

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS
(6) THE MAN WHO WALKS ON WATER

John 6:15-21
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SCRIPTURE

¹⁵When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself. ¹⁶That evening Jesus' disciples went down to the shore to wait for him. ¹⁷But as darkness fell and Jesus still hadn't come back, they got into the boat and headed across the lake toward Capernaum. ¹⁸Soon a gale swept down upon them, and the sea grew very rough. ¹⁹They had rowed three or four miles when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, ²⁰but he called out to them, "Don't be afraid. I am here!" ²¹Then they were eager to let him in the boat, and immediately they arrived at their destination! (John 6:15-21 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

Jesus is the man who walks on water.

There were three religious leaders from the same town who liked to fish: a Roman Catholic Priest, a Jewish Rabbi and a Protestant Minister. One day they were out in a boat fishing and it was about noon. The priest put down his pole, stepped out of the boat, walked to shore, got his lunch and returned. The rabbi saw this and he went, "Hmm." A few minutes later the minister put down his pole, stepped out of the boat, walked to shore, got his lunch and returned. The rabbi saw this and he went, "Hmm." After a few apprehensive moments, the rabbi put down his pole, stepped out of the boat and went "Kersplash!" He was immersed in the water. The priest leaned over to the minister and said, "Do you suppose we should have told him where the stones are?"

That's the way those guys walked on the water. But that is not the way Jesus walked on the water.¹ The fifth of seven miraculous signs found in the section of John's Gospel

¹The Greek of "walking on the water" (vs 19) can be translated as "walking by the water." Some critics who have trouble with the miraculous say that the disciples were much closer to the shore than they thought and that Jesus was merely walking on the shoreline to encourage them. However, this does not explain why the disciples were terrified to see Jesus nor why John included the incident in his gospel. It does not match the other gospel accounts where there is no ambiguity (cf. Mt. 14:24; Mk. 6:47).

known as the Book of Signs is not explicitly identified as a “sign” by John. But it clearly fulfills the role of a sign by being a miraculous event that points us to the identity of Jesus and the nature of the new life he offers us. John tells us:

¹⁹They had rowed three or four miles when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, ²⁰but he called out to them, “Don’t be afraid. I am here!” (6:19,20).

I cannot walk on water (except maybe Gogouac in mid-winter). Nobody here can walk on water. But Jesus walked on water. The Bible does not simply tell us that Jesus walked on water. It tells us that Jesus walked on water during a storm. This is significant. If we forget about the storm we will miss the point of the miracle. Jesus comes to us in unexpected ways during the storms of life.

1. PRIORITIES

One night, the disciples found themselves in the midst of a raging storm. Jesus was not with them and they were anxious and afraid. How did they get in that mess?

On the previous day, they had been in a remote place near the northeast shore of Galilee where a large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach. After awhile it became obvious that they were unprepared to be in that place as they had very little food. But Jesus was able to multiply what little food was available. Everybody had enough to eat and then some. As you can imagine this made Jesus quite popular with the crowd. In fact, the crowd tried to force Jesus to become their king.

In those days, their king was the Roman Emperor but they did not want him to be their king. They wanted a Jewish king. So when Jesus showed such promise they thought maybe he could be the king they always wanted, a king who had the ability to raise up an army and overthrow the Romans. A king who would make sure their bellies were filled.

Some of Jesus' own disciples even held to this opinion at this particular time. But they were mistaken. That is not why Jesus came. He was not interested in establishing a political kingdom. His concern was for the Kingdom of God and the salvation of the human race. So what did Jesus do? He slipped away quietly into the hills.

We do not know how the disciples reacted to this but it is likely they were hurt, even confused by Jesus' behavior. “Why did he do that to us?”

They had misplaced their priorities. They had attached the wrong importance to Jesus. They, like the crowd, saw Jesus in terms of their wants and not in terms of their needs.

They wanted him to fit their expectations rather than try to understand what God expected of them.

They decided to sail back to Capernaum on the northwest side of Galilee. Perhaps they thought they would meet up with Jesus there. The fact that it was night was not unusual as they were used to fishing at night. But the weather changed. Sudden, unexpected squalls were frequent on the Sea of Galilee. Based on details from Matthew and Mark's Gospels, they had probably already gone over halfway when caught in the storm. Turning back was not really an option. Fishing boats were equipped with oars; the sail would be useless in the storm.

So that is why they were out in the boat when a storm struck. They were caught in a storm. And there is nothing like a storm to help sort out your priorities.

Some years ago I was taking a youth group to a major conference in Colorado. Along the way we stopped in Lincoln, Nebraska. We went into a very busy McDonald's and I waited in line a long time for a fish sandwich. I finally got my fish sandwich. I found a seat, sat down, unwrapped my sandwich and was about to put it up to my mouth when a tornado touched down. The manager ran out yelling at the top of his lungs, "There's a tornado. Drop everything and go down into the basement now!" For a split second I hesitated. I had waited so long for this fish sandwich. I had to decide: fish sandwich or my life. I decided my life was more important and I dropped the sandwich and ran down into the basement with everyone else. The storm hit and caused quite a bit of damage but we survived. There is nothing like a storm to help sort out your priorities.

When times are tough that is when you sort out what is really important. When the storms of life hit that is when you need to decide on what really matters. The superficial must give way to the deep and abiding. The temporary must give way to the eternal.

2. WORSHIP

It was late, the storm was raging and things were bad enough when suddenly, the disciples saw a ghost. They were terrified and they cried out. But it was not a ghost. It was Jesus coming to them on the water.

Jesus called out, "Don't be afraid. I am here!" The phrase "I am here" is a legitimate translation but the Greek is literally "I am." Given the context of Jesus walking on water, the nuance of deity in "I am" is likely also intended. In Exodus we read that Moses asked God for his name:

¹⁴God replied to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of

Israel: I AM has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14 NLT).

As I indicated at the beginning of this series, there is no other gospel that so emphatically stresses the real divinity of Jesus. John saw in Jesus one who had always been even before the world began. Again and again he speaks of his coming down from heaven (6:33-38). John tells us that when Jesus met up with some of the same people he had miraculously fed the day previous, he said:

³²“I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. ³³The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”
³⁴“Sir,” they said, “give us that bread every day.” ³⁵Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:32-35 NLT).

John also talks of the glory which Jesus had with the Father before the *cosmos* existed. He is Yahweh in human flesh.

⁵⁸Jesus [said], “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM” (John 8:58 NLT).

Moses parted the Red Sea but only God walks on the water. The psalmist says of God:

¹⁹ Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen. ²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron (Ps 77:19-20 NRSV).

And from Job:

God alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8).

The disciples were awestruck at this Jesus. They recognized that somehow God was in their midst but we know from the parallel accounts in the Gospels that they were, in fact, nearly scared to death. “Who is this man that even the wind and the waves obey him?” (Matt 8:27).

Some anthropologists teach that primitive people invented religion in order to cope with their fears. If you were a seafaring people afraid of a storm at sea you would invent a god to help you deal with your fears. This theory is taught in campuses all across America.

But this theory does not fit our account. It doesn't make any sense. Consider this. Here is exhibit A: the storm on Galilee. Here is exhibit B: the guy who calmed the storm, Jesus of Nazareth. The disciples became more afraid of Jesus, the guy who calmed the storm, than they were of the storm that originally frightened them. My question is this. Why would you invent a god more terrifying than the original thing that scared you? The answer is, you would not do that. Because this is not made up. This is not invention. This is real.

Jesus is Lord. And he is awesome and mighty and powerful and holy and majestic and imposing and wondrous and exalted and grand and magnificent and overwhelming and if we were not so spiritually blind and stupid we would fall down in terror before him. But Jesus is not our enemy. He seeks our friendship. He wants to rescue us from the storms of sin and death. He wants to restore us to our Creator. He wants us to gain everlasting life. Such a person is worthy of our highest worship.

3. PEACE

The disciples had pushed out to cross the sea, but it was not long before they ran into inclement weather. Darkness and a violent wind and a heavy sea were about to overwhelm them. And Jesus was not with them. Is this not a picture of contemporary life?

We face terrifying problems that defy human solution. We face the breakdown of our principal relationships. We face ever-increasing violence and anger in our homes, places of work, and schools. There is a sense of hopelessness and despair that seem to paralyze the human spirit. We are in the dark, at sea, while a terrible storm rages. And there does not seem to be anyone in the boat who can save us.

Bruce Milne makes this observation from this passage:

Here is discipleship without the discerned presence of the Lord, and, recalling the traditional image of the church as a [sailing] boat, it is not difficult to make application. 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 and uncertainty within, out of touch with its point of departure, unsure of its whereabouts, and with no clear destination ahead.

Out of touch with its point of departure, unsure of its whereabouts, and with no clear

destination ahead – this describes the disciples during the storm but it also seems to describe the modern Church. Many feel like we have lost hope. But we have not lost hope. We just forgot who hope is.

In the midst of this violent Galilean storm, a barely visible figure could be seen walking on the water toward their boat. They were terrified and they cried out. But it was not a ghost. It was Jesus coming to them on the water.

So Jesus came to them. They had never been out of his sight, even if he may have been out of theirs (Mk 6:48). His commitment is unconditional. His people, whatever their limitations, will never be abandoned.

Jesus assured them, “Don’t be afraid. I am here!” Jesus stepped on board the boat and the storm ceased. The wind and the waves became still. He was welcomed into the boat and they “immediately” came to the land where they were going. Indeed, his presence will always bring us to our destination in his own way and time. Jesus stepped on board and there was peace.

Oceanographers tell us that 25 feet below the surface the ocean is tranquil. Regardless of what may be happening on the surface, a storm may be raging, 25 feet below it is calm. Depth means calm. If you and I have a shallow faith then when the storms of life hit we will be anxious. But if we have a deep and abiding faith in the Lord then if the storms rage, within us there is peace knowing that God is with us and will not forsake us.

CONCLUSION

The fifth sign from John’s Book of Signs tells us something about Jesus and how he relates to us during the difficult times of life – the “storms” of life if you will. Jesus does not promise to spare us from the difficulties of life but he does promise to go with us. And with Jesus’ help there is a great deal of good that can come out of a storm.

- Clear Priorities.
- Genuine Worship.
- Lasting Peace.

What storms are you going through right now? Or perhaps you are in the lull between storms. In any case, I want you to know that Jesus is with you, perhaps in ways you did not expect. Listen to his reassuring voice. Then welcome him aboard.