

“The Wave Walker”

John 6:16-21

July 24, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

In our summer series on the miracles of Jesus, we come today to the well-known incident in which Jesus walks on water in order to help his struggling disciples. Kent Hughes tells the story of once walking on the campus of the University of Cambridge when he saw a student wearing a warm-up jacket with the words printed across the back, “Jesus Walks on Water.” He considered approaching the student to encourage him in his bold witness for Christ, but decided not to. He was thankful for that decision when he saw the saying again near the Cam River, which runs through Cambridge and is well known for the rowing teams that practice and race there. He realized that one of the crew teams belongs to Jesus College, and what he had seen on the student’s warm-up jacket was simply an irreverent boast about the excellence of that team. Their boats could glide across the water so fast that it appeared they were on the water instead of in the water.

Unlike that Cambridge College rowing team, Jesus really did walk on water. He did so not to impress and gather a wide following, but to help his disciples. He did this in the early morning hours when no one saw him except his disciples. The Gospels record several times when Jesus taught from the water because of the large crowds who wanted to hear him. When he did so, he would borrow a boat from one of his fishermen friends and sit in it to teach. Jesus could have dispensed with the boat and simply stood on the water as he taught. That would certainly have gotten people’s attention. But Jesus’ power isn’t used to impress people but to help people. And the people he is most interested in helping are those who belong to him, his disciples.

This familiar story of Jesus walking on water has long been read by the church both literally and figuratively. Jesus literally did walk on water. The figurative reading is also true, a reading that finds in the boat an apt symbol for the Church. Interestingly, the English word “nave,” a word describing the main seating area of a church sanctuary, comes from the Latin word for a ship. The Church has often been tossed and blown by various ill winds, even to the point that her very survival is threatened. But Jesus never loses sight of his people, and he will stop at nothing to come to their aid and ultimately deliver them safely home. Let’s consider and apply these truths simply by looking at the main movements of this account.

I. In the Dark Without Jesus

I am confident that the behavior of Jesus often puzzled his disciples. This miracle comes on the heels of Jesus' feeding of the multitude. I can imagine the excitement of the disciples when they saw the reaction of the crowd. They were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and wanted to make him king. Since there were five thousand men present, that would represent a formidable fighting force, able to take back the Holy Land from the pagan Romans. Imagine, too, the difference Jesus would make in that effort. He could heal wounded soldiers immediately and send them right back into battle, and he could keep them all supplied in food. No supply lines would be needed. This is what the disciples had been waiting for. But just when the opportunity seemed greatest, Jesus slipped away and no one could find him.

The statement at the end of verse 17 is intended to describe more than the basic facts of the story. We know that because it is redundant. **"It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them."** But we already knew that by what was reported just before that. I believe John repeats himself to let us know something of their mental and spiritual state. They are troubled because it is dark and there is no Jesus. Many of you know what that's like. A child is diagnosed with a serious illness and Jesus, with his healing touch, is nowhere to be found. A daughter tells you that she has decided she doesn't believe in God any longer and your heart aches for her salvation. A husband who pledged to love and cherish you as long as you both lived decides he didn't mean it after all, leaving you alone and impoverished. You had prayed, but it seemed that Jesus didn't show up. Then things get worse before they get better.

II. In a Storm Without Resources

Shortly after the disciples push off from shore, heading west back to Capernaum, a storm arises on the Sea of Galilee. These storms were not unusual. The sea lies about 600 feet below sea level, forming something of a bowl that collects warm, moist air. The cooler air from the surrounding lands will often rush in to displace this air, producing squalls and high winds. The disciples are caught in such a wind here. So they lower their sails and take to the oars. But the wind is such that they can make no headway. All they manage to accomplish is to wear themselves out in the attempt. Perhaps they had also become disoriented and weren't even sure which way to go.

One of the significant things about this story comes from Mark's account of it (Mark 6:45ff), where he tells us that it was Jesus who directed the disciples to get in their boat and make this journey. They found themselves in this storm not because they had disobeyed Jesus, but because they were obeying him. This is the opposite of Jonah's experience, where the storm came because of his disobedience. An important application from this is that you can't conclude that stormy times in life are always caused by sin. That's one of the lies Satan would have us believe, so that we might feel condemned and guilty all the time.

It is true that God sometimes disciplines his children for our sin, and that our sufferings are intended by him to bring us back to him. But it is also true that there are times when our suffering is unrelated to our sin; it's just God calling us to suffering. Such was the case with the disciples here.

It is also a storm in which their own resources are unable to deliver them. Once more, it is Mark's account of this that adds the detail that the wind was against them, and they were making headway painfully. Our lives are often that way, too. We enter a storm, and we respond with all the resources we can. But it is not enough. That is usually when Jesus shows up, only when we come to the end of ourselves and call out to him.

III. With a Powerful, Personal Jesus

It is in the storm that Jesus comes to them. In the Jewish mindset of this day, the sea was a symbol of chaos. Jesus is Lord over the chaos of life. He tames it because nothing is beyond his control. We need to consider a little more carefully the exact nature of this miracle, and all other miracles for that matter. The common understanding of a miracle is that it is when God decides to make an exception to the laws of nature. For example, the laws of gravity and buoyancy are clearly not at work in Jesus walking on the water. The problem with this definition of a miracle is that it originates more from Deism than from the biblical record. Deism says that God had an initial involvement with his world when he created it, but now he has backed away and allows it to be run by the laws he created. A miracle, then, according to this view, is simply when God decides to suspend one or more of his laws and do things differently.

I think that is a defective definition of a miracle that robs God of his glory. The Bible teaches, both by proposition and example, that God is in control of everything that happens in his world, down to the smallest detail. Paul said that God works *all things* according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11). He doesn't just know about them, but works them. The book of Job concludes with God speaking about all the things he controls and over which Job has no authority. Even relatively small things, such as the movements of fish in the sea and wild animals on the mountains, are controlled not by impersonal laws, but by the personal action and work of God. So God is intimately and personally involved not just in the thing we call a miracle, but also in all the times when things happen normally. When you dive off a diving board into a swimming pool, it is God's action that causes you to drop into the water instead of floating away like an astronaut in outer space. It is the order of God that results in your body plunging beneath the water for a few feet instead of hitting the water like it's hard ground. God simply makes these orders so consistently for our sakes. Gravity works every time because God orders it to do so. Imagine the disaster it would be if God were not so consistent. So a miracle is when God, who already controls everything, decides to do something

differently than is his normal pattern. A miracle highlights the fact that God controls all things, both when he does things consistently, such as the way gravity and buoyancy work, as well as when he does things out of the ordinary, such as walking on water.

He does so in this case for the benefit of his disciples. When they see him, they are frightened at first. Mark tells us they think he is a ghost. Jesus speaks and says, **“It is I; do not be afraid”** (v. 20). Jesus didn’t just tell them not to be afraid. That never works, does it? If you have a young child who is afraid of the water, that fear is not removed by telling your child, “Don’t be afraid.” That’s why Jesus adds those words before the command: “It is I.” It was no ghost after all, but the familiar form of the one they were coming to know so well. It was the one who just the day before had fed the multitudes. It was the one they were learning to trust. And now they see, to their amazement, that he is Lord over the chaos of the sea. It submits to him. If he tells it to be hard like the ground so he can walk on it, the sea obeys him.

I read this week of a woman who said that she sometimes goes to sleep at night visualizing the Lord holding her in his arms just like her father held her in the rocking chair when she was a little girl. She is on solid footing in thinking of the Lord like that, because the Bible says that he indeed holds us in his everlasting arms (Dt. 33:27). I think we need to do the same with this verse. Can you visualize Jesus coming to you in a storm you are enduring and saying, “It is I; do not be afraid.” He comes to you with all his power. He comes to you with his love, and he speaks these words to your heart. Can you hear him? The storm may still be raging all around, as it was for the disciples when Jesus spoke those words. Jesus doesn’t tell you beforehand how it will all end, because the only thing that matters is to have him nearby and leave it with him. Someone with all power and with all love can certainly be trusted.

IV. Safe in the Harbor

One of the questions in this passage is whether there are two miracles or one. Walking on water is clearly one of the miracles, but how about what is recorded in verse 21: **“immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”** The plain reading of the text would lead us to believe that a second miracle occurred here, one that transported their boat to its intended destination without the normal process of sailing or rowing there. The point, I think, is that Jesus is able to deliver us to our destination. If you belong to Jesus by faith in him, your destination is to be like Christ and to enjoy everlasting joy in eternal fellowship with God. Jesus is able to bring you safely to that destination.

If you believe that, the application is to do the same as the disciples, of whom we read that they were glad to take him into the boat. I read this week of

a Houston pastor whose five-year old daughter, Melodye, asked him if he would build her a dollhouse. He nodded and said that he would, and then returned to the book he was reading. A few minutes later, he glanced out the window and saw his daughter with her arms filled with dishes and dolls, making trip after trip until she had a large pile in the yard. When he asked his wife what Melodye was doing, she replied, "Oh, you promised to build her a dollhouse, and she believes you. She's just getting ready for it." If you believe Jesus when he tells you, "It is I; do not be afraid," there is an action that will follow. You will gladly receive him into your boat, into your life. And you won't receive him like so many do today, as your servant, a god who helps you succeed in whatever you want to do. No, you will receive him as your Lord, the one who can walk on the waves like they are a smooth sidewalk.

CONCLUSION:

He knows how to deliver you safely to your ultimate destination, even through the worst storms of life. Have you realized yet that you do not have that same ability? Have you found that you don't know what's best for your own life, and that the best thing to do is to gladly let Jesus into the boat? But what if you've already run your life into the ditch, having made many bad decisions and having brought upon yourself the stormy weather? We have all done that to one degree or another, haven't we? We noted earlier that this storm came not because the disciples disobeyed Jesus, but because they obeyed him. But what if you are in a storm because of your disobedience? Can Jesus help with that too? Though it is much more difficult for him, he can and he will help with the storm of God's judgment that comes because of our sin. His help also involves the sea. The prophet Micah said it like this. **"He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"** (Micah 7:19).