

John: Treading Water

John 6:15-25

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So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone. 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. The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone. There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got. When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we turn now to Your word, infallible, inerrant, given to us by the inspiration of God. And we pray for Your blessing, acknowledging once again that without You we can do nothing. Hear us for Jesus sake, Amen.

We come now to another miracle. Here, Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. John actually doesn't give us too many of the details. The parallels in Matthew and Mark fill out the story a little for us, and I'll allude here and there to some of their details in order for us to understand what John may well be intending for us to pick up here. This story has been understood by the Church from the very beginning, to teach that in the midst of trouble, Jesus may draw near and grant His blessing. Earlier we sang the hymn, "Eternal Father Strong to Save," William Whitings' so-called "naval hymn," the hymn of the Royal Navy, and I suspect of the American Navy too. And with these wonderful lines, "O Savior whose almighty word, the winds and waves submissive heard, who walked upon the foaming deep, and calm amid the rage did sleep. O hear us when we cry to

Thee, for those in peril on the sea.” And there's another hymn in our hymnbook by Katarine von Sleigel, “Be still my soul the Lord is own thy side,” and it too has a reference to this story here in one of the stanzas, “Be still my soul, the waves and winds still know His voice, who ruled them while He dwelt below.”

The disciples are in trouble. To all intents and purposes, at this stage in the history of redemption, it is difficult to distinguish the disciples from the Church. There wasn't much more to the Church than the disciples. So, we might say, the Church is in trouble. They are in the midst of a storm. John doesn't tell us this, but both Matthew and Mark relate to us that actually Jesus was the one who had made them get into a boat in order to cross from the north side of the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias, to the other side, to the region of Capernaum and Bethsaida. One gospel writer says they went to Bethsaida, and another writer says they went to Capernaum. Actually, there's only a few miles between the two towns, and they probably ended up going to both.

Look at verse 15, “perceiving that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king.” This is now Jesus' response to the multitude who had followed Him along the shore to the place where He would perform this miracle of feeding 5,000 men, maybe more. But they only saw the miracle, they only saw the external things, and they were ready to come and make Him king. And Jesus would have none of it, and He withdraws to the mountain, as one of the gospels tells us, in order to pray and He tells His disciples to get into the boat and go across, in the opposite direction this time, to the west side, to Capernaum. They are in trouble because they are heeding what Jesus has told them to do.

I want us to pursue that thought for a little. A storm arises. That wasn't unusual in the Sea of Galilee. It is about 600 feet below sea level, and about 2,000 feet below the summit of Mt. Hermon, which is northeast of the sea of Galilee. You can see it from the northern shores of the sea. And John informs us here that it got dark, and the sudden temperature changes that come in the evening cause winds which frequently brought storms on the Sea of Galilee. These disciples, many of whom, at least four, were experienced fishermen, made their livelihood on the Sea of Galilee, and had seen this before.

Actually, this is a theme, darkness, that's often repeated in the Bible. There's more to this than just John's description of a storm on the sea of Galilee. John's interplay of storm and darkness and trouble picks up the language of many of the psalms for experiences of intense personal difficulty; Psalm 42, “All your waves and breakers have gone over me”; “I have come into the deep waters and the floods engulf me,” Psalm 69. They're in trouble. They are in trouble through no fault of their own.

Isn't that interesting. They're in this boat, they're going in the direction of Capernaum, and one of the gospels tells us that Jesus came in the fourth watch of the night, at 3:00 o'clock in the morning. They have, at this point, traversed

half the Sea of Galilee, and all of this in obedience to Jesus, and yet they find themselves in trouble.

You can find yourself in trouble simply by doing what Jesus tells you to do. “Come to Jesus and all your troubles will disappear. Come to Jesus and you need have nothing to worry about for the rest of your lives. Come to Jesus and all your emotional and psychological difficulties will evaporate in an instant.” Not on your life, at least, not in this life. Because, actually coming to Jesus and walking with Jesus in fellowship with Jesus can bring trouble into your lives that you never even thought of before. Do you remember when Paul obeyed the Macedonian Cry, “Come over and help us.” He crosses the sea to what we would now call Greece. The Apostle Paul, in obedience to the command of the Lord, ends up in prison; he's in a jail in Philippi all because he was obedient to Jesus.

We follow a crucified Savior. We follow this evening, and we are not just following but we are in union with one whose own family didn't understand him. His own brother, at least at this stage, didn't believe in him. We are in union with one who was mocked and bruised and spat upon and rejected and tried and crucified.

Don't be surprised if you find yourselves in trouble. 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 tonight if you make as a resolution for this upcoming year a prayer to the effect, “I want to follow you Lord more closely than ever before. I want this year to be a year in which I follow so closely in your footsteps that your footsteps will be my footsteps. 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.

Here are the disciples in obedience to the Savior and they find themselves in trouble. Sometimes the purpose behind these trials may be completely unknown to us. If all you had was John's version of the story, we would have very little idea as to why they found themselves in this trouble. What was the Lord up to? What was the reason? Now, if we didn't believe that providence was purposive; if we didn't believe that behind every providence there was a purpose, we would be insane. It's what holds us together in the midst of a trial; that there was a purpose, a reason, a sovereign hand, that there is one who plans and guides and leads us.

Actually, Mark gives us in his account of the story *at least one of the possible reasons why, because he refers to the disciples' hearts as being hardened*. That is to say, that one of the purposes of this trial, this difficulty, was to encourage faith and to draw out the lesson that had not been fully drawn out in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. That standing in their very midst was the Son of God with all of the resources of heaven at his disposal.

You remember when Elisabeth Elliot, with her husband Jim Elliot, when they make their way to Ecuador to the native Indian folk of that land to initially, at least, translate the Bible into their native language, and within a month Jim Elliot is murdered. And all of the work and labor that had gone on in preparation for the translation of the Scriptures, all of that had been stolen, so at that point in her life, everything that they had done seemed to have been utterly and completely futile. And she says, "I simply had to bow in the knowledge that God was His own interpreter." She couldn't fathom the whys and wherefores, the ins and outs of the providence she found herself in, but she simply had to bow in hope and in faith and in trust that God was doing the right thing even though she could make no sense of it. Just as perhaps these disciples in the boat were wondering why the Lord allowed them to pass through such a trial as this, and immediately, perhaps, there was no answer. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable minds of never failing still, He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will."

Then again, sometimes we may be left for a considerable period of time before the reassurance of His help comes to us. One of the other gospel accounts of this story that tells us that when Jesus eventually came to them on the Sea of Galilee, it was in the fourth watch, that is between three o'clock and six o'clock in the morning. It was daylight when they had set off. They had been in trouble for quite some time. They had been for many hours with a wind that was contrary to them, with sea waves lashing about the boat threatening their very survival and existence. They're half way across the Sea of Galilee. Maybe dawn will break and they are still there and Jesus has said nothing and Jesus has done nothing—at least nothing miraculous or out of the ordinary. He had, of course kept them alive. He had with His unseen hand of providence maintained them in the course of the storm, but He hadn't yet revealed Himself to them. As far as the disciples were now concerned, He was out up in the top of the mountains somewhere praying, unconcerned about them. "Why does Jesus make us wait?"

You know how difficult waiting is? Yes, you do. It's not a national characteristic of you dear people to wait in line. I think it's something to do with the Constitution. You know how it is when you're making a telephone call and they put you on hold. You know how irritating that can be? And when you've heard that piece of music for 20 minutes or an hour and you hear that voice that says, "Hi, I'm Jason. What can I do for you?" And you say, "Well, Jason, it was yesterday when I wanted you to do something for me." Waiting can be irritating. In all seriousness, how many of you have been praying for a particular problem, a particular circumstance in your life and God still hasn't come and provided the answer that you are seeking. And He's put you on hold. And there's jingle music; it's hymn music, it's a psalm playing in your ear, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not on your own understanding." And it's playing there through the accompaniment of some music or other and you've heard it now over and over

and over, but He's put you on hold. He's made you wait. Jesus can make us wait just as He made these disciples wait because He was testing their faith. He was testing their faith just as He's testing your faith and just as He's testing my faith, because what we say in our heads can be one thing and what we actually believe in our hearts is actually something very different.

And will you notice with me too, something else; that Jesus comes to these disciples in the midst of the storm. Do you see that? Jesus could have stopped this storm from the mountainside. Jesus could have commanded the winds and the waves to cease from up in the mountain where He, no doubt, could see the boat in trouble in the midst of the storm. He could have just uttered His word, and all would have been calm. He could have stayed where He was. But instead, He walks out into the middle of the storm. I want to tell you tonight that that is the kind of Savior you have. He wasn't content, you see, to perform His miracle from a distance and from the relative safety and security of the mountainside. No, Jesus actually identifies with the disciples in the midst of the storm and He comes to them walking in the wind and rain all wet and wind swept. Yes, He's walking on the water. Yes, there's a miracles here. Yes, there's an extraordinary demonstration of His native glory here, of course. But His face was all wet and He was all wind swept and He too was being buffeted by the winds and being threatened by the waves. And I think from the point of view of the disciples, they simply weren't expecting that because, as one of the gospel writers tells us, when they saw this figure coming towards them, they thought they had seen a ghost.

And I think that at least in part, what this miracle story is telling us is that this Jesus that we worship, and more than that, the Jesus with whom we are united by faith, is a Jesus who is prepared to walk into the very eye of the storm. When you cope with bereavement and the excruciating sorrow and the rending of your heart at the loss of someone you dearly love, there is Jesus standing beside the grave of Lazarus, His friend, and He's weeping because that's the kind of Savior we have. There's something deeply moving that Jesus would actually walk to these disciples not only to demonstrate His glory and power, but to demonstrate His compassion and to demonstrate His willingness to identify with us in our deepest pain and in our deepest fears and in our deepest troubles.

Do you remember the powerful passage in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*? You remember he's been shipwrecked on a desert island, and the first few weeks he's taken up with building a shelter for himself and finding food provision and protecting himself from whatever might be there, animals or men or whatever. And then he gets a Bible from the shipwrecked boat and begins to read it and he puts his faith in Jesus Christ. And as time passes by, and Daniel Defoe says 28 years passes by, "One morning, being very sad, I opened the Bible upon these words, 'I will never, never leave thee nor forsake thee.' Immediately it occurred that these words were to me. Why else should they be directed in such a manner just at the moment that I was mourning over my condition as one forsaken of God and man. Well then,' said I, if God does not forsake me, of what ill

consequence can it be or what matters if all the world should forsake me seeing on the other hand if I had all the world and should lose the favor and blessing of God, there would be no comparison in the loss. From this moment, I began to conclude in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken, solitary condition than it was possible I should ever have been in any other particular state in the world.”

Do you see what he's saying? That you can actually be brought to the point where the trial that you are now experiencing can be something that you'll regard as one of the greatest privileges that you've been given.

Do you imagine after this event that the disciples went round complaining, bemoaning the fact that they had been caught in a boat on a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Do you think for one moment that five years later, that Peter, or James or Andrew or whoever filled their lives with complaints that they were ever found in these circumstances? I don't think so. I think they shook their heads with wonder and said, “Isn't it a blessing that we were in that boat? Isn't it a blessing that that storm came? Yes, we were frightened and thought we were going to lose our lives but if we'd never experienced that terror, we'd never have known the joy of seeing Jesus walk on the sea of Galilee and coming towards us and stepping into that boat and saying the words, “Peace, be still. Don't be afraid, it is I.” I don't think those disciples ever forgot that for one minute.

Some of us have just seen Gandalf descend into the abyss with Balrog from the bridge of Khazad-Dum and that ten-minute scene was in my head all night and it hasn't gone out of it today and I doubt that it will for a long, long time. But that's just fantasy, but do you think the disciples ever forgot when Jesus came walking to them on the Sea of Galilee? To them, fishermen as many of them were. Oh, what joy there can be even in the midst of trouble. Let' pray for hearts to find it. Let's pray.

Our Father, it's so easy to say these words and yet it's another thing to actually believe them. And for that, we need the help of Your Spirit and the benediction of Jesus. We ask it with all of our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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