

**"The Personal Presence of Jesus"
(John 6:16-21)
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When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Today's story is a well-known story that appears in other gospels as well. It's the story of Jesus walking on the water. As we look at this story we want to ask, what is this story in the life of Jesus trying to teach us? Is this story there just to show us that Jesus as the Son of God has the supernatural ability to defy the laws of nature by walking on water? That's probably a part of it, but there's more to it than that. The key to understanding this story is to look at the context; that means we need to read the events that happened before this event and what happened after this event. As we said last week the whole of chapter 6 is a continuous flow of events that are connected to each other. Let's take a look at what's going on.

At the beginning of chapter 6 Jesus and his disciples go away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, but they soon realize that an enormous crowd was following them and the author tells us that the reason they were following them was because Jesus had done many miracles, especially in healing the sick. That makes sense, doesn't it? If someone showed up in our city that had the ability to heal the sick, I think we'd all take our sick loved ones and friends to receive healing from Jesus. So a crowd of around 20,000 people were approaching Jesus and his disciples. As Jesus saw the crowd coming closer he decided to feed them and that's where we have the miraculous feeding of the 5000 men plus the women and children. The people sat down on the grass and Jesus performed this incredible miracle and fed all the people that were there. It was a bread and fish buffet. Everyone ate as much as they wanted and there were even twelve baskets of food left over. It was an unbelievable miracle.

The people that ate the food knew that a miracle had been done. So they think back to the time of Moses. Do you remember when Moses was leading the Israelites out from slavery in the wilderness, that God provided all those people with food every single day? How did he do that? He sent bread from heaven that they called Manna. Every day except on the Sabbath there was manna on the ground and the people went out and gathered as much as they wanted, every single day. That taught the Israelites to trust in God for their daily bread, just like Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us today our daily bread."

So, the people in the feeding of the 5000 miracle are making this connection. The last time there was a miraculous feeding of thousands of people was during the time of Moses and today we have just experienced a similar miracle where 20,000 people were fed bread and fish. Then they remembered what God had promised to the Israelites back then. God said in Deuteronomy 18:15, "I will raise up for you a prophet like Moses." So, the people said in John 6:14, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." That was smart of them to think that. They absolutely made the correct conclusion.

But, what happens next? In John 6:15 it says, “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” The people wanted to take Jesus and force him to be the kind of king they wanted him to be—a king who would do great miracles for them; a king who would heal the sick for them. A king who would feed them bread and fish whenever they wanted. They also wanted a king that would be like King David—a powerful king who would conquer all earthly enemies. And during the time of Jesus, the people in power were the Romans, so the Jews wanted to make Jesus into a king that would overthrow the Romans and establish the Jewish people as the ones in power, just like it was when King David was King. What the people were saying was that we want Jesus to be the kind of king we want him to be, not the kind of king he’s really supposed to be, the savior king, the suffering king, the king who gives his life for his people, the king who rules not only here on earth, but over all of heaven and earth, a king who will be an eternal king.

That’s why Jesus went away from them and withdrew from them. He refused to be controlled by people. He refused to be just an earthly king. We too must never try to make Jesus into something that he was never meant to be. We must never try to squeeze Jesus into our own molds. So, that’s what’s happened in chapter 6 so far. Now we get to the story of walking on the water.

So, where is Jesus at this point of the story? He’s by himself. He’s up on a mountain, getting away from the people who want to make him their king by force. Where are the disciples? They’re at the shore of the lake. They get into a boat and begin making their way across the water. The text says that it was dark, the sun had already set, but that’s not a problem for these fisherman, which is what some of the disciples were before they joined Jesus. They knew this lake inside and out and the time that they fished was always at night. So, it was no problem for them to make their journey across the lake at night. So, there they are in the boat, without Jesus and as they’re making their way across, they get about 3-4 miles, about 5-7 kilometers out, and the waters start getting a bit rough. The waves are getting bigger and the water is getting choppy, which meant it was getting more difficult to row their boat across the water and right about this time they see something or someone on the water.

You can imagine one of them saying, “Hey what’s that out there?” And another says, “What are you talking about, It’s just the waves. Or, it’s the moonlight playing tricks on your eyes.” Then the first disciple says, “No look, it’s getting closer.” Now all of them are straining through the darkness trying to see what it is. This thing, this person, he’s getting closer and closer and they finally recognize who it is. It’s Jesus, but he’s not on a boat. He’s walking on the water, coming towards them. I’ve been on a lake hundreds of times in my life. And there are times when I look across the water and I see something that’s not water. So, I strain my eyes and move toward the object and when I get closer I say, oh it’s just a log, oh it’s just a rock, or it’s a floating dead fish, but I’ve yet to say, oh it’s my wife walking toward me, saying, “Honey you forgot your lunch.”

So, what’s the response of the disciples? What would be your response? They were frightened! Now if there ever was an understatement, it’s here. They were scared out of their pants. On one hand it was unmistakable that it was the Lord, it was Jesus. They know what his face looks like, they know the sound of his voice, they know the gait in his step, but how in the world is he walking on the water?

Jesus, knowing that they were frightened says, "It is I, don't be afraid." Now, those are beautiful words, amazing words, which can settle down any troubled heart! Those words can provide incredible comfort that can drive away any kind of fear, but it's more than words, isn't it? It's the person who's saying the words that make the difference. If you're in the middle of a tornado in your basement, staying away from the windows, trying to find shelter and that tornado is barreling down at you. If your mommy or daddy says, "don't worry, we'll be okay" and Jesus says, "don't worry, we'll be okay," whose words will bring you more comfort? What power does your mom or dad have over a tornado? None! What about Jesus?

So, what are you afraid of? Are you afraid of the dark? Are you afraid of a bully? Are you afraid because of your health? Is it your finances? Is it finding your future mate? Are you fearful because you don't know what's around the next corner of your life? What is the storm in your life? To what situation is Jesus telling you, "It is I, don't be afraid?"

Verse 21 ends this part of the story saying, "Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." The disciples welcomed and brought Jesus into the boat and they were brought immediately to the shore. There was no more fear. Jesus was with them.

Now, we still haven't answered the questions, "What is the point of this story? What is this story all about? Why is it placed here?"

To get some more clues, let's look at what comes after this story. Remember, all of chapter 6 is a unit, connected to each other. In the next part of the story Jesus engages in one of his most well-known teachings. He talks about the bread of life. Remember with me again: the crowds were following Jesus, their leader. They were hungry because they had no food. Jesus fed them with a great miracle just like God did through Moses when he provided manna. And now Jesus teaches them about the bread of life. He says, just like the manna came from heaven, the true bread of life comes from heaven. The Israelites ate the bread, but they still died. The bread I just multiplied, the people ate, but they too will still die. However, there is another bread that if people eat, they will never die. They will live forever, because it is the bread of life. Then Jesus says it as clearly as he possibly could, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (35)." But listen to what Jesus says next. He says, "³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." And then a couple verses later he says, "³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." And then Jesus says, "⁴⁴ "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."

Here's what's going on. Jesus tells us that there were people who saw Jesus face to face and didn't believe. Then there were people who were healed by Jesus or saw a relative or friend healed, and they too didn't believe. Then there were those, thousands of them, who ate the miraculous bread and ate the miraculous fish and who saw that there were even twelve baskets left over and they too didn't believe. In fact, they tried to take Jesus by force. We're going to make you the kind of king we want you to be.

So, what does Jesus then say? He says, ³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” And he will not lose a single person that God gives him. Then a few verses later he says, ⁴⁴ “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Jesus is telling us that if God the Father gives someone to Jesus, then that person will come to Jesus. And those that come to Jesus because the Father has given them to Jesus, Jesus will not lose a single one and Jesus will never drive those people away. He will always accept them. He will always receive them. He will always allow them to come. Are you following me so far?

Okay, now back to story of Jesus walking on the water. Before he walked on water, he fed the 20,000 but they had their own idea of who Jesus should be and so Jesus went away from them. He left them. He rejected them, but to another group, Jesus goes toward them, miraculously. He goes across something that is impossible to cross. He walks on the water, but in one sense that's nothing. Jesus truly did the impossible in taking on the sins of those the Father had given to him, when he took our punishment when he was hanging on the cross. When Jesus went to the cross, he did something that no other person could do. He crossed over the barrier of sin. In fact, he tore down that barrier by dying on the cross.

Sin is that great barrier that keeps us from God. It destroys our relationship with God and with one another. It destroys even our ability to know ourselves. Sin keeps us from knowing what we really need. We think we need a king of our own invention. We think we know what we need, but we don't. That's what sin does and we wander around all our lives pursuing dead ends. The Bible calls it spiritual blindness. When Jesus died on that cross, he took that barrier down and he shows us what we really need. What we really need is the Jesus of history, the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus of the cross, the Jesus who can wash all our sins away, the Jesus who can restore us from the inside out.

To one group, Jesus goes away because they want Jesus to be what they want him to be. To another group Jesus goes to them. Which group are you? Is Jesus coming to you? Do you feel that God is bringing you to Jesus? Do you sense in your heart that you are being drawn, pulled toward Jesus? Then come. Come to him. Go to him. Run to him.

When God brings you to Jesus, or Jesus to you, what are you supposed to do? You are to invite him into your boat. You let Jesus take away your fears and you welcome him into your life. What exactly does that mean? You are to believe in him. What does that mean? You trust in him like you trust in the seat you are sitting in, like you trust in the ground you walk on, like you trust that the sun will come out every day, you trust in Jesus with your heart, your mind, and your will. You receive him as your savior and as your Lord. You can say a simple prayer. “Jesus, come to me. Jesus, open my heart to you. Jesus, I welcome you into my life.” It's that simple. If God is calling you, don't delay, don't wait. Trust in Jesus right now, right away.

Let's pray.