

All Signs Point to Jesus

Session 5

March 30, 2025

The Sign of His Presence

The Point: In Jesus's presence, we have no need to fear.

Session Passage: John 6:16-21

John 6:16-18

Connection to the point. The disciples encountered high winds on the water, but Jesus was not there with them.

Context. After a long day and a busy period that included the feeding of the five thousand (vv. 1-14), Jesus retired to a mountain by Himself (v. 15).

When evening came. 16). The Jews reckoned their lives by the sun. The day began at dawn with the rising of the sun, and evening came when the sun set. Very little could be done in the evening in ancient times. Jesus, His disciples, and the crowds were in a deserted place, so it would've been very difficult to find lamps or torches sufficient to engage in another teaching session. Additionally, the demands of the day no doubt gave reason for Jesus and the disciples to seek rest that evening in preparation for further ministry the following day.

Boat (v. 17). Two fishermen discovered the "Ancient Galilee Boat" in the muddy shore of the Sea of Galilee in a drought in 1986. Radiocarbon dating indicates the remains to be from 100 BC to AD 100. The boat is approximately twenty-seven feet long and seven and one-half feet wide. (Pictures at yigal-allon-centre.org.il) This discovery gives a better understanding of the typical Galilean fishing boat in the first century, though we don't actually know particulars about the boat John mentioned into his account. Boats are mentioned some fifty times in the Gospels and were common, yet important, implements for a fishing culture. Luke recorded that Jesus on one occasion borrowed Simon Peter's boat, pushed away from the shore, and used it for a teaching platform preceding a miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:3)

Capernaum (v. 17). This city was on the northwestern tip of the Sea of Galilee and served as the hub of Jesus's ministry for a time. There are three mountain regions around the Sea of Galilee so it's unclear where Jesus was teaching and where the feeding of the five thousand took place. John said the disciples were determined to return to Capernaum that night, but Jesus was not with them. Mark records that the disciples wished to go to Bethsaida (Mark 6:45). Peter, Andrew, and Philip were from Bethsaida (John 1:44), and Peter's mother-in-law lived in Capernaum (Matt. 8:14-15). Capernaum may have been Peter's ancestral home before moving to the adjacent fishing village of Bethsaida. It may be the case that the disciples planned to go to either place, or to both places, to find lodging for the night in their hometown area. The disciples knew that the twin cities offered better accommodations for the night than the deserted area they'd been in earlier. After a long day dealing with the crowds and administering a meal they were, no doubt, ready for a place to sleep.

Darkness had already set in (v. 17). The apostles' departure apparently was later than normal. Even though several of the disciples were experienced fisherman and navigators, darkness could be a major obstacle on the water. If the sky was cloudy, they would have experienced navigation problems even before the storm arose and compounded their plight. Though they were familiar with this part of the sea, the wind and waves that followed probably meant they were lost since the stars, typically used for navigation, were likely obscured, leaving them no point of reference.

Not yet (v. 17). Matthew's account adds that Jesus sent the disciples away so He could dismiss the crowds and remain on the mountain to pray (Matt. 14:22-23). Perhaps reluctantly, the disciples left Jesus. They might have even rushed to the boat, knowing a storm was coming and believing they could be home before it struck. But whatever the case, the event was a springboard for another miraculous event.

High wind (v. 18). This event is told also by Matthew and Mark. Matthew recorded that the boat was "battered by the waves, because the wind was against them by the waves because the wind was against it with waves: for the wind was contrary" (Matt. 14:24). Mark observed that the men were "straining in rowing" (Mark 6:48). These experienced boatmen were challenged at the ferocity of the sudden storm. They were strong men, but their strength was proving insufficient for navigating their way home amid the severity of the storm. They felt very weak and very insufficient in this circumstance.

Began to churn (v. 18). The Greek word means to arouse completely. Not only was the wind against the disciples, but the picture is that of an angry sea erupting from the depths and attacking them with fury. Since Jesus knew beforehand how He planned to feed the multitude, and only asked about food in order to test Philip (v. 6), we surmise Jesus knew beforehand the storm was coming, or allowed it to come, to set the stage for another miraculous and faith-building event.

John 6:19-20

Connection to the Point. When Jesus came to the disciples, He told them not to be afraid.

They saw Jesus . . . walking on the sea (v. 19). Mark recorded that Jesus from His mountain retreat saw the plight of His disciples and determined to come to them (Mark 6:48). Just as He knew the hunger of the multitudes, He knew the threat to the disciples. Jesus came to assure these men His power was greater than the untamed wind and angry sea. He was attentive to their need and came to them in a memorable way. We can likewise be assured of Jesus's concern in the needs we face. He's promised to be with us in the storms of life.

Afraid (v. 19). The Greek verb is based on the noun *phobos*, the source for our word *phobia* or fear. Psychology has identified hundreds of phobias, and most of us struggle with one or more. Phobias are grouped into five distinct categories: animals, natural environment (such as heights or thunder), medical injury or bloodshed, specific situations (such as flying) and the broad category of "other," such as the fear of loud noises or drowning. Thus, the disciples could have experienced at least two categories of fear: "nature"—the wind and waves, and "other"—the loud and boisterous wind and the real possibility of drowning in the storm.

Interestingly, though, this fear arose when they saw Jesus walking on the water! Matthew adds, “‘It’s a ghost!’ they said, and they cried out in fear” (Matt. 14:26). The disciples seemed not to recognize Jesus at first. Certainly, they’d never seen a man travel on water as on dry land. They feared this was an impostor from the spirit world.

It is I (v. 20). Jesus readily identified Himself to the disciples. Jesus elsewhere identified Himself as “the good shepherd” and observed, “My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me” (10:11,27). The disciples were among the sheep in the fold of their Good Shepherd. They heard the familiar and reassuring voice of Jesus calling to them above the storm and were prepared to follow Him. Matthew recorded the familiar account of impetuous Peter who followed Jesus in a unique way. After hearing Jesus’s voice, Peter asked to come to Jesus on the water. Jesus invited him, Peter took a few steps, then grew even more fearful and began to sink. But Jesus reached out and rescued Peter from the waves and chided him for his loss of faith (Matt. 14:28-32). But Peter had more faith than his compatriots who stayed inside the boat! He’s the one we remember for his courage and faith when he stepped from the boat onto the sea.

Don’t be afraid (v. 20). Fear is the possession of our common humanity, and Scripture exhorts us hundreds of times not to give in to our fears. Abraham was troubled about having no heir when God commanded him not to be afraid (Gen. 15:1). Moses’s understudy, Joshua, was about to engage in a new leadership role in a hostile environment. The Lord reminded him of the previous encouragement given by Moses (Deut. 31:7) and repeated it almost verbatim: “Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you” (Josh. 1:9). The Lord told Jeremiah: “ ‘Don’t be afraid of the king of Babylon whom you now fear; don’t be afraid of him’—this is the Lord’s declaration—‘because I am with you to save you and rescue you from him Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the Lord, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands’ Be not afraid of the king of Babylon, of whom ye are afraid; be not afraid of him, saith the Lord: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand” (Jer. 42:11). We remember the enduring and confident word of King David in the beloved twenty-third psalm: “Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:6).

Certainly, Scripture doesn’t exhort us to take foolish chances, to live dangerously, or to believe we’re stronger than any temptation. Satan tempted Jesus to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple in order to force God to intervene and save Him. Jesus dismissed this evil enticement (Matt. 4:5-7). We cannot make deliberate bad choices believing we’re invulnerable to the consequences or, as it were, to “force” God to intervene. But on the other hand, the Lord has promised to be near us in our fears and to give us strength in trying circumstances. In the storms of life, we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd: “It is I, Don’t be not afraid.”

John 6:21

Connection to the Point. Jesus immediately brought the disciples to the other side.

They were willing to take him on board (v. 21). John added that the disciples gladly welcomed Jesus aboard their boat. They had initially feared Him, thinking He was a ghost. But His voice and His actions toward Peter had convinced them of His identity. Thus, they invited Him to bring His calming influence to their fearful circumstance. Matthew stressed that once Jesus and the thoroughly drenched Peter boarded the sailing vessel, “the wind ceased down” (Matt. 14:32).

We, too, must be humbly willing to invite Jesus into the storms of our lives. Peter’s cry, “Lord, save me!” (Matt. 14:30) underscores the kind of attitude that pleases God and hastens His help. Peter’s plea is akin to that of the tax collector who cried out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). A prayer for God’s help need not be a lengthy prayer; indeed, sometimes in our distress all we can do is utter a short appeal for God’s intervention. And sometimes we may even have difficulty giving voice to what we need. Paul in the book of Romans promised that the Holy Spirit would help us pray as we ought in those circumstances of bewilderment and confusion (Rom. 8:26).

At once (v. 21). The Greek word, *eutheos*, meaning “quickly” or “without delay,” and related words are used over seven dozen times in the New Testament. Mark was especially fond of using the term (some forty-two times) since one of his themes was to show the power and authority of the Son of God. John said nothing further regarding the storm but indicated that immediately when Jesus stepped on board the boat, it **was at the shore where they were heading**. Once again, the disciples saw the miraculous power of God in the actions of Jesus. That day was filled with wonder.

Bible students differ on their understanding of the significance of this last part of verse 21. Some see in these words a second miracle of the evening. First, Jesus had walked on the surface of the lake to reach the boat and His disciples. Then once He boarded the boat, it and all its occupants *at once* were transported to their intended destination. Certainly Jesus demonstrated during His ministry that He possessed power over objects and distances and could have accomplished this without being taxed. Others see not a miracle of transportation but an example of the effect of the presence of Jesus—despite the long night and strenuous effort required to battle the strong winds and churning sea, once Jesus had come aboard and was present with them, it was as if the remainder of their journey passed without their noticing. Both the Old and New Testaments, and hopefully our own personal experiences, testify to the impact God’s presence can have on individuals in trying circumstances. Though the circumstances might not be diminished in intensity or severity, God’s holy presence makes navigating them possible. Still other scholars would suggest that by the time Jesus reached His disciples in the boat, they were unknowingly already alongside the shoreline so that all they had left to do was to land their craft. Such an explanation seems to downplay the whole account and raise questions as to why Peter would need rescuing in what would seemingly be rather shallow water.

The disciples’ reaction. Matthew explained the reaction of the shaken disciples at the moment Jesus brought peace in the storm: “Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’ (Matt. 14:33). How could they believe any less after what they’d heard and seen that day and night? The power of God was evident when the wind and waves were subject to His authority. Even the sea was stilled and transformed into a pathway for Jesus to come to them in their need. Our human fears may not dissipate at once, but we have the assurance our Savior will come to us at once and partner with us in the midst of our fears whether we sense His presence or not. The command not to fear is an imperative for modern disciples of Christ who live in a world of challenge.