

John 6:16-21 "It's a Long Way to Gennesaret"

There is an expression we've all heard at one time or another and it has to do with someone who thinks they are something quite special and can do no wrong. Thus the saying, "that person thinks they can walk on water." And of course the implication is that they are on a par with the person we're going to look at this morning who was the first and the last person to actually accomplish this.

But our text this morning was not inspired by the Holy Spirit and written by the apostle John so as to give us a cute saying to attach to people who think too highly of themselves.

This portion of Scripture actually teaches us about the faithfulness of our Lord in the midst of our tumultuous times as well as clearly showing us that He is the God who has all power and authority even over all creation.

JOH 6:16-21 "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 three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. 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."

Now, keep in mind that this is in the context of Jesus just having fed thousands of people as much bread and fish as they wanted, as He turned five barley loaves and two small fish into a feast for this multitude.

And after the crowds recognized this miracle at the hands of Jesus they decided to take Him by force and make Him king of Israel. Our text from last week shows us however that Jesus would have none of this and so He withdrew into the surrounding mountainside area to pray by Himself to the Father.

And so, as we come to our text this morning, it appears that His disciples decide to leave for Capernaum without Jesus.

JOH 6:16-17 "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."

John seems to leave it up to our imagination as to why Jesus didn't get into the boat with them and why the disciples would leave without their Master. But we should always keep in mind that the bible is not simply different books among many as though each stands on its own like an island.

Matthew sheds additional light on the issue.

MAT 14:22-24 "Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it."

And so, what we've got here is a command from Jesus that they need to take off without Him and that He'll catch up with them later. It might have sounded like an odd request to the disciples but they get into the boat and do exactly what Jesus tells them to do.

Part of the reason for this command is not made clear in our text but it is in Matthew. Jesus planned on spending some time with the Father as He prayed and discussed the things of ministry with the Father, and as He continually sought the Father's will in all things.

It's amazing how many times in the gospels that we see Jesus getting off by Himself and spending time with the Father. This is such a clear indication of what Jesus desires for us to do in our own lives. We are told to be imitators of Christ and part of that has to do with keeping lines of communication with our God open.

I don't know why it is but I dare say that most Christians, including myself, don't spend nearly enough time alone or corporately with the Lord in prayer, and yet the very Savior we claim as our own by faith, characterized His earthly ministry as one which was always seeking and spending time with the Father.

But, one of the things we see here is that it is important for each of us to get alone with God. Notice that Jesus didn't invite His disciples to go up on to the mountainside with Him. He chose to go alone, and it had nothing to do with our Lord shunning His disciples.

It was just important for Jesus to get away from the crowds, to get away from ministry, and yes, to even get away from His friends and fellow workers and just be alone with the Father with no distractions.

In our own busy worlds this is so important and yet it is probably one area of all of our lives which has a tendency to get neglected. And again, I'm preaching to myself here.

Whether it's the morning time or evening time, or any other time when we can just get alone with the Lord and discuss our day, and lift up our praises and prayers to the Lord as we seek His will and direction and power for ministry, we all need to try and make that a priority for our lives. Jesus did.

Verse 18 of our text tells us that once the disciples got out onto the lake "a strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough."

I don't know that much about sailing and boats and weather as it relates to both, but evidently the Sea of Galilee, because it is below sea level, and because there are mountains nearby, make sailing that lake treacherous; not because sailors can't handle the task, but because in those days you couldn't know in advance with certainty what the weather would be like.

You could get out onto the lake during a beautiful calm day and by the time you get some distance off shore the weather immediately changes because of the surrounding high ground. Even to this day it is very dangerous to sail on the Sea of Galilee for many of these reasons.

But, unless you wanted to walk around the lake the quickest way to get across it was to sail it. Now again, as I said earlier, I don't know that much about sailing, but I do know that to sail the craft you need wind to fill the sails to get the boat to move. And yet, notice what we see in our text.

JOH 6:18 "A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough."

A strong wind was blowing. Hey, if you need wind to sail then a strong wind should be ideal to get that boat moving. Well, it would be if the wind was favorable in moving you in the direction you want to go, but Matthew tells us that "the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it." (MAT 14:24)

Now we need to put in our mind's eye what is going on here. The disciples are sailing from Bethsaida to Capernaum. If you were to look on a map you would find that Bethsaida is on the east side of the lake on the north part of the lake. Capernaum is due west. Later we'll find that they end up landing at Gennesaret which is just a couple of miles south of Capernaum.

But the disciples cannot sail their boat west because the winds evidently are coming from the west. And keep in mind that most of these men are experienced sailors. Well, it turns out they are also strong sailors. They now have to grab the oars and start rowing.

Now, I don't know if you've ever rowed a boat in calm waters but it can get pretty tiring in a hurry if you haven't done it in a while. Imagine trying to row, not a small row boat, but a boat that would accommodate quite a few people, and add into the equation strong head winds and large waves.

These guys rowed that craft for three to four miles. The KJV tells us that they rowed 25 to 30 furlongs. A furlong was not an absolute science when it came to that measurement. And so, the NIV does the math and comes up with three to three and a half miles, while the NASB and the NKJV does the math and comes up with three to four miles.

It makes little difference in the long run because it's still an awful long way to row this sized boat against the wind and waves. These guys must have been exhausted. But here's the deal with that. Jesus most certainly knew the problem they were going to get into on the lake when He instructed them to sail for Capernaum, and yet He still gives them the command. And He does it for a variety of reasons.

One reason has to do with obedience. Being sailors they probably knew during this time of year, which was spring time, and with night approaching and the cool air coming down off of the high ground surrounding this part of the lake, that it would be a rough night on the water, and yet they obey Jesus.

There are times in our lives when Jesus may instruct us to follow a certain path or pursue a particular ministry where we know that if we say yes it may have some uncomfortable rough sailing ahead of us.

And it is at this point where we have to decide to pursue our comfort or be obedient and faithful to our Master. The hard part is

not knowing how rough the seas may actually get and how long we'll have to fight the head winds.

We may have a sense of the task but it's the unknown that causes us to have second thoughts about going down that path Christ has placed us on. And yet, we need to always understand that He will never place us on any path where He doesn't provide the means and the direction as He goes with us down that path. And that's why we can trust Him and obey Him as do His disciples here.

Now, that doesn't mean there won't be a struggle in the process. That doesn't mean it may not become tiresome. These men out on the Sea of Galilee were not hallucinating about this west wind blowing in their face, or the fact that they had to grab the oars to not only get to their destination but also to keep from being blown back to where they came from, or worse.

I'll be the first to admit that sometimes it seems that all of this rowing is not worth it. It seems that for all the rowing there is very little distance being traveled. And in the process of rowing against the head winds it just seems to take too much energy and effort.

But keep in mind that Jesus already knew the struggle before He placed you on that path, just as He did with these disciples. The question is, will we say yes to Him and continue to say yes when it's dark and the wind is blowing and the waves are coming over the bow?

But here's the beauty of how God works, though we may not be big fans of the way He does things at times. The beauty of all of this is that He always comes through. Maybe not the way we expect, but He always comes through.

JOH 6:19 "When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified."

You got to love this. Jesus has already had enough time to go up into the mountain and spend time with the Father. He had probably told the Father how much He loved Him and how grateful He was for the opportunity to minister to thousands of people that day.

And maybe toward the end of their time together the Father tells Jesus that His disciples are frantic out on the sea and maybe He better go to them. Maybe Jesus smiles and says, 'yes I'm aware of their problem, I'd better get going.'

He walks down the mountain toward the dock where they left. The shore line has got waves crashing onto it. There are no lights anywhere and so you can't see very far off of the shore but Jesus knows the whole area is churning up as the wind is blowing His hair and clothes.

You ever try walking into a 30 or 40 mph wind? You've got to lean into it. And lean into it Jesus does as He all of a sudden decides to take an early morning stroll. Matthew tells us that it was during the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between three and six in the morning.

We're not told that anyone was around when Jesus begins walking toward the water, but can you imagine the looks He would have gotten when instead of sinking below the waves He is walking above them?

This is truly miraculous. No one walks on water in their own power. But for the Son of God who created the water, it's not a problem. As far as Jesus walking toward the boat the text gives every indication that He literally took a three to four mile stroll over the waves to get to the disciples, who by this time are probably praying and asking God for help.

And so, it's not as though Jesus beams Himself out to their location as He certainly could have done, and which by the way would have alleviated their fears much sooner. But because He knows they are in no danger, because He will not allow them to sink or drown, He takes His time for their sakes as He gives them an opportunity to consider their plight.

Now, this may sound cruel but it really isn't. Our Lord has actually planned for them to be in distress for a time so that when He finally does arrive they will be all the more grateful.

And again, even in our own lives we may wonder if God is playing games with us or if He is being cruel to allow us to continue to be in whatever distress we happen to be in at the time.

But we must never entertain that thought for very long. God is not cruel. He is not without compassion or understanding of our situation. He is a God who loves us as His children even if we don't understand His perfect ways.

Now, as I said, the Lord may plan on taking His time to deliver us to help us better appreciate the deliverance when it actually comes.

But notice that the disciples are not very grateful when Jesus arrives because they're too busy freaking out.

The last thing they expected to see was anyone walking on the water toward them at 3 o'clock in the morning. We're not told that there was a moon which could have allowed them to see Jesus, but William Barclay in his commentary on John's gospel, give us some insight to the possibility that the moon may indeed have played a role in illuminating Jesus in the middle of the night.

"It was Passover time, and that was the time of the full moon."
(Vol.1, pg 242)

There is nothing in the three accounts of this incident that suggests that the wind was the result of a storm that would hide the moon, therefore it is possible that Barclay's further comment may have been true, where "the silver moon made the scene almost like daylight."

In light of this when the disciples were struggling to negotiate the waves and they see a man in the near distance coming upon them they would certainly translate that as something other-worldly and thus Matthew records for us "when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear." (MAT 14:26)

You can imagine the fear they had, but it's hard not to chuckle at the situation. Can you imagine these men struggling to row against the waves and the wind and how tired they must have been? It's been at least nine hours since they've eaten that bread and fish. They haven't slept all night, and out of nowhere Jesus comes up beside the boat and says, 'how you guys doin'?'

They can't believe what they see. You better believe they were terrified. It would be like you or me flying at 30,000 thousand feet and seeing someone come along side your window seat on the outside of the plane motioning for you to open the door.

Immediately Jesus has to relieve their fears. And again, I have to go back to what I said earlier. Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. He knew this would cause them to fear. He knew that they wouldn't be able to handle this situation and yet He proceeds with His plan to walk some three to four miles out on the lake and come up on the side of the boat so they could see Him.

It's interesting that Mark's gospel adds another element to this incident that strongly suggests that Jesus was not going to

immediately come to the rescue as He apparently was going to walk past the boat and the disciples.

Mark 6:48 ⁴⁸ Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and ***He intended to pass by them.***

The word intended connotes that it was His will not to stop at that moment, but to continue on toward Capernaum. But, as we see, Mark records what Jesus actually does.

Mark 6:49-51 ⁴⁹ But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." ⁵¹ Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished,

And the question might be raised, why would He do this? Because they needed to be reminded one more time that they were not dealing with a mere man who came into this world to set up a temporal kingdom. He was the Messiah God who is the master over all of creation, including the waves and the wind. And this seemed to escape their notice as Mark adds this caveat to the incident.

Mark 6:52 ⁵² for they had not gained any insight from the *incident of the loaves*, but their heart was hardened.

Sometimes God needs to remind us of the very things we often take for granted and in the case of the disciples being buffeted by the waves it was wake-up call that Jesus Christ was a teacher as well as the Messiah and He would continue to teach them through His time with them.

The Psalmist sums it up well.

Psalm 25:4-5 ⁴ Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths. ⁵ Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; For You I wait all the day.

And so, we may find the answer to our problem just as frightful as the problem at times. But God says, I will teach you to walk through it with Me. Fear not.

He's been telling His people all through the ages, do not fear.

ISA 35:3-4 "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4 say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come..."

ISA 41:10 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

How many times does God have to remind us that He's right there with us? He will never leave us or forsake us. And yet, life can get pretty scary even when we see the hand of the Lord involved in our lives, because often times His involvement still requires the employment of our faith.

These disciples had to come to believe that it was the Lord, not some phantom or ghost. But once they believed and trusted that it was their Master they were more than willing to take Him into the boat.

JOH 6:21 "Then they were willing to take him into the boat...."

I don't know if you catch the nuance of this verse. Let me put it into the context. Jesus has come up to the boat. Only after He identifies Himself and they are convinced that He is their Master will they let Him into the boat.

I've got to believe that someone on that boat yelled out to this person, you better show me some I.D. because there's no way you're getting in this boat unless you do.'

Hey, you laugh, but that's precisely what Peter did. He didn't use those words, but he most certainly wanted some proof as Matthew points out in his gospel.

MAT 14:28-34 "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." 29 "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" 32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God. 34 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret."

Notice that only after Jesus proved Himself to Peter, and of course, to the rest of the disciples, did the disciples allow Peter and Jesus to get on board.

John didn't include the incident about Peter, but John's intent here is to show the deity of Jesus and so Jesus is the focal point in his gospel, not Peter.

But the other thing that I find interesting in John's account is what he leaves out that is not found in the other synoptic gospels.

Mark 6:53 ⁵³ *When they had crossed over they came to land at Gennesaret*, and moored to the shore.

Matthew 14:34 ³⁴ *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.*

In both of these accounts we are told that after Jesus got into the boat they crossed over and came to land at Gennesaret.

John's account does not include the place Gennesaret but gives a broader designation of the area that would include Gennesaret, which was Capernaum, though there was a distinct place called Capernaum.

In both Matthew and Mark it appears that their landing at Gennesaret, after Jesus got into the boat, transpired over a period of time that would have included more sailing or rowing, but John says that once Jesus got into the boat they immediately came upon land.

John 6:21 ²¹ So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

There are a couple of ways to interpret this. If John's account were taken by itself it could certainly give the impression that not only was there a miracle of Jesus walking on the water, but another miracle of the boat being transported over a distance instantly.

Vincent in his Word Studies in the New Testament makes this comment regarding the Greek word *immediately* in this passage.

"Their immediate and miraculous arrival at the shore was simultaneous either with their entertaining the wish to receive Him, or with His actually coming on board."

We actually have an incident in the Scriptures that is clear about someone being miraculously transported from one distant location to another immediately.

Acts 8:38-40 ³⁸ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, *the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away*; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But **Philip found himself at Azotus**, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

And though this same type of miracle with the disciples in our text is possible the other gospels cannot be ignored as to their lack of instantaneousness regarding the boat arriving in Gennesaret. In fact, the distance from Bethsaida to Gennesaret is approximately 4 miles and so it also possible that upon Jesus getting into the boat it would make sense for John to record that they immediately arrive at the land to which they were going.

Either way, all of the accounts of Jesus traveling to Gennesaret via a watery high way must be seen within the context of Him teaching His disciple that He is none other than the Son of God, which in Matthew's account is clear.

Matthew 14:33-34 ³³ And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" ³⁴ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.

Now, John tells us specifically that the disciples got into the boat to set off for Capernaum. We must assume that it was Jesus who told them Capernaum was the destination. So, why do they end up in Gennesaret?

Well, as we said before, Gennesaret would have been part of the area of Capernaum, but there was an actual place called Capernaum and so it is likely that it was a specific place that Jesus had in mind when He sent His disciples away with the intention of meeting up with them at that place.

Like so many other things in life, and as is often the case when following our Lord, He doesn't usually take us in a straight line. He may give us a specific direction and location to get there, but more times than not it has been my experience that I end up in a Gennesaret before I end up at my final destination.

Sometimes we get so consumed with getting to our destination that we miss the necessity of stopping along the way, as Jesus redirects our paths, and so we sometimes miss the wonderful opportunities of those re-directions.

We sometimes think those situations are a waste of time, or an inconvenience which only gets in the way of our destination, and yet Jesus has a reason for everything He does. As I've learned over the years, and as I've said before, our Lord never wastes anything, even those times which seem to be obstacles or detours.

If for some reason you believe that God is moving you in a particular way to a particular destination, as it relates to life or ministry, and yet you seem to be spending more time in spiritual truck stops then getting back on the road, don't get frustrated, but try and learn or even enjoy the detour.

Some of the best food is found in truck stops. God will get you to where He wants you to go, but He may do it in a round-about way. Just track the different missionary journeys of the apostle Paul and you'll see what I mean.

The disciples in our text expected to sail all the way to Capernaum. Jesus had other plans as they end up in Gennesaret, and then possibly walk the rest of the way to Capernaum, the destination Jesus had originally planned. Just follow where He leads. He won't get you lost.

Often times in life we're on the waters that are churning up and seemingly ready to consume us. And it is often during those times when we think we'll never reach the shore. We want to give up.

But if we would just not give up we might find that Jesus is ready to take us from the point where we think we're still a long way off and yet He seems to shorten the trip when we least expect it. And sometimes He may even do this miraculously.

With God we're never far from our destination. And the reason for it is that He has not only set the destination, but He is the One who ultimately delivers us to that destination. Let Him be God and do it the way He wants and trust that He knows what He's doing. And stay faithful and obedient in the mean time. In that way we keep our sanity and He gets the glory.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 ⁴ I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all

knowledge,⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you,⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.