

The Water Walker
John 6:16-21, Preached March 10th, 2024

Have you ever seen someone walk on water? Ten years ago, a man in a red jacket walked down a flight of stairs from a London street to the lip of the deep, dark Thames River running through the heart of the city. After a few moments of deep concentration, he slowly stepped out onto the water but he didn't fall in! He just stood there on the surface as the river flowed around his feet. A crowd gathered along the bridge overhead as he began walking on the water. Some people cheered, some took pictures, others stared on in slack-jawed awe. The water walker made it about 50 yards before being picked up by a police boat... a police boat which then crashed into the submerged plexiglass platform the man had been walking on. You see the man in the red jacket was a magician named Dynamo. And this was no miracle, it was a silly magic trick.

Critics say that must have Jesus employed a similar illusion in our passage this morning; that he was stepping from one submerged stone to the next, or walking along a hidden land bridge left by a low tide, or that the word is mistranslated: he didn't walk "on" the sea but merely "around" it. *But what do you think? Did Jesus really walk on water? And why does it matter? What does it teach us?* We'll wade through the passage looking for answers to these questions and more as we see that ***the Lord allows us to experience trials to deepen our dependence upon Christ.***

Frist, this passage paints ***an honest picture of the trials we face as believers.*** In the opening verses of John 6, we see that thousands have followed Jesus back to Galilee having seen the wonders he worked in Jerusalem. Knowing they had no food, Jesus had compassion on them and miraculously fed them all from 5 loaves & 2 fish. The satisfied pilgrims liked that very much; so much, in fact they wanted to make Christ king by force. But Jesus had come to do far more than save people from hunger. He'd come to save them from their sins by offering himself in exchange. He would not short-circuit His Father's plan of salvation by taking his crown without his cross. So Jesus "withdrew again to the mountain ***by himself.***"

Picking up in ***v16-17*** ... Put yourself in the disciple's place. After a long and claustrophobic day of ministering to thousands, you'd be tired, even exhausted. Nevertheless, you board the boat and sail into the fading twilight. And before long, you find yourself out on the water, in the dark, without Jesus, who stayed behind. You don't have to be a Galilean fisherman to know what that feels like; to *feel* abandoned by Christ in the face of trial, to sense that God has withdrawn the peace of his presence and the power of his Spirit, to watch as unanswered prayers come crashing down to earth like a flimsy paper-airplane, to sing with David in Psalm 13:1, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

You may be singing that song this morning. You may be singing it tomorrow. *What are we to do when we feel forgotten by God?* John alone includes a single word that can buoy a sinking soul. That word is "yet." ***V17-*** "Jesus had not ***yet*** come to them." This little word is bursting with the light of faith; "the assurance of things hoped for." "Yet" means Christ's felt absence is always temporary. "Yet" means that Jesus' coming and help are certain and his his purposes are always holy. *What purposes? Why would he withdraw his presence from us in the first place?* Our WCF 5:5 so helpful says it so well, "*The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.*"

As we trust in the heart of God who does all things well even in the midst of trials, as we cling to John's "yet" our song will change. David's psalm that started with "*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me?*" ended with "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation" (Ps13:5). So may we trust in God's steadfast love even when we don't feel it.

So, there they are, in their boat alone in the dark alone when suddenly, John remembers in *v18*, “the sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.” Now, the sea of Galilee was then and is today a dangerously unpredictable body of water because of its unique topography. The world’s largest freshwater lake is also the lowest; at the bottom of mountainous bowl, 700 ft below sea level. When icy air blows down from the mountains and mixes with the warm air rising from the water it can generate spectacular storms. On a single day back in April of 2017, 80 people had to be rescued from the lake when hurricane winds suddenly threw the sea into a maelstrom. Three young people on inflatable rafts couldn’t outswim the storm back to shore and were swept out into the middle of the lake where they tragically drowned.

The disciples found themselves in a similar situation. But their watery trial reminds us that following Christ is not always lollipops and butterflies. Jesus promised Jn16:33,, “In this world you will have trouble.” Now, sometimes our trouble is of our own making, the predictable consequences of our sin, but not always. Job was singled out for sharp suffering because he was a righteous man. So, as we strive to live for God’s glory by trusting and obeying him, we must learn to expect fierce resistance. Like the salmon swimming against a hard current, pushing against gravity up waterfalls, skirting past swiping grizzly bear claws and eagle talons the Christian life is lived *contra mundum*. Jesus said, “For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mat7:13-14).

The Christian’s way is hard because it passes through a fallen world darkened by sin and allergic to holiness; a fallen world of toil, thorns, and thistles; a cursed world of sickness & misery, death & decay; a captive world under the delegated dominion of Satan, the accuser of the brethren, the liar and the murderer, who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, who disguises himself as an angel of light to deceive us. The Christian’s way is hard because our own flesh, the remnant of sin, the Mr. Hyde monster lurking inside each of us, wars against the indwelling Spirit of God, seeking to sabotage our sanctification, steal our joy, and hinder our fruitfulness by enflaming our lusts, pride, greed, anger, and apathy. The Christian’s way is hard because God himself has promised to take away our love of sinning & refine our faith in the fires of adversity. He is at work demolishing & renovating our inner man. “In this you rejoice, said Peter, “though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1Pet16-7) That’s why it’s called *Pilgrim’s Progress* not *Pilgrim’s Lazy River*.

So don’t be surprised when the winds and the waves of life turn against you; when a thousand hands reach to pull you back from walking with Christ and keeping in step with the Spirit. Expect it. While we must search our own consciences in the midst of crisis for unrepentant sin the Lord may be chastising, we must not make the mistake of Job’s friends who automatically assumed that all suffering is the self-inflicted cost of personal sin. Don’t draw the false conclusion that difficulty in this life means that God doesn’t love you. If you are in Christ, He loves you more than you could ever imagine, more than you love yourself. He knows best.

This passage paints an honest picture of the trials we face as believers. But it does more than that. It reveals the way ***Christ draws near to his people in their trials (19-20)***. First, note when Christ comes to us in trials. The text says, “after they rowed 3 or 4 miles,” in the dark, in the storm, alone. *Have you ever rowed, three or 4 miles?* My college had a water front overlooking a bay. And on the other side of that bay was a mangrove island and bird sanctuary. One day I decided to take a kayak and paddle around that island to see the birds. It didn’t look that far and the island didn’t look that big. It would be fun! And it was fun, for the first two hours, but I had dramatically underestimated the distance. I ran out of water, it seems, before I left the harbor. And rowing requires strange muscles I didn’t have so before long, my arms and shoulders ached

as if was being caned with each stroke. What's worse, the paddle rubbed the skin of my hands away like a brillo pad. By the time I returned I was utterly spent.

Why do you think Jesus waited to come to them after they'd rowed 3 or 4 miles? Why do you think he let them simmer in that storm? He was letting sorrow do its work. He was allowing the sanctifying crucible to heat up to dross-burning temperatures. He was waiting until the disciples were spent; until their strength and self-reliance had drained away; until they'd come to the end of themselves. You can tell their nerves were frayed because when they saw Jesus' walking on the water, the involuntary spasm of their souls was fear...not the good kind of fear the Proverbs call the "beginning of wisdom" and a "fountain of life" but faithless fear, that FDR called in his 1st inaugural address, "nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes."

Some call this fear terror, or panic, others anxiety. But, most of us know what it feels like to be gripped in the iron claws of fear; to be spiritually squeezed in the anaconda coils of dread; henpecked by unwanted thoughts. Sometimes this fear is in response to hard circumstances, sometimes it's not. *How am I going to pay the bills this month? How can I be sure that my children are safe? Is my retirement secure? What will happen to our country? Will I get the grades and the test scores I need to graduate or get into college or grad school? Will I be alone forever or will I find someone? Am I healthy? Am I dying?* It's important to keep in mind that the fall has affected us body and soul. That means our physiology can betray us. Hormones can become unbalanced and adversely affect our minds. So, God has kindly blessed us with physicians and medicines to heal our bodies when they malfunction (Paul prescribed wine to Tim). Whether you need medicine or not, we all need Jesus "whose grace our fears relieved," who comes to his disciples in the midst of life's storms and irrational fears to deliver them.

See the 12 disciples rowing for their lives through the night through the heart of a hurricane. Feel the boat crashing through the waves. Hear that howling wind tear at their skin and clothes. See their clenched teeth and grimacing faces as they fight for their lives against nature itself. See the dark water slowly filling up the boat, creeping up their feet, ankles and legs as the boat sinks lower and lower into the darkness. Hear the men groaning against the strain & maybe Peter was the coxswain, crying out, "row, row." But then one of them, suddenly stopped & cried "Look!" And John was one of those 12 men who peered through the blackness to see Jesus' walking on the water coming after them, drawing near to them in the storm, crying out **v20**, "It is I; do not be afraid." *That order of those phrases is so important, isn't it?* Jesus doesn't just bid their fears to cease, he drives the fear away by showing and telling the disciples who he is. The Greek here is *egw eimi*- "I am." You see Christ, by his word & deed is proving his divinity to the disciples. Moses fed the people with mana from heaven, but Jesus fed them himself. Moses parted the sea and led the people of God through it, but Jesus "plants his footsteps on the sea and rides upon the storm!" Moses delivered his people from their bondage to Pharaoh through the blood of a paschal lamb, to lead them through the wilderness to Canaan. But now one greater than Moses is here who rescues his own from the cruel slavery of sin and Satan by shedding his own precious blood for their sins on the cross, as the Lamb of God and leading them to heaven. **V21.**

*Have you ever answered the phone & the voice on the other line says "hey, it's me," & you have no idea who they are? They've overestimated the intimacy of your relationship. You either play dumb and try and figure it out, "oh hey you..." or you just admit, "I have no idea who this is." But not Christ. Whenever Christ calls, his voice is immediately recognizable. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (Jn10:27) And he calls to you now, "It is I, do not be afraid." Note the order: the text says the disciples "were glad to take him into the boat..." *Why?* The storm was still raging. Their lives were still in peril. They were glad to take hold of Jesus because of who he was. They could count this storm all joy with Jesus in the boat. And so can you... *Are you in a storm this morning?* Look and see Jesus standing sovereignly above it. See him walking to you in perfect power and steadfast love. Hear him crying out to you "It is I; do not be afraid." And reach out in love and faith. Cling to him and glad dependence. Take him in. He will see you through this storm to the other side.*