of chapters from now, we read that Jesus is the light of the world.

Whoever follows him will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life. And in John chapter 13, in the upper room when Jesus reveals that one of his own disciples is going to betray him, and then Judas is the one. And Judas leaves.

He excuses himself when he's found out from the other twelve, from the other disciples. And as he leaves the upper room to betray Jesus, John the Gospel writer says, it was night. And so what we're discovering, what we find here as we come to this chapter, is that the disciples here are in the dark.

They are in the night. They are perplexed and at a loss. They are bereft of their master.

They are deep in the heart of the night. They are fighting against the wind. They are in the middle of the lake and away from the safety of the shore.

They're threatened by the storm and the reality that they may not make it across the lake. And in fact, that they may drown. And this is, it seems to me, a picture of discipleship in the world.

And it's what John is intending to remind us of. That the disciples have just witnessed the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and then they saw the way in which the crowd had misunderstood Jesus and tried to take him by force and make him king. And now they are alone in the eye of the storm and in the darkness of the night, trying to find their own way, trying to be his disciples, trying to manage in the midst of the darkness.

Bruce Milne, who's the pastor of First Baptist Church in Vancouver and who's written a book on John's gospel, describes it this way. He says, here is discipleship without the discerned presence of the Lord. And recalling, he says, the traditional image of the church as a boat, it is not difficult to make the application.

He says, in many parts of the world today, particularly in the West, it would be difficult to find a more telling picture of the church. Here is a small handful of people, seemingly remote from the land where most people live their lives, apparently irrelevant to the great issues confronting the world. It is tossed by the winds of secularism, without and controversy within, out of touch with its point of departure, unsure of its whereabouts and with no clear destination ahead.

And he says, all the while its members, like the disciples in the story, strain at the oars of good works and ministry, making no apparent headway in the process. Crucially, they have no manifest conviction that Jesus, the head and Lord of the church, is anywhere in sight. In short, it is dark.

And so it seems to me, as we think into this passage this evening, one of the questions we want to ask ourselves is whether this is a picture of discipleship in Canada at the end of this century. Is this what it's like to be a disciple of Jesus? Is this a picture of the Christian Church today? Is this a picture of our congregation? And perhaps even more importantly, is it a picture of our own lives? Many people can identify with these words, it was dark. And Jesus seems to be nowhere around.

It may be during a time of trial or testing or temptation. It may be during a time of illness. It may be in the midst of a broken relationship.

It may be in the midst of a financial crisis. It may be in some kind of circumstance that seems to be overwhelming you. And somehow you're fighting against the wind, it seems.

You're in the middle of a storm, in the eye of a storm. And the harder you row, the more tired you become. And the more hopeless it seems to be, the more difficult is the situation in which you find yourselves.

I don't know whether you've ever experienced that kind of a reality, that kind of an experience in your life when it seems like the darkness simply descends. And Jesus seems nowhere to be found. There seems to be no light anywhere.

And you ask, where is the Lord in all of this? Where is the Lord to be found? The text says it was dark. And no matter how hard they rowed, they couldn't row out of the darkness themselves. And then secondly, as we come to verse 19, we come to this second phrase which says they were frightened.

Verse 19, when they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water, and it says they were terrified. They were frightened. Suddenly, as they're out in the

middle of the lake, the lake's about 11 kilometers, so they're about halfway across by this point, they've been rowing six or seven hours, they're in the midst of the darkness, they're in the midst of the storm, suddenly Jesus is seen walking on the water toward them.

Now what are we to make of this? Some people find this difficult to believe and difficult to accept, and some of the commentators try to explain it away in all sorts of interesting explanations. Some of them say that the phrase, on the water, should be translated by the water. And the suggestion is that the disciples have been rowing along and fairly close to the shoreline, and Jesus appears walking along the shore, and he comes along and he steps out and he encourages them and brings them safely to the shore.

But of course, there are a number of problems with this particular suggestion and this particular interpretation. One of them is, of course, if they are so close to shore, why would they row for five or six hours in the storm? I mean, why would they be fighting against the wind? Why would they be fighting with the storm? If they were so close to shore, it seems that it would have made more sense for them to land the boat on shore, get out, and it would have been a much easier walk around the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, around to the other side, to Capernaum, which is where they were headed. The other problem with trying to argue this away is it says the disciples were terrified.

That is, they were frightened when they saw Jesus. Now, why would they be frightened? Why would they be terrified if they simply saw Jesus walking on the shore? It doesn't really come to terms with their fear. It doesn't explain their terror.

Something startled them. Something seemed unusual. Something seemed out of the ordinary.

And finally, if this is not a miraculous appearance of Jesus, it seems rather difficult to see why the story would be included at this point in John's Gospel. In fact, the other parallel versions in Matthew and Mark make it very clear that Jesus came to the disciples in the midst of the night, in the darkness, in the midst of this storm, in the middle of the lake, walking on the water. John expects us, and I think we can't pull our punches here, he expects us to believe that the one whom he describes in John 1 as the one who created the whole world, as the one whom he describes in John 2 as the one who turned the water into wine, the one who healed the disabled man at the Sheepgate Pool in John 5, the one who's just fed the 5,000, this large crowd, over 5,000 people, with bread, five loaves, and two fishes, he expects us to believe that this Jesus, this Jesus who's being uncovered and revealed to us throughout the Gospel of John, is in fact able to come to the disciples walking on the water.

And so he comes. And it's important to notice the disciples' reaction. The first phrase, it was dark, describes the outward circumstances in which they found themselves, but now this second phrase describes their inner state of mind.

They were terrified. They were terrified. Why? Why were they afraid? Why were they terrified? Well, perhaps they didn't recognize Jesus at first, perhaps they didn't know it was Jesus, or perhaps they did recognize him, but they were overwhelmed by what they saw.

After all, it's not every day that you see someone walking on the water, and here Jesus is coming to them on the water, and they are afraid. They're not sure what is happening. And John's point seems to be almost an ironic one, because the disciples now seem to be more afraid of the Savior than they were of the storm.

Somehow this experience terrifies them in a way that even the storm itself didn't. And I want to suggest to you that there are times in our lives when Jesus coming to us only seems to intensify our difficulties and our troubles, at least at first. When Jesus comes in the midst of the storms of life, one of the questions, of course, that we always wrestle with is, how can we be sure that it's really Jesus? How can we be certain that it's really Jesus who is coming to us and not some stranger? How can we have the assurance of faith? And so the first problem that the disciples faced, and a problem that all of us, it seems to me, face, is the problem of knowing whether it is really Jesus who has come to help us, having that assurance.

We all struggle with that uncertainty, that lack of assurance, that niggling doubt in the back of our minds. Is it really Jesus who has come to help us, who has come to rescue us? But sometimes, of course, the problem is not uncertainty, and it may well not have been for the disciples either. Sometimes the problem is terror, because we know beyond any shadow of a doubt that, in fact, it really is the Lord God who is making his way into our lives, that it really is Jesus who is breaking into our lives, and his presence is overwhelming.

His presence is mysterious, and his presence shatters our paradigms. After all, Jesus isn't supposed to work in this way. He's not supposed to suspend the laws of nature and walk on water.

He's not supposed to come waltzing into our life in this way. And so sometimes we think it would be so much easier if Jesus didn't come in a way that made us feel uneasy, or in a way that even made us feel afraid. But Jesus comes.

Jesus comes in his power and in his presence, and Jesus comes in his own time, and Jesus comes on his own terms, and Jesus comes to these disciples, and so Jesus comes to us in the midst of our lives as well. And then we come to really the turning point, I suppose, or at least the the center, the heart of this passage, the third phrase in verses 20 and 21, where Jesus says, it is I, don't be afraid. Jesus says to them, it is I, don't be afraid.

Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. In the midst of this darkness, in the midst of this terror, in the midst of this fear, Jesus now identifies himself. Jesus now reveals his identity to his disciples, and Jesus says to them, it's me.

It is I. Stop being afraid. But we need to understand the phrase which is used here because the words, it is I, in this passage translate the Greek words, ego, a me, which literally mean I, I am. It is an emphatic, it repeats the I twice.

I, I am. It's as if it's underlined, it's emphasized. And this is the same phrase which is used throughout the Gospel of John with the great I am sayings.

Do you remember those sayings, the great I am sayings? I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the Good Shepherd. I am the way and the truth and the life. Before Abraham was, I am.

And in John's Gospel, this little phrase is intended to refer to the divine name, the name of God. It is the name by which God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3. You remember when Moses is confronted by God in the burning bush and he's told to go and to lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land? And Moses says to God, who shall I say sent me? I mean, why are they going to believe me? And the Lord says to Moses, tell them I am has sent you. And John wants us to

understand in this passage that the appearance of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee is a divine appearance.

It is the presence of the Lord himself. But there's even more if we press a bit further into this passage, because the appearance of Jesus on the water is also intended to remind us and to recall for us the great Exodus event from the Old Testament. The deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt to freedom, to their wilderness wandering.

In the wilderness they were fed and with bread from heaven they were sustained by the manna provided by the Lord. And what John is doing in this chapter is he's unfolding for us a parallel. Jesus has fed the 5,000 with bread and fish.

He's miraculously provided for them. And now this event occurs in the middle and then later in John chapter 6, Jesus teaches on the meaning of the bread of life. And in fact in John chapter 6 verses 30 to 33 and then 58, there are specific references to the wilderness experience.

Jesus is the bread of life and those who eat from him will live forever. They will never die. And so we've got this story, this parallel being developed in relation to the Exodus in the Old Testament.

In between the bondage in Egypt and their being freed and their wandering in the wilderness, what happened? They had to cross, the people of Israel had to cross through the Red Sea. And this was for them the supreme demonstration of the majesty and the power of God as the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea for the people of Israel. The story is told in Exodus chapters 12 to 14 and God intervened for them.

God overruled for them. The sea was parted and they made their way across. And here Jesus appears in this passage as the Lord of the waves and the seas.

John wants us to understand that he is the personal manifestation of the Almighty God the Lord himself who walked upon the waters of the Red Sea to deliver his people. That was the way the people of Israel remembered and celebrated the Red Sea experience. And now here the Lord Jesus himself is walking on the water.

And so the words of Psalm 77, for example, ring in the background. When the water saw you, O God, when the water saw you, they were afraid. The very deep trembled.

The clouds poured out like water. The skies thundered. Your arrows flashed on every side.

The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind. Your lightnings lit up the world. The earth trembled and shook.

Your path was through the sea. Your path through the mighty waters, yet your footprints were unseen. If you think of those words of Psalm 77 and think about what happens here in John 6 or the words of Psalm 107 verses 29 to 30, he stilled the storm to a whisper.

The waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm and he guided them to their desired haven. Now, why am I taking a bit of time here to try to paint this picture? It's because in this passage, Jesus is portrayed.

Jesus is revealed as the Lord of the wind and the waves. And his disciples and all those who first read the Gospel of John would have had that great picture of the Exodus, of going across the Red Sea of the Lord

who walked on the waters, who parted the sea, the Lord who has power over the water. They would have that in the back of their minds.

And here Jesus comes to his disciples and his disciples see and understand and experience and know that here they have to do with the Lord God Himself and the Person of their Master, their Lord Jesus. And he comes to them and he comes to bring them safely to their destination. And notice the text says that the disciples took Jesus into the boat and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

And so the disciples now know that Jesus is more than a prophet. He's more than the prophet that the people thought he was. He's more than a king, the kind of king that they wanted to make him by taking him by force and putting him on the throne so that they could get out from underneath the Roman yoke.

They know now that he is Yahweh, Jehovah, Lord God, the one revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the one who led the people out of Egypt through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land, the one who can feed with not just physical bread but bread from heaven. He is their Lord and their God. And they know that separated from him they were in the dark, struggling under their own power against the forces of the storm which was against them.

But when Jesus comes, God comes to them in him and they see him and they accept him and they are delivered. And I want to suggest to you this evening that there are times in our lives when life seems to be too burdensome for us, when spiritual victory somehow seems beyond our grasp, when we are rowing against the wind, when we find ourselves in the darkness, and when we see the stormy seas threatening to engulf us, the winds blasting around us, and the more we struggle the more we seem to fall behind and often we are terrified and we are afraid. And it's at those moments that we need to hear the same words which Jesus spoke on the Sea of Galilee so many years ago.

It is I. Do not be afraid. It is I. Not just a prophet, not just a king, not just a priest, but indeed the Lord God himself. You see, he comes to his disciples and reveals to them in a more profound way who he is and what he has come to do.

And as he rescues them and as they experience that deliverance, he leads them safely home. But the disciples did one thing that all of us have to do. It says that they were willing to take Jesus into the boat.

And that's really the question, it seems to me, for all of us this evening. That's really when all is said and done, the crucial and the critical question, are we willing to take Jesus on board? Because you see, it's one thing to see Jesus walking on the water. It's one thing to even affirm the great truths which are taught in this passage.

But it's quite another to take him on board, to let him into our lives, to let him get into the boat, to relinquish control of the oars as we struggle in the midst of our own lives, and to let him take his seat in our life and let him safely, quickly, indeed miraculously, as seems to be the case here, take us to the destination that he has for us, to let him take us home. Yes, Jesus walked on the water. That's the headline.

But the real story is, will you take him on board in your life tonight? Let's pray together. Lord, there may be some of us here tonight who feel like it is dark. The darkness may be there for all kinds of reasons, perhaps an illness, perhaps a broken relationship, perhaps some disappointment, perhaps unemployment, perhaps facing a financial crisis.

Lord, whatever that darkness is tonight, we cry out to you. We pray that in the midst of the darkness and in the midst of the fear, you would reveal yourself to us in a new way, that you would come to us as Lord and Savior, that you would help us to believe and to have faith, that you cannot simply help us, but that you can come into our very hearts and lives and minds and souls and transform them and make us to be new people and to bring us out of the darkness into your marvelous light and to bring us safely home to the destination that you have for us. Lord, if that's our circumstance tonight, we reach out to you with arms of faith, reaching out and praying that you would come to us, help us to believe, help us to receive, help us to go forth renewed and empowered for the sake of Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen.

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