

The Storm – John 6:16-21

Introduction – John continues to use literary devices to do far more than tell stories of miracles done by Jesus. In fact, this is the shortest account of this miracle (the 5th in John’s seven signs of Jesus). Matthew and Mark give us more detail, but John is emphasizing particular aspects of this event. Key to interpreting the Gospel of John is the prologue (1:1-18). John 1:1 and 1:14 should hover over our text as the Spirit hovered over the waters at Creation.

In addition is the experience of the disciples. “We see them alone in a dark night, tossed about by a great wind on stormy waters, and worst of all, Christ not with them. It was a strange transition. From witnessing a mighty miracle and helping it instrumentally amid an admiring crowd, to solitude, darkness, winds, waves, storm, anxiety, and danger, the change was very great. But Christ knew it, and Christ appointed it, and it was working for their good...” – Ryle. John had said the former sign was to test them (6:6), and we noted that the test was less about what Jesus could do as much as who Jesus was. This was now the honors-level portion of the exam.

Overview – Jesus departed the crowd and His disciples and, by Himself, went up on a mountain (v15). That evening, the disciples went down, got into a boat and set out to return to Capernaum. John notes that it was already dark and Jesus had not come with them (vv16-17). A storm arose because of a great wind blowing (v18). Rowing for 3 or 4 miles in this storm, they suddenly saw Jesus walking on the sea, drawing near, and they became terrified (v19). Jesus said, “I am; fear not” (v20), and their response was to willingly receive Him into the boat, after which John says that immediately the boat was at the land (v21).

Key Themes – Themes of Moses and the Exodus continue. But Jesus is more than a greater Moses (John 20:31). Like Moses, Jesus ascends upon a mountain to pray. And while Moses caused the waters to divide, Jesus walked upon the waters. God alone treads on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8) and it is God who stills the storms of the waters (Psalm 89:9). God was in a burning bush, a fire that won’t consume; and Jesus walked on the sea, waters that would not drown.

“And it was already Dark” – “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). This Gospel begins with creation language (1:1) and here we are again with “darkness on the face of the deep” (Gen 1:2). Jesus is the One who created the world (John 1:3) and Jesus is the true Light. We saw that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness (John 3:2) and after their conversation, John tells us why men are condemned in the darkness and must come to the light (John 3:19-21).

God and Wind - Remember that both in Hebrew and in Greek, there is only one word for both “wind” and “spirit.” “Then the sea arose because a great wind was blowing” (John 6:18). God walked in the wind of the day (Gen 3:8). He pushed the floods away with His wind (Gen 8:1). God parted the Red Sea with His wind (Ex 14:21). Jesus told Nicodemus that the wind blows where it wishes, as the Spirit (John 3:5ff). “And the wind/Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). God feeds His people angel food and brings the winds (Psalm 78:25-26).

Storms and Seas – “The Sea of Galilee lies about six hundred feet below sea level. Cool air from the south-eastern tablelands can rush into displace the warm moist air over the lake, churning up the water in a violent squall” (Carson). So far, the material observation. But the waters had to be gathered up into one at creation to separate the land from the waters (Gen 1:9-10). The sea often stands for chaos and disorder, of a symbol of a world in sin (Psalm 69:1, 14-15). In Dan 7:2-3, the four winds of heaven stir up the Great Sea and four great beasts come up from the sea. These are the idolatrous kingdoms of the world against the Son of Man Who ascends to rule over them all (Dan 7:13-14). God rules the raging of the sea (Psalm 89:9) and it is He who controls and stills it (Psalm 107:23-32, esp. v30). And so, in John’s narrative, once Jesus arrives in the boat with His disciples, “immediately the boat was at the land where they were going.”

I AM – Creation language and Mosaic/exodus language abound. And so it should come as no surprise that Jesus says to them, “It is I.” But our translation does not catch what He says. He says “ego eimi” and this is the exact divine name that God gave to Moses (Ex 3:14). This is one of many “I am” statements in John (i.e. 8:58) and is a clear declaration by Jesus of His divinity. This was the test for these signs. Not what can He do, but who is He?

“Do not Fear” – The other gospel accounts note that they had rowed against the storm all night. It was late, the fourth watch, and then they saw what they thought was a phantom walking on the water. “The waters saw You, O God. The waters saw You, they were afraid; the depths also trembled...” (Psalm 77:16-20).

Fear in the Storm – The phrase, “do not fear” or “be not afraid” shows up in Scripture over 120 times. And yet, how often are we afraid? Jesus teaches us that the only fear we are to have is the fear of God (Matt 10:28-31) and the passage explains that the reason to fear only Him is because He knows the very number of the hairs on your head. Nothing touches you except it pass through the hands of your loving Father and Jesus, who calls you “friend”, not even physical death.

One of the reasons we are such an easily troubled people, full of anxiety and fear, is that we do not fear God. The God of our modern sensibilities is small, manageable, inattentive, full of sweet sentiment but unable to control all the storms of life. And when we view God as distant in that way, we determine that we must be the captain of our souls which leads to terrible and lonely fear. The fear of the creaturely things (man, relationships with others, cancer, loss of job, marital unhappiness in the future, the “what ifs,” the “what abouts” that you cook up in your imagination) cripples you. This is because to face those fears effectively without a sovereign God means you have to be omnipotent. And you are not.

But the answer is not to live a life with no fear. Rather it is to live a life that sees God placing you in the storm, and the I AM present with you in that storm, through that storm, and taking you “immediately” to that haven of rest – in Him. How can that be “immediately”? “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Why? “For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.”

God in the Storm – And so you see the storm in your life. But do you see Jesus in the storm? Not only is He coming to you in the storm. He brought the storm. You are to turn to Him, but you are to do so in fear. Let Him be your fear and dread (Isaiah 8:13-14). That is when we see Jesus “and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The truth is that God is to be feared. And this God is full of grace. You do not get to choose who God is; you do not get to choose what He is like. But He is full of grace and truth. And when you “willingly receive Him into the boat” as He is, He will bring you safely to the land – to your haven.

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