

Signs: The Walk on Water

John 6:14-36, 66-69

It's Memorial Day weekend – so as a nation we remember the pain and injustice of our world that shouts at us in times of war. Approximately 1.1M Americans have died in wars – almost ½ in the Civil War. On this weekend, we declare that we refuse to forget those Americans who have died in war – often giving their lives so that we might have the kinds of freedoms we are experiencing right now, i.e., the liberty to assemble and worship freely. I extend my deepest thanks – my gratitude-filled respect -- to all who are here today who have served us as a nation in the military. I'm glad you were able to return and that you commemorate this Memorial Day with us. On this weekend, we remember those who were unable to return.

So, as we come to church on this weekend, we are reminded that we still live in a world filled with all kinds of wars, terrors, and injustices. One of the central parts of Christian belief is that God will not leave this world as it is but is at work in this world -- and will continue to be -- until all wrongs are righted. I find that the text we come to today speaks into an important aspect of this good news of God's work among us, i.e., that **even while we still endure the pain of this world, we believe that God is with us**. This comes out in one part of today's Scripture reading. Here's the section I want you to hear, meditate on, and then take home with you. **Jesus said to his followers, "I am! Don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat (6:20-21).**

Question 1: Why Do You Go to Church? *Jesus, knowing that the crowds intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew...* (6:15).

What happened that day in and around the Sea of Galilee has been making me ask this question why any of us have showed up at church today. I'll tell you why I've been asking that. It's because a lot of people back in Jn 6 were going to where Jesus was. Crowds of them were traveled into this rural area in Galilee, supposedly, to experience Jesus. <http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-E-ltSmO5g2o/TiOEkwTAf5I/AAAAAAAAA18/1-5nUG3A40h0/s1600/Snapz%2BPro%2BXScreenSnapz002.jpg>

John tells us in **6:2** that these crowds flocked to him out in a remote area near Bethsaida because "*they saw the signs Jesus performed by healing the sick.*" You heard the story as the Scripture was read. Jesus had been doing the kinds of signs we've been focusing on over the past month here at LAC – turning water into lots of wine in Jn 2, healing a child from afar in Jn 4, and healing a lame man by a pool in Jn 5. Last week, Pastor Jeff spoke to you of the feeding of 5,000 men (and surely over double that when women and children were included) with 5 barley loaves and 2 small fish. Each week, we've reminded you that John says he wrote this so that people would become convinced that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God and find life in his name.

So, the "signs" that John chose to write about all were directly related to what the Jewish people believed Messiah would do. When Jesus made 180 gallons of wine at a wedding feast, it pointed all the way back to Gen 1 and the abundance that was a part of God's world before sin entered it. Here in Jn 6, when Jesus took 5 loaves and 2 little fish and fed thousands of people, it also pointed to the fact that Messiah would provide food in abundance. It was a "sign" saying that Messiah will usher in a day when people will never be hungry again.

So, in Jn 6, after doing yet another miracle that pointed to the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the people wanted to make him their king whether he was ready to accept their coronation or not. It's clear that what they wanted was not only the wine and food, but the victory over the Roman government that they also thought Messiah would bring about. They wanted all that – and they wanted it all now!

But, Jesus withdrew from them (**6:15**). As he saw the crowds coming to make him their king, he went up into the mountainside area just north of the Sea of Galilee where there were (and still are) many caves. (<https://admissions.tufts.edu/files/dogwood/posts/dsc01780.jpg>). He hid from them there. So, with him gone, the people dispersed. And, the disciples went back to their boat by the Sea of Galilee. Matthew 14 tells us that Jesus came down to the shore that evening and forced the disciples to go out into the sea without him. You can almost picture Jesus pushing the boat to get them on their way.

The next morning, these crowds of people came back to the shore and realized the disciples had left – though they knew that Jesus hadn't been in the boat when they had launched out. So, these frantic and obsessed crowds hurried into their boats and went across the sea to find Jesus. And, find him they did! Knowing he hadn't been in the boat, they asked, "When did you get here? How did you get past our watch for you?"

At this point, instead of answering that, Jesus took up the issue I'm asking you about in my sermon, i.e., why people even showed up to be with him. This time, Jesus didn't just say, "You only want signs; not the One to

whom the signs point.” He took it a step further in **v. 26**: “*Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.*”

What’s that comment about? Basically, Jesus said to them -- “I did a sign that pointed to who I am. You should see that and believe in me. But, that sign was like all signs in this world, i.e., that sign didn’t last. You ate and had your fill – but today you’re hungry again. Learn from that not to work for on getting things that are temporary. Learn to put the focus of your life on eternal food.”

Well – they wanted that kind of food, but they were baffled by his words – and maybe you are too! You can read the dialogue on your own as **Jesus and the people bantered back and forth about this from v. 26 through v. 65**. Boiling down that discussion: The people thought Jesus would be a Moses-like leader. They remembered Moses as a leader who freed his people from an oppressive government and then provided food for his people throughout their journey in the wilderness. That’s what they wanted Jesus to do.

So, why did the crowds come to Jesus? They came to Jesus to get him to do what they wanted him to do. Is that why you’ve come to church today? To tell God what you want him to do? They thought, “Moses set his people free from Egypt and then fed people manna for 40 years, 6 days a week! Jesus, you might be as great as Moses. But, so far, all you’ve done is give us one meal. Big deal! We’ll make you our king and then you might be able to do some really great things!”

Jesus told them, “Moses didn’t do any of that. My Father did. And, I’m not Moses. I’m the bread come from heaven to give your eternal life. To have life that will last, you have to receive me into your life! I am the one who gives life that cannot be taken away.”

And, Jesus used very shocking language to try to shake people out of the dullness and blindness and to help them begin to know that what really matters in this world is not merely political liberation and bread that leaves us hungry the next day. Out of love for them, he proclaimed: “I care about people. That’s why I provided the meal. But, it’s not temporary bread and a mortal king that you need. I am the bread of life. You must eat my flesh and drink my blood if you will find life. You need to surrender your life to me in faith.

Look at his words in **vv. 57-58**: “*The one who feeds on me will live because of me. I am the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.*”

With these words, people turned away and no longer followed Jesus. They had come for something else. **They had not come to Jesus to surrender their lives to him by faith.** They wanted him to surrender to them and to do what they demanded. So, again, my question to you today: **Why have you come to church today?**

But, notice this: **While most people walked away from Jesus, some stayed. I am praying that you will be like them!** To them Jesus said, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” And Peter answered, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God. (6:67-69).*”

Remember how imperfect these disciples had been. They were as obsessed with temporary things as the crowds were. And yet, for the first time in John’s Gospel, we see something different happening in them. Oh, they were still “pieces of work” – still flawed. But, **something had happened that made it so that, when others left, they continued to follow Jesus, and all but one (Judas, as v. 70 tells us) would continue to follow him to the end.** Somehow, this group truly had welcomed Jesus into their lives. They had begun, using Jesus’ language, “to eat his flesh and drink his blood.”

What had happened that changed their lives? And, when did it happen? That’s my 2nd question today.

Question 2: What Happened in the Boat? *Then, they were willing to take Jesus into the boat (6:21).*

To grasp the significance of this event, you should know that most people in the days of the Bible had a fear of storms at sea. Even though some of these disciples were fishermen, they would have shared that fear. A part of it was that the Sea of Galilee was over 600 feet below sea level. It is a place in which, when a cold-front moves through, it often merges with the warm and moist air over the sea. This development often creates times of violent squalls. And, when that happened at night, it created a particularly fearful time and place of terror for people. They didn’t know what was under the water. They couldn’t control the storm. Here’s picture by 19thC American artist, Henry Tanner, that depicts the situation: https://www.vmfamuseum/piction/6027262-7905810/?piction_id=355181&piction_download=1

So, consider the setting: Jesus had intentionally sent his disciples out into the sea. Think of that. It feels like many of the difficult situations in my own life. As I’ve gone to places and situations in which I was

following God's leading as best I understood it, I've often found myself in situations that went beyond my ability to control. In one of them, the mission team I served with when I lived in Germany was called to do an evening of music with message in Lubeck in northern Germany. Back in the 70s, many of the churches there were opposed to any kind of ministry from what they called "born-again", i.e., those who called people to personal faith in Jesus – just as Jesus called people in John 6. It was about a 50-mile drive from Hamburg where I lived to Lubeck (https://media.bikemap.net/routes/2837387/staticmaps/2837387_400x400.jpg). So, I was picked up the morning of the event by my two Swedish musician-colleagues and our bus driver.

As I got into the truck, they told me, "Our speaker is sick. Greg, you have to bring the message." At that time, I could hardly speak German at all. I had not yet been to seminary. I didn't have a message prepared. All to say: I was filled with fear and anxiety. This went beyond what I could control. Then, as the Bishop introduced us, he did it this way, "I didn't want this group of evangelicals to come but some of our young people wanted them. So, let's see that they can do." Have you ever been in a situation like that?

The disciples were. In Jn 6, the disciples were filled with terror at a time and in a place to which they were sent by Jesus. On their own, they felt they had no hope. Then, they saw Jesus coming toward them and that terrified them too. Matthew tells us they thought Jesus was a ghost!

It's at that time of unfathomable anxiety and fear that we read the words of Scripture that I want you to hear, meditate on, and then take home with you. *Jesus said to his followers, "I am! Don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat (6:20-21).*

Notice two phrases in Jesus' moving words:

- "I am!" That's exactly what Jesus said. With those words, he is emphatically identifying himself with God, the one who made himself known as "I am" in Scripture. Later, Jesus would say to these same disciples, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father (Jn 14:9)." "I am!" Through me, light came into darkness – and still does. "I am" – through me the seas were made as well as everything in them. "I am" – and I have come to be with you. I can walk on the water. I can calm the storm. Fear not!"
- "They were willing to take him in..." The language here is much more intimate and personal than "willing to take him in." It has to do with receiving someone personally, i.e., welcoming. They had just been afraid of him and held him at arm's length. After hearing his words, they intentionally and consciously received him into their space and into their lives.

Then, Jesus came in, took over and saved them. The Bible says, "Immediately, the boat reached the shore where they were heading... (6:21b).

This was all the work of Jesus. But, **his work called for a response, a response that leads to rescue.**

- 1) **They recognized their need.** They knew that, on their own, they could not survive. They needed someone to save them.
- 2) **They heard his voice.** They took time in the midst of the storm to hear what Jesus was saying to them.
- 3) **They recognized who Jesus is.** He was the one who had called them to himself in the first place. The one who had always provided for them. The one who loved them.
- 4) **They welcomed him in.**

I'm convinced that this was the turning point in their lives. They would still have a lot of learning and growing to do. But, this time of inviting Jesus in by faith is what led to them remaining when other turned away. As Peter would say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (6:68-69)."

I think all of us who have shown up this Memorial Day weekend need to hear this message now – or we will someday soon need to hear it. So, I want to show you the words of Scripture again: *Jesus said to his followers, "I am! Don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat (6:20-21).*

The rest of my message will be a pastoral chat with you. I don't think I've ever spoken with as many people going through a storm as I have over this past month. I think there are many times we need to hear Jesus say this to us. But now, let's think about just two kinds of time that this message is important:

- **For when things seem out of our control**

Out-of-control times like these begin when we're infants. Babies have times when they have pain, when they're hungry or they can't understand where Mom is. What can they do on their own? These things fall outside of their control. They can only cry. It's often a cry for help – for relief.

Times like this continue on throughout our lives. When I was a university president, I met with a group of other presidents together with several psychologists and psychiatrists to discuss a growing reality on all our campuses, i.e., eating disorders and cutting – both acts of self-harm. What we heard was the underlying cause for both problems is a deep and terrifying sense that our students could not control anything in their lives. So, often, they could not live up to the expectations of others. These acts of self-harm were the kinds of things they felt could control – but it was self-destructive.

And, I've discovered that those incidents of life feeling out of control never end this side of heaven. When they come, you often need good Christ-centered counseling and therapy and you need a small group of supporters and prayer partners. But, foundational to those things, you need to acknowledge your need, to recognize who Jesus is, and to hear him say to you, "*I am. Do not be afraid.*" And, then, personally – intentionally – consciously – welcome him into that space in your life.

- **For times of loss**

This loss might be bad health diagnosis – for the loss of your job – for the loss of a loved one etc. Few things in life are more difficult than loss. In times of loss, the future often looks dark and uncertain, as dark as that Sea of Galilee must have looked in the time of a storm. In those time, I want you to learn to see Jesus coming to you in the midst of the storm, walking where no one else can walk and able to do what no one else can do. And I want you to remember these words from Scripture: "*I am! Don't be afraid.*" *Then they were willing to take him into the boat* (6:20-21).

I want to give you a moment right now to hear Jesus say that to you and for you to say, "I receive you. I bring you into this matter. Take it over. I will trust you." As we prepare to do so, I want you to know what happened in Lubeck. We went to the church and received the less than enthusiastic introduction. Then we did 30-45 minutes of music and I imagine I preached a sermon with broken German and no preparation. It may have been among the worst sermons ever preached homiletically. But, people gave their lives to Jesus that night, people who have remained in the faith. I knew I had to do it. I knew I couldn't do it on my own. And, I heard Jesus say, "Greg, I sent you to Lubeck and I am." I am! And, I will be with you. And, I welcomed him to take over. That's what I ask you to do now – as we go to prayer...