

The Fifth Sign: Jesus Walks On the Water

John 6: 16-21; Matthew 14: 22-33; Mark 6: 47-51

John 6: 16-18a

This miracle follows the feeding of the five thousand in two of the synoptic Gospels as well. The full impact of John's account can only be realized by reading it in terms of the previous miracle as well as the long discourse that follows. This incident took place on the same day as the fourth sign so John wants his readers to associate it with the Passover season as well.

Like the fourth sign, this miracle takes place during a time of great crisis. It is dark and the disciples are alone on a sea (Galilee) well known for its dangerous storms. John is careful to set a tone of discouragement and fear. A strong wind blew causing the sea to grow rough and dangerous. They had rowed for more than three miles so there was no going back to the safety of land. The net affect of all of this is that the disciples are terrified!

These men are not without relevant skill. As fishermen, they must have had the knowledge of experienced sailors that would provide them with the confidence that Capernaum could be reached safely. However, the storm threatened them and they were afraid. In this situation the disciples are without the presence of the Lord and for awhile he is no where in sight.

In the Hebrew mind the sea is the place that demons inhabit as well as all the forces that oppose God. Traditionally, a boat in the Gospels is understood as a symbol for the church. A small craft on a stormy sea is descriptive of their true situation as early believers. (Only the disciples are ever in a boat with Jesus) The modern reader need only to read through the letters in the

New Testament to get a sense of how the early church was constantly threatened by the dominate culture that vigorously opposed them.

Bruce Milne a New Testament commentator, argues that the metaphor of the boat on the stormy sea aptly describes the contemporary western church. He writes:

It (the church) is tossed by the winds of secularism without and controversy and uncertainty within, out of touch with its point of departure, unsure of its whereabouts, and with no clear destination ahead. All the while its members, like the disciples in the story, strain at the oars of good works and ministry, making no apparent headway in the process. Crucially, they have no manifest conviction that Jesus, the Head and Lord of the church, is anywhere in sight. "It is dark".

John 6: 18b-21

In the midst of the storm they see Jesus approaching but they do not realize who it actually is so they are more terrified by him than the sea. Jesus recognizes their state of mind so he announces, "It is I; don't be afraid." What Jesus said can be properly translated "I am", an Old Testament term for God. John is simply wants his readers to see what he has already said in his prologue; Jesus is God dwelling among us.

John also wants his readers to see this event in terms of the Passover background. The previous miracle related to how God provided manna to the children of Israel by supernatural means as they moved from Egypt to the promise land while this sign reminds them of another aspect of Israel's journey from Egypt.

Exodus 12-14 tells of how God intervened to part the Red Sea for the sake of his people. By doing so God demonstrated his commitment to and love for Israel by ensuring their escape from those who sought to recapture them and return them to slavery.

Now Jesus appears as the Lord of the seas as well thereby manifesting the fact that the God, who was present to rescue Israel by parting the Red Sea, is now

present with the disciples in their present crisis and they can be confident that his intervention will be affective and trustworthy.

As John's first readers read his account they would be reminded of Psalm 77 where the Psalmist cries out to his God in great distress and he wonders if God will intervene in his difficult circumstance. Like the prophet Habakkuk, he begins to reflect on what he knows of the faithfulness of God and he remembers how He had parted the waters.

Psalm 107 may have also come to their remembrance as they considered the meaning of this miracle. In this Psalm the writer praises God because there is no limit to which his God will not go to rescue his people with His unfailing love. Half way through the Psalm he writes; "He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven." (Psalm 107:29-30)

The situation of the disciples is analogous to Israel's experience. Jesus came to the disciples in their boat when the waves threatened and prevented them from arriving at the desired destination but God in Christ rescued them as he had rescued Israel in the past. Their fear and doubt is transformed by the one whose presence casts out fear. John has made it clear that the God who rescued Israel is made manifest in the one who now says, "It is I; don't be afraid."

As soon as Jesus got into the boat they arrived safely at their destination with their hopes and confidence renewed.

The modern reader ought to find great encouragement in John's telling of this fifth miracle because in so many ways our situation is like that of the disciples. People of faith live in a world that is fundamentally opposed to God and there are forces everywhere that work to prevent us from arriving at the destination God desires for us. The culture that we live in, like the Sea of Galilee, rises up to destroy our trust and confidence in God. In the face of

this sober reality, John has reminded us again that there are no forces anywhere that can prevent God in Christ from continuing his saving work. The one who has mastery over the wind and waves is more than able to take us across the dangerous sea to safety on the other side so long as we allow him to get in the boat with us. We need only to raise our sails in faith as he supplies the ballast that keeps us upright and sailing in the right direction.

John 6:22-24

The crowd had remained hoping to see Jesus again but soon they realized that they would have to go and find him. Eventually they found him at the synagogue at Capernaum where they probably anticipated another miracle. Instead Jesus entered into a long discourse that was introduced by the fourth and fifth sign.