

John 6:16

Jesus Walks on Water

It was a dark and stormy night – sounds like the opening sentence of a melodramatic novel but it really was a dark and stormy night in the story we will be looking at this morning. We are in our preaching series “That You May Believe, Exploring the Miracles in John’s Gospel” and today we will pick up on a time when the disciples were indeed in the midst of a dark and stormy night.

John 6:16

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 five or six kilometres, 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.

This account is the same occasion we read in Matthew 14:22-33, but in that story, you will remember Peter got out of the boat and walked on water.

You remember the story as Peter looked at the waves he got afraid and began to sink but Jesus reached out and rescued him. There are many sermons and references to that text. Author John Ortberg wrote an excellent book with the title “If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat” – it’s a great book. But here, it seems strange that in John’s account of the same incident he doesn’t mention such a pivotal part of the story as Peter walking on water – not a word and if we didn’t know better, we’d think it was a different occurrence.

We may be tempted to read into this omission as some kind of disapproval of Peter’s impetuous acts or that John begrudged Peter’s impulsive and sometimes thoughtless behaviour. Sometimes what we leave out speaks louder than what we put in - silence can indeed be deafening. Maybe as John wrote this gospel, he looked back to that time and had regrets that Peter took the risk and stepped out of the boat, but he stayed put. However, as we open up this story we see John’s omission of Peter in this narrative is because he is focusing on something entirely different. Matthew’s account highlights faith and trust, but John looks a lot deeper because there is something very important going on and he doesn’t want his readers to be distracted.

The events leading up to this dark and stormy night took place on the Sea of Galilee, and I’ve had the privilege of being on this sea close to where this took place. Just prior to this they’d had a great time of ministry on the hills of the north-eastern part of the sea, and they were on a spiritual high because they were involved in the miraculous feeding of 5000. Life was going so well for the disciples, they had seen Jesus heal a sick woman, they had seen him raise Jairus’ daughter back to life, two blind men received their sight, and an invalid healed at Bethesda. Crowds of enthusiastic people followed Jesus, and I guess that in many ways the disciples got caught up in the euphoria and the popularity of Jesus. It was so cool to be part of this elite group and to be acknowledged as one of Jesus chosen – things were going so well, what could possibly go wrong?

Jesus, ostensibly, wanted to spend some time alone so he sent his disciples ahead by boat and told them he would catch up later. The Sea of Galilee is about 200 meters below sea level, and on occasions, a cold wind blows inland off the Mediterranean Sea eastwards and gains momentum as it descends toward the lake causing very sudden and violent storms. Three-meter waves have been recorded in one of these storms. So here the disciples toward evening leave Jesus behind in good

weather and set out to cross the lake. Remember some of these disciples were fishermen and were very familiar and comfortable with boats and they had done this journey hundreds of times before – it was no big deal. But as they got out onto the sea one of these Mediterranean winds quickly picked up and they found themselves in trouble. Water spray splashed over the gunnels and into their eyes, they were cold and wet, and the small boat heaved on the waves. They couldn't put up a sail, so they had to row the boat against the wind. Progress was painfully slow, and after many hours of rowing their muscles ached and their bodies in pain.

It must have felt a bit like *déjà vu* for the disciples because this was the second storm on the Sea of Galilee that they found themselves in. In Matthew 8:23 we read about a time when Jesus got into a boat with the disciples and went to sleep at the back of the vessel. The disciples woke Jesus and said "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" Jesus got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. However, this time around Jesus was not with them – they were on their own.

When things couldn't get worse, when they thought they were going down, they saw something through the foggy moonlight. (We can read about this in Matthew's account of this story.) At first, they didn't know what it was and in the distance saw some kind of apparition. I guess some of the disciples thought to themselves that it was an optical illusion or shadows of moonlight



waltzing on the waves, maybe a star reflection. Then someone blurted out "It's a ghost!" There's always one isn't there. Things were tolerable with moonlight reflections but now – really; a ghost! And as my granddaughter would say, "Seriously?" Up until that moment, they probably didn't even know what a ghost looked like, but the very suggestion was a catalyst, in their minds at least, that this was some type of demonic entity set on their destruction. Fear is so contagious. It soon became apparent that what they were seeing was not a trick-of-the-eye or aberration of light because it was getting closer, it had a human shape and walked with a definite and rhythmic gait.

The NIV Bible translates this word as frightened but in the pre-1984 version the NIV the word is terrified. I prefer terrified as it describes more accurately what was going on in that lonely boat. The disciples' fear escalated to terror as this apparition got closer.

When I was a teenager at the age of about 14 or 15 my cousin was a game ranger working in a National Park in the very remote northern part of Zimbabwe and every school holidays I would go up to this game park and spend time with my cousin. It was a great experience being in the bush. At the main camp where my cousin lived, about 50 meters from the house, was a garage workshop which was where they serviced vehicles and carried out general repairs. One evening at about 7 p.m. a fire broke out in a storeroom attached to the workshop – some drums of petrol caught fire. While my cousin was getting vehicles out of the garage, I wanted to do something useful, so I got a hosepipe and started to spray water onto the corrugated iron roof of the storeroom. What I didn't realise was that in this burning storeroom was a full cylinder of acetylene gas – welding gas, the big, heavy industrial type.

Well, there's no prize in guessing what happened next – the cylinder exploded like a bomb, the ground shuddered and as I looked up a massive tower of red flame stretched up about 100 meters up into the night sky. Psychologists tell us that in situations of extreme stress the natural response is

one of 'fight or flight'; my reaction at that moment was definitely flight. I started to run. The problem was that sheets of corrugated iron then began to rain down and there was nowhere to run to. When I was spraying water onto the storeroom roof, I was afraid but now it had escalated to terror.

In a similar way the disciples were afraid in the midst of the storm but now it had spiralled into terror as they saw this figure approaching them. Admittedly these disciples had never seen anyone walking on water. Logic and common sense told them that in the natural this was impossible and in fact it was so far removed, so utterly unexpected that we can understand their reaction. The disciples had grown familiar with miraculous healings. They'd seen a dead girl was raised to life and the feeding of thousands of people, but walking on water was so different, so unfamiliar it caught them completely off guard. Nevertheless logic and common sense disappear under extreme stress and in this situation they made an assumption, but sadly they assumed the worst, not the best.

We live in a world where never before have we had access to so much information; Google, Yahoo, Facebook and a ton of other social media. But unfortunately, this has also exposed us to the phenomenon of Fake News. Fake News on the internet and social media exist because it is money driven in that the more people click on the link, the more revenue they earn from advertising. However, Fake News is disguised as genuine news – the websites look so authentic and legitimate and usually carry just an element of truth to make it believable, but the thing that fuels Fake News is the fact human nature thinks the worst, not the best. Fake News is always bad news and capitalises on people's fears. Fake News is nothing new and crept into the boat with the disciples – "We are rowing and straining so hard but going nowhere. We are going to drown in the storm. Ghosts are haunting us. Jesus has abandoned us. Maybe God isn't really in control." If the disciples had Facebook they would be clicking share and get a million hits – no problem.

It was indeed a dark and stormy night, but at the point where they lost hope Jesus called out "It is I; don't be afraid," – that changed everything, they recognised his familiar voice, and he was invited into the boat. At that moment they felt the boat bump into something, but it was not a dangerous bump it was more of soft grinding noise, the vessel felt steady no longer being tossed about, and they realised the boat had beached. Now they were safe not only on the shore but at their destination Capernaum – the very place they had set out for.

John wrote this account of a dark and stormy night as a sign that we may believe – the title of our preaching series. So what is the sign John wants us to see? I know there are many here this morning going through storms. Storms are inevitable. In fact, if you are not in a storm at the moment, you have been through a storm, and the probability is that you will face a storm in the future. John wrote about this account to tell us something significant.

When Sandy is away, and we send WhatsApp messages to each other, I usually end the words with Me as in "Miss you, love you, Me". Now when she receives those messages, she doesn't have to wonder who Me is. When Sandy calls me on the phone, she'll say something like "Hi It's Me," and again I don't have to say "I'm sorry your voice is vaguely familiar is that Moira, or Mary or Jane?" No - I instantly recognise her voice, and there is only ever one Me. 'Me' is powerful. Our identity as who we are is wrapped up in 'Me' and speaks to our very personality – it's a soul thing.

In the same way when Jesus said to the disciples in the boat "It is I; don't be afraid," he was saying in effect "Hey guys, it's Me." Instantly they recognised his voice, and everything changed. There is only one sign John wanted us to see, and that is it's all about Jesus. Jesus is the central focus, and this morning he whispers into your heart "It's Me."

If Jesus is the central focus of our lives it changes everything – here are a few observations:

Sometimes obedience to God leads us into storms not out of them.

It's a cheap theology that assumes that obedience to God entitles us to a life free from problems. More importantly, when we see others going through tough times, we can make the error of thinking they must be living in disobedience. Pharisees and religious people believe that – “If they just get their act together they wouldn't be in the situation they are in,” or “Well that's what you get for disobedience.” Well maybe their act is together, and that's why they are having a hard time. When Jesus sent his disciples into that dark and stormy night – he knew full well what they would be facing, not because he was mean and vindictive but because the storm was good for them.

I am deeply aware of the intense heartache and stress so many of you struggle with, and I don't want to dismiss or minimize the pain you are going through, but the fact is that people come out of storms stronger than when they went in. Jacob had to wrestle with God, and it is sometimes during those times of wrestling through the storms that we grow and become strong.

It is interesting that in this same chapter of John, from verse 66, many of those following Jesus turned away because his teaching was so different.

66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

67 “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

It's my guess that had these twelve disciples not been through that dark and stormy night, they too may have walked away. But something changed in their hearts, and something clicked into place in their minds so that they were convinced they were in the right place - “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

You do not labour in vain even when it feels like you do.

The disciples invited Jesus into the boat. The question is why would they invite Jesus into a boat that was sinking and going nowhere? Jesus was doing just fine outside the boat, thank you. Maybe you feel like you been rowing your boat all night and got nowhere. You've tried so hard, year after year you've laboured and as you look back, you've accomplished so little. Maybe you are discouraged, and in the back of your mind there's that little thought, “Is being a Christian worth it, because it would be a whole lot easier if I weren't.” If you feel like your boat is sinking and you're going down, under the waves of circumstances, Jesus comes to you and says “Fear not, it's Me.”

Sometimes the ghosts that haunt us may not be ghosts at all

We are all haunted by ghosts, but I'm not talking about creaking doors and footsteps down the passage type of ghosts (we have been given authority over those.) What I'm talking about is a lot more subtle but haunt us nevertheless and are a lot more difficult to deal with. When the disciples looked out over that boiling sea on that dark night they saw something they didn't understand; they assumed it was a ghost, but it was Jesus - Jesus was in camouflage if you like. Maybe this morning some things still haunt you: A childhood memory that just won't go away or a loved one who is hell-bent on living a selfish and reckless lifestyle. Possibly it's a destructive habit or addiction that torments you ceaselessly. Maybe your lack of finances haunt you, and you lie awake at night wondering how you are going to pay the rent, put food on the table, pay school fees, yet alone buy

electricity. Could it be a health issue that haunts you? You can still hear the doctor's words as he gave you the bad news.

We need to understand very clearly that sometimes the ghosts that haunt are not ghosts at all. I must confess that at times I see things are going on in people's lives that I don't understand and just don't have an easy answer to, nevertheless it is at those times Jesus says to you, "Hey guys, it's Me."

Even when we can't see Jesus, Jesus sees us.

It's a quote from Dr Erwin Lutzer, but it is just so true. What do you think Jesus was doing when he sent his disciples ahead across the lake? Jesus didn't go to sleep, but I'm convinced he climbed up on the hills and looked intently hour after hour out at that little boat. The disciples felt alone and probably remembered the storm when Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat – at least they could wake him and ask for help, but this time around they were alone. Ironically during the first storm, Jesus was with them but asleep, but this time around he was not with them but very much awake.

Maybe you are feeling alone and isolated from God, that He's not listening to your prayers or worse that He's indifferent or doesn't care what you're going through. It's in those times we need to remember His promise never to leave us or forsake us even when it doesn't feel like it – soon you will hear His voice "Hey guys, it's Me."

It's all about Jesus' presence

It was 4 am in the morning when Jesus arrived at the boat, not a minute too late and not a minute too early, Jesus' timing is perfect. We also need to recognise Jesus' voice and invite him into our boat, so to speak. Maybe you have never done that, (asked Jesus into your life) and perhaps you don't fully understand, but you are welcome to talk to one of the pastors.

We need to understand that everything in life hinges on being in Jesus' presence. When can face the darkest nights and fiercest stormy nights; we hear him say "Hey guys, it's Me."