The Gospel of John: *Against the Wind*

John 6:14-21

Good morning Colonial, and good morning to all those who are joining us from many places around the world! My name is Jim West, and I serve as the Lead Pastor at Colonial Presbyterian Church here in Kansas City. As you can see, I am not standing on a Colonial stage, but instead I am live this morning from our my family’s home here in Olathe, KS. Though I am fairly certain that the work of Christ’s church should be considered an “essential business” in any community, the “Stay at Home” order released by our community leaders failed to make that clear. Thus, we are trying to honor our civil authorities by encouraging our staff, volunteers, and church members to remain at home over the course of this 30 day mandate. I do agree with this “lock down” order, by the way. Staying at home, maintaining social distancing, and resisting the temptation to socialize in larger groups is certainly the best way to protect our seniors and our vulnerable citizens and to stop this nasty coronavirus in its tracks. Please, please, please…do all that you can to honor this temporary time of confinement so that we might spare so many from a horrible battle with Covid 19 that could easily lead to a stay in the hospital if not death.

This morning it is my joy to lead you back into John’s Gospel, back to a story that once again speaks so directly into our current circumstances and challenges! So, with no further ado, if you have your Bibles on hand, please turn to John 6, and we will be dealing with vss. 14-21. I encourage you to read along out loud with me as I read from the ESV.

14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”
15 Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.
16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles,[a] they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” 21 Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

My message is entitled *Against the Wind*, and I have arranged my thoughts around four subheadings: 1) When Jesus Withdraws; 2) The Inherent Risk in Following Jesus; 3) The One Who Sees and Waits; 4) The One Who Comes to Us on the Waves; and 5) Inviting Jesus to Come In.

**I. When Jesus Withdraws**

Our text this morning begins with an exclamation of the 5000 who were miraculously served by Jesus and His disciples: When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

We looked at the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 last week, and regardless of whether we think the miracle was accomplished by supernatural reproduction of the food, or the supernatural transformation of selfish hearts into those willing to share…Jesus has clearly demonstrated His power and revealed His identity to this massive group of people. The initial response of this crowd is good and accurate. They recognize and proclaim that God has been faithful to fulfill
the promise He made in Deut. 18:18-19 to raise up a Prophet like Moses. Here is that promise made well over a thousand years before Christ: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you (Moses) from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” To appreciate all that is happening in John’s Gospel, we must remember that many generations of Israelites had been awaiting the arrival of this Prophet like Moses. Many assumed that the Prophet like Moses was also the Messiah, so this proclamation by the 5,000 here in the desolate, mountainous region near Bethsaida is huge! Thousands upon thousands witnessed the miracle that happened on that mountain, and thousands upon thousands will return home proclaiming that the Prophet has appeared…the Messiah has come!

Now, unfortunately, many Jews also had a very nationalistic assumption about the Prophet/Messiah. Many assumed that when the Prophet/Messiah appeared, He would lead them into a military victory over their enemies…the Romans in this case…and apparently Jesus now perceives that this large mob is getting revved up to proclaim Him as their Rebel King. Therefore, John reports in vs. 15, “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Now…let’s pause for just a moment and ask this question: why did Jesus withdraw? What would cause Jesus to withdraw from people? We know Jesus loved this group of people and had compassion on them because they were like “sheep without a shepherd.” We know He “taught them many things;” we know that he healed the sick amongst this crowd of 5000 according to Matt. 14; and we know that Jesus fed them by somehow multiplying the five loaves and two fish. So why does Jesus withdraw from this crowd that He loves…what would cause Jesus to withdraw from a crowd of people?

The answer is clear and all too familiar: this crowd wants to harness Jesus. They want to make use of Jesus in order to gain their independence. They want to harness Jesus as a King who can heal their infirmities and feed them all the bread they can eat…that could be a very useful King, right?

Friends, this is a lesson we all must learn. Too often we attempt to harness Jesus for what we believe He can do for us. We hitch up our wagon to Jesus to help us accomplish our goals…we harness Jesus to make us feel better about ourselves…we plug into Jesus to protect us from harm and to provide for our needs. But notice: Jesus can’t be harnessed; He won’t be harnessed…and Jesus will withdraw from those who try to “harness” Him for their own agenda. Church: We can’t have Jesus on our terms…He will come to us only on His terms. He is the King; we are the subjects…so that makes sense, right? If you sense that Jesus has withdrawn His presence from you, begin with this question: Have I tried to harness Jesus for my own ends? I think we would all be surprised how often we do that. Let’s now turn to my second subheading:

II. The Inherent Risk in Following Jesus
As we return to the text, John simply reports that Jesus withdraws to the mountains, and then in vs. 16 he reports, “When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.”

So…why are the disciples leaving Jesus on the mountain and heading out to sea in the dark? Does that even sound like a reasonable thing to do? No…it begs an explanation. The explanation we are looking for is clearly stated in two other gospel accounts of this story found in Matthew 14 and Mark 6: “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side…” The verb used here by both Matthew and Mark for “made them” literally translates as “to urge, force, or compel.” In other words, Jesus commanded his disciples to get in the boat, to head out across the sea, at night…without Him.

Last week I showed you this map (https://ischristianitytrue.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/bethsaida.jpg?w=768&h=768), so let’s look at it again for just a moment. As we learned last week, Jesus and his disciples left Capernaum and sailed across the sea to a desolate place, generally in the region known as Bethsaida. Most historians and archeologists place ancient Bethsaida near the mouth of the Jordan river as it spills into the northeast corner of Sea of Galilee…you’ll see Bethsaida there on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum was and is to this day on the northwest coast of the sea, and you can see that on your map as well. So, according to John’s account, the disciples get in the boat and head due west, back to Capernaum.

Now, if you’ve read all three gospel accounts of this story, you know we have a problem here. John’s account clearly states that the disciples are to go to the other side, and they set out for Capernaum. However, According to Mark’s account in Mark 6, Jesus instructs his disciples to get into the boat and to “go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida.” This discrepancy has caused a world of confusion for many scholars and it cost me more than an extra hour of reading on Tuesday! Now, I know these details are petty for some of you, but I believe the Bible is true and accurate, so let me tackle this seemingly contradictory report for just a minute.

In my reading, I learned that some scholars think there may have been more than one town named Bethsaida--that there was, in fact, a town named Bethsaida on the east coast as represented on our map, and then another town by the same name on the west coast, south of Capernaum. That may have been the case, but it seems to me that the biblical authors would have designated which Bethsaida Jesus was referring to in Mark 6 if there were, in fact, more than one city by that name. I will admit that there is some reasonable evidence for this theory, even to the degree that there is some debate over which location is the Bethsaida regularly mentioned in the NT.

Other scholars simply think that Mark got it wrong because he was geographically challenged and unfamiliar with the area. However, I find that unlikely as well. The early church fathers agreed that Mark was the writer most familiar with Peter; and as a fisherman, Peter was most familiar with the Sea of Galilee. So, I feel confident that Mark would have received that information correctly from Peter.
So what are we to make of this mystery? Well, what we do know is that all three gospel accounts of this story have Jesus and the disciples arriving (finally) on the west coast of the lake, at or just south of Capernaum, in the region known as Gennesaret. So, here’s my theory as to what may have happened that could possibly make sense of the different accounts.

I think it possible, and even likely, that the “desolate place” where Jesus fed the 5000 was in an area generally associated with Bethsaida, but south of Bethsaida by several miles…far from any local village or town. If that was the case, then it may have been Jesus’ intention to tell his disciples to set out from where they were, to make their way north up the coast, and that He would meet them at the port of Bethsaida after His prayer time. They would then cross over to Capernaum together. That would make sense of what Jesus says in Mark 6. What we know, however, according to all three accounts, is that a terrible wind whips up on the lake sometime after the disciples set sail. The Sea of Galilee remains famous for these winds given the cold air above the mountains on the east coast clashing with the warm air of the plains on the west coast.

Now, if the wind was a strong, southwesterly wind, we can easily discern how difficult it would have been for the disciples to hold the boat off the northeastern shore. Those familiar with boats and strong winds know that the greatest danger in such conditions is not getting swamped, it’s getting dashed against the rocks when you are close to shore. I have no doubt that the fishermen among the Twelve (Peter, Andrew, James and John) took over at this point, directing the boat back into the wind and pulling hard on the oars to avoid getting beached, which would account for why they are now abandoning their course to the north and heading west/southwest, straight into the wind, in hopes of reaching Capernaum. The disciples know that Jesus can walk around the north end of the lake and meet them on the other side, if need be, so they have given up on meeting up with Jesus and now they are doing all they can to fight the wind and get back to the northwest shore.

This theory could be completely wrong, but I have spent a great deal of my life on small boats, and that scenario plays out very reasonably in my imagination. I can totally relate to fighting a wind that wants to dash your boat against the rocks. When you add to that the blind uncertainty that comes with being at sea at night, and I can tell you there is only one place you want to be in that scenario, and that is far from shore, over deep water…away from the rocks…and that is exactly where the disciples now find themselves in the wee hours of the morning.

Now…have you entered into the story? Are you there? Can you imagine yourself in the boat? Do you hear the wind, can you feel the spray? Can you relate with the intensity of this scene? No doubt some of those disciples…the non-fisherman like Matthew and Judas, are turning green and asking themselves, “How did we get here? What are we doing out here? Just hours ago we were eating our fill, hanging out with Jesus and five thousand of our newest friends…and now we’re about to die!” We all ask that question when the wind is against us and we are struggling to survive. We all ask, “How did I end up here? How did I get into such a mess?”

Sometimes we are in a storm because of our own stupidity or poor decision making, but here’s the answer to that question for our drenched and weary disciples: “Jesus sent us out here.” Jesus made us get into this boat and leave the safety of shore, at night, without Him…and now look at the mess we’re in.
Church, don’t miss this: there is an inherent risk in following Jesus. When we kneel to Jesus and call Him King, we are bound to do His bidding…and sometimes that means He will send us out to sea in the dark. Sometimes that means we are going to find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, in the midst of a storm, straining against the wind just to survive. And what makes matters worse is when we look around, and Jesus is nowhere in sight. That is where the disciples are in our story…and that is where many of us find ourselves right now, amen?

Someone watching this morning is in a relational storm because Jesus directed you to confront your loved one about the truth of his addiction, and now he won’t speak to you. Someone is rowing hard against the wind because Jesus directed you to initiate a conversation with a neighbor about faith, and now she has labeled you as a fanatic and has spoken poorly about you amongst your neighbors. Some of you young ladies are in a storm because Jesus required you to draw the line, and your boyfriends broke up with you as a result. Some of you are in a storm because you followed Jesus into a new job, but now that job has been cut…and you have no income.

We are all familiar with the storms that come about because of our own reckless decisions; but sometimes we are in storms because we are exactly where Jesus sent us. Even so, those storms are real…the threat is real…and it is in those storms that our faith is truly tested.

And that leads me to my second subheading:

**III. The One Who Sees and Waits**

Now, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus could see the disciples from where He was on the mountain. In Mark 6 we read, “And Jesus saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.” Question: how can Jesus see the disciples on the boat if it’s nighttime? Great question! The answer comes in what John reported last week in John 6:4—“that the Passover Feast was at hand.” If you recall, God instructed the Israelites to always commemorate the Passover on the 14th day of the first month… the month of Nisan… which would be in the spring of the year (which accounts for the gusty winds, right?). And the 14th day in a Jewish month represented 14 days after the new moon, so the 14th day of any Jewish month was ALWAYS a full moon…and that explains how Jesus can still see the disciples on the boat in the middle of the night…He sees them in the light of the full moon.

Now, in order for Jesus to see the disciples in their boat by the light of the moon, they would have to be within a reasonable distance from the shore; but notice that John says they had travelled just over 3 miles before Jesus comes to them. Mark and Matthew make specific mention that Jesus came to them on the water sometime after he saw them, waiting until the “fourth watch” of the night, which would have been somewhere between 3-6 a.m.!

So here’s the picture, Jesus was watching over the disciples from the mountain; He saw them struggling against the wind and waves but Jesus did not immediately come to their assistance. Jesus was praying to the Father, no doubt interceding for His drenched disciples, but Jesus
allowed them to wrestle against the wind and waves for a time. He waited for several hours before He came to their rescue. Church…pay attention to this.

One of the first questions people ask in the midst of a crisis is: “Where is God? Does He not see our situation?” And of course, we ask that question because we can’t see God…so we naturally assume He does not see us. Though we often find ourselves in storms when we can’t see Jesus, here’s what we see in John 6: He still sees us! Jesus does not take His eyes off His own as they struggle in the storms of life! I love that old song, “His Eye is on the Sparrow.” I sang it at my grandmother’s funeral many years ago. “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free, His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me!”

Church, just because you can’t see Jesus in the midst of your storm doesn’t mean He can’t see you! Be encouraged by that! According to Matthew 10, our Lord sees every sparrow that falls to the ground; how much more valuable are you than a sparrow? Jesus sees us in our trials…He sees us when the seas rage and the winds blow…of that we can be sure. However, just because Jesus sees us doesn’t mean that He will immediately rescue us.

How many of you know that there is value in the storms of our lives? There is…you will never know if you have courage until you are hard pressed on every side. You will discover how brave you are when the risk is real and the consequence is costly. You develop confidence to weather storms when you have been through some storms and lived to see another day, amen! Jesus will never turn away from our plight, we are always under His watchful care, and He will come at just the right time, according to His perfect plan and His eternal vision. But until that time, He waits. The scriptures tell us that He sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for His Church. One writer suggested that He looks on as any proud parent looks on as her child competes—celebrating courage, hard work, perseverance, and resourcefulness…and lamenting those moments when her children act out in frustration or cowardliness. Our Lord knows that some of the greatest human virtues are those that are earned through the storms of life…particularly those storms we were made to enter by our loving King. He sends us, He sees us, He prays for us, He waits for us…but then He Comes to us, amen? And that leads me to my third subheading:

IV. The One Who Comes to Us on the Waves

As we return to the text, John reports in vs. 19: When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.

So what are we to make of Jesus walking on the water and the response of the disciples?

To understand the significance of this moment, we need to have some contextual understanding of how the ancients viewed the sea. One writer for Bible Hub captured it this way:

Throughout the Scriptures the sea is regarded as an object of fear; its majesty, greatness, masterfulness, seem mostly to have impressed men. It had not then been tamed by human skill; the compass was not known; the few vessels were inefficiently constructed for ocean sailing, and they seldom ventured out of sight of land. Scripture speaks of "the raging of the sea," of "the raging waves of the sea," of its voice "roaring," of the "floods lifting up their voice," of the "wicked being like the troubled sea," of "those that go down to the sea" seeing "the wonders of the Lord, and his judgments in the deep," of the "great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable."
Nothing is more telling of the ancients’ dread of the sea than the great vision of John in Revelation 21 when He describes the new heavens and the new earth. He concludes with great rejoicing, stating: “And the sea was no more.” For the ancients, the sea was not your family vacation get away…it was a fearful reality that an ideal world could do without. Such explains why the disciples were full of fear when they saw Jesus walking towards them on the water. No doubt the tales and superstitions of those swallowed up by the sea led them to immediately apprehend this figure approaching them as some kind of a ghoul. In fact, we read in Mark 6: “…when they saw Him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified.”

The fears of these desperate men were quickly put to rest, however, when they heard a familiar voice call to them across the wind and the waves, “It is I. Do not be afraid!” The Greek phrase used here for “It is I,” is literally, “Ego eimi,” I AM!

Jesus identifies Himself with the name of God, and commands His followers to set their fear aside. Can you imagine the relief of these poor men as they strained against the oars, weary from hours of toil, unsure of what progress they had made in the dark of night…when at last, Jesus calls out to them: It is I! Do not be afraid! Oh, thanks be to God…JESUS IS HERE!

Can you picture this scene? The most intimidating, treacherous force on earth is the enraged sea…and yet Jesus treads upon the white-crested waves as though He was taking a walk in the park! He, the Master of the Seas…all of nature yields to His Lordship, and now He comes to His own when their power is spent and they discover that they have not been abandoned after all! The eloquent 19th century pastor, Alexander Maclaren, states it the best:

We have here a wonderful picture which is true for all ages of the mighty Christ, to whose gentle footfall the unquiet surges are as a marble pavement; and who draws near in the purposes of His love, unhindered by antagonism, and using every opposing force as the path for His triumphant progress.

Church…does that ring true with where we are at this moment in history? Yes, it does. Though the waters surge all around us with upheaval, and the storm rages with no end in sight, still our Lord comes to us…“unhindered by antagonism, and using every opposing force as the path for His triumphant progress.”

I wonder how many of you have already begun to observe how the Lord is working in this age of the coronavirus? I can tell you I’ve spent more time with my family, more time in meaningful conversation with my team, and prayed more with more people this week than in any other week of my 12 years in Kansas City! This church gave close to $100,000 in one day to help single parent homes and vulnerable families! All over the world people are coming together, caring for one another, and finding a way to push back the darkness…can you see Him? Can you see our Lord walking upon the waves?

Church, storms are inevitable. And we must accept that our Lord has never once promised that we would not face storms in this life. To the contrary, He told his disciples that He was sending
them out like lambs among wolves. He says very clearly later in John 16: “In this world you will have tribulation.” And then what did He say? “Take heart, I have overcome the world!”

Our Lord will not be undone by the tribulations; they are but marble stones upon which our Lord treads to accomplish His purposes…take heart Church, He has overcome the world! Pandemics will come; financial hardships will come; death and disease will take their toll; and the darkness will press in upon us…but take heart! We are not alone; we need not fear though the earth give way and the mountains shake; the Lord is with us! The Lord is near…He has come to us! So how shall we respond?

That leads me to my fifth and final subheading:

**V. Inviting Jesus to Come In**

John concludes his telling of this story with these words: “Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”

Friends, it is one thing to know that Jesus is walking by…it is quite another to invite Him into your boat! Listen: Jesus has come for us; that is the central theme of the entire New Testament. The Father saw us in our peril, and He sent His Son. He came for us, treading across space and time, traversing the raging sea of sin and death, so that we might be rescued by His shed blood on a cross that we all deserved.

But there remains for all of us this decision, if you can call it that: do we invite Jesus into our boat, or not? Do we invite the Lord of the Sea to enter into our boat and take over as the Captain of our souls, or do we blindly lean to the oar, on our own, because we are too proud to acknowledge our sinking ship? That remains a choice that we all must make.

John acknowledges that just as soon as Jesus stepped into the boat… “immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”

This is almost a humorous insight to some degree. It is not but 4 miles or so from the northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee to the northwest coast. Given all that drama and all the fear…the uncertainty of darkness and the roar of the waves…the disciples now discover that the Lord was always watching over them, and when He arrives and steps into the boat, the disciples also discover that they actually ended up right where Jesus sent them in the first place! Even though it was an adventurous journey with real dangers, with real perils that called out every last ounce of their courage, they made it to the destination to which they were sent…the journey just looked a lot different than they anticipated. How many of us can relate with that picture? I know I can.

Friends, we actually can trust God, after all, amen? Our Lord knows what He is doing when He sends us out like sheep amongst wolves. He knows what He has in mind for us when we find ourselves straining against the wind. There will always be great perils and challenges to overcome. We will be called upon, just like Joshua…to be strong and courageous, even when we don’t feel strong and courageous. But let us never forget what the Apostle Paul writes in
Romans 8:28, “And we know that God works in all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.”

We have not been forsaken. We are not alone. Our Lord sees us, and He will come to us…He always does. We are not adrift upon a meaningless sea of chaos…we are going to where He has sent us, though we may not know exactly where we are at the moment! That’s part of the journey…and so we continue on in faith, knowing He has not forsaken us.

Most important…far more important than where we are going…is who we have in the boat with us! Friends, invite Jesus into your boat! And here’s what you’ll discover: the relationship with Jesus IS the destination…everything else in our lives simply serves to get us there and to bring others with us! Invite Jesus into your boat today; and discover that which your heart has been yearning for all these weary days.

Will you pray with me?