

THE “I” OF THE STORM

John 6:16-21

When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, 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. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. 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. But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Last week I said the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 was like a doughnut, and that it had a creamy filling we were going to come back to. That's what we're at this morning. John tells this little story right in the middle of the other one. Between the feeding on one side and Jesus' explanation of himself as the true Bread of heaven on the other, we find this little nugget. But calling this story the creamy center is a little misleading, because there's nothing smooth about it. It's more like a fiery salsa or something, because you have this stormy, dramatic moment with a bite to it, not something calm and soothing.

Some of the scholars I read this week wondered why John would include this where he did. Why would he break off a thought midstream, go to this completely different event, and then come back?

Maybe from a thematic perspective it's confusing, but it's the way the story happened. It's the way life happens. I don't know how many times at work I am focused on one project when someone comes into my office and asks me a question or sends me an email that pushes me off in a different direction before I come back to my original task. I remember one time I sent an email to someone in Switzerland to request some photography, and I thought at the time how strange it was that I could affect what somebody did on the other side of the world.

Life is full of interruptions and rabbit trails. But for Jesus, this wasn't really a rabbit trail at all. It wasn't a departure from the main story – it was part of it. He needed to separate his disciples from the crowd and get them by themselves to show them some things about himself that the larger group was not yet prepared to see.

As you may recall, when we last left the crowd, they were getting excited. Jesus had just performed his most spectacular miracle yet, and they began to get ideas. So the next thing you know, he slips away. He's not going to just get swept up in the tide of public opinion. His agenda wasn't going to change because of what they wanted him to be.

So he hid himself in the hills. My hunch is that people thought if they waited around, he might come back soon. But it was getting later and later. You can almost hear the conversation that must have taken place between the disciples.

“Come on, let's go. He said we should just go without him.”

“I think we should wait.”

“We can’t wait. It’s getting dark.”

“How’s he supposed to get back?”

“He’ll be fine. Hurry up. I don’t want to be out there all night.”

And finally they make a decision. If they’re going to go, they can’t wait any longer. So they push off.

Those are tough moments, aren’t they? Decisions we make without knowing what we’re getting into or whether or not it’s the right thing. We’ve all made choices that looking back we wish we could change. If we’d known then what we know now...

But they didn’t know. So they set off. And we find a whole boatload of things they experience without Jesus in the boat.

John ticks through several of them right away for us. First they encountered what I would describe as **lostness**.

It was dark, John tells us. The sun had gone down, and with clouds in the sky, there would have been no stars or moon to give them light and direction. We’re used to there always being light, or headlights. It’s never completely dark around here. But this would have been pretty much true darkness. And it would seem John is saying more than simply “It was nighttime.” It’s a darkness of uncertainty, lack of direction. Not only are they navigating without the stars, they are also in the dark about who Jesus really is, where he went and what just happened with that miracle.

There’s also a certain **loneliness** to their experience. John writes that Jesus had not yet come to them. One writer called him The Absent One at this time. He is nowhere to be found. They are alone and isolated, facing unknown waters. They undoubtedly have questions and want to process the day with him. But they don’t know where he is.

As they head out on the lake, the waters are getting stormy. John describes them with two words. First he talks about the strong wind. November is the month of wind here in Washington. My big wind story happened in November when I was 15, and we were about to move into a new house when there was a huge windstorm that blew a large evergreen tree down on top of the new house we were buying. It had to have been at least 40 or 50 feet tall and it made a big crunch in the roof. That takes some serious wind.

What is wind? It’s a force of air moving, and it can be powerful enough to push us around. We could use the word **pressure** to describe it. It’s the pressure that is bearing down on the disciples. It is blowing them off course and changing their situation. They are having to row hard to resist the pressure that wind creates.

Wind also causes the next piece John talks about, which are the waves. The ups and downs, the highs and lows. Waves are a good way to describe the **upheaval** that accompanies a storm. They are the chaos that results from the wind, a churning and choppy sea that makes it difficult to stay afloat. They can capsize a boat or flood it.

The disciples are working with all their might just to stay alive, so they aren't making much headway. John says they got about 3 to 3-1/2 miles into it, which was only about halfway across the lake. When you're in survival mode, you're no longer thinking about your ultimate goals. You just want to get through the crisis. I would say there is a **hopelessness** that accompanies their rowing. Will they ever get where they are intending to go? It seems all but useless and somewhat futile. They are spinning their wheels in a first century kind of way.

And then they spot Jesus through the storm. It's an eerie sight, giving them another tough sensation, which was **fear**. He looked like a ghost. When you really stop to think about it, it would be terrifying. You're already scared you're going to die from the storm, when you see a figure coming through the dark. Maybe you'd think it was the angel of death.

(Incidentally, I just finished reading a Hardy Boys mystery to my boys. #44, The Haunted Fort. In it Frank and Joe saw someone walking across a lake, and they were scared by it too. It turned out that he had surfboard like shoes on his feet, so the mystery was solved.)

It's not natural to see somebody walking across a lake like that. The disciples' fear was the kind that comes from recognizing you're dealing with a supernatural power. They couldn't even recognize at first that it was Jesus' face.

Those were the things the disciples experienced out there on the lake. We're all in the same boat with the disciples, so to speak. As we push out into life, we're going to be hit by unexpected storms. And we'll face many of the same feelings the disciples did.

Lostness. Where am I headed? I can be paddling around in the dark, searching for direction and searching for a guide. When we're in the middle of a storm, sometimes all we want is for somebody to give us an action plan. Have you ever just been at a point where you said, "Please God – just tell me what to do and I'll do it?" I have had times in my life when I was desperate for direction and I just couldn't see a way out. Lostness goes with stormy weather.

Loneliness. – In his book *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee says that America is the loneliest nation on earth. We're incredibly busy. We're rowing hard. But when we stop to take inventory, we have this sense of being isolated and alone in the world, and we don't feel connected at all. We're looking for the Absent One. There's an Indigo Girls song that says, "How come I gotta die to get a chance to talk to you face to face?" We long to have God with us here and now, in the middle of life's storms.

Pressure – Life brings all kinds of strong winds that blow us off course. Pressures push us in directions we don't want to go. These are circumstances that are quite often out of our control. I watched part of an interview Barbara Walters had with Martha Stewart, who is probably the queen of being in control of every detail. Barbara asked her what was the one thing that hurt the most about this whole scandal, and Martha said she had no time in this stage of her life for unforeseen events that she had no control over. The pressure that was coming to bear on her was making her mad, partly because there was nothing she could do about it.

We all face pressures like that, whether it is losing a job or a health crisis or a car wreck or work related stress. The storms of life are windy – pushing us around and knocking us over with pressure.

Upheaval – Things get turned upside down for us. The sea we're riding on can rise up against us and try to flip us over. I like life to stay the same. Change is hard for me. But it goes with the territory. The sea isn't like glass most of the time.

Hopelessness – This was a week full of meeting with people for me, and I met with one friend who is really going through the middle of a storm right now. And what he conveyed to me was how futile it seems to be trying to connect with God right now. He has little motivation because it feels so useless. Trouble in life can steal any sense of something having purpose or hope.

Fear – In all those situations, we can become full of fear, to the point where we can't even see the face of Jesus because we're so afraid. Life is overwhelming much of the time and can lock us up.

So we can relate to the disciples in their predicament. It's at this point in the story when I can hear a disciple saying, "I knew we should have waited." There had to be a moment of doubt, a second guessing about the choice that was made. But there was really no room for that. And ultimately, their decision hadn't caused the storm, and their decision, right or wrong, didn't prevent Jesus from still coming to them.

When we find ourselves in deep waters, we may want to blame ourselves because of our own poor judgment. We may kick ourselves for bad choices. But we don't have control over the storms in life and when they hit. And we can be sure that Jesus will still come for us, even when we did take a wrong turn.

That's because in the middle of this story in the middle, we find the heart of the matter: **Jesus comes for his lost friends.** And when he arrives, we find out who he really is.

What does he say to his disciples? "It is I. Don't be afraid."

You can miss it in English, but in the original Greek, it's the same phrase we talked about when Jesus met the woman at the well. He really says, "I AM. Don't be afraid." He takes that Old Testament name of God "The Great I AM" and declares himself to be God.

He does that in his actions, too, by walking across the lake. Listen to what Job said centuries earlier about God:

Job 9:8

He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.

This is a God act – not just a phenomenal power of a miracle worker.

Psalm 77:16 & 19

*The waters saw you, O God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed...
Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.*

In the middle of our darkest hours, in our deepest despair, Jesus shows himself to be the real I of the storm – The God who is, the God who loves, the one who comes to us, who looks for us, who intently pursues us across time and space.

The storm shows us who is the only one who can help us, the only one who cares enough to enter it even though he didn't have to.

He's also the one big enough to make the storms serve his purpose. He walked all over those waves, turning them into a path. He makes the pressures and the upheaval in life into something that can usher in his presence.

I can't stand up here this morning and tell you why God allows pain and hard times, why he doesn't just make the storms disappear. We'll have to wait to ask him someday. I do know though that often the storms get our attention and become the path that he uses to get to us. He can walk right into our lives, riding those waves right to where we're desperately searching for him.

When he comes to the disciples, at first they're not sure they want him in the boat. They now realize they're not dealing with an ordinary rabbi. When my dad was a kid, he saw a man get electrocuted by a downed power line. He saw the instantaneous devastation that happens when someone tries to handle high voltage electrical current. You just don't mess with that stuff. As good and wonderful as electricity is, it's also deadly and something to be respected.

The disciples know the power they're dealing with, and more importantly, they know how powerless they are in comparison. Can they really afford to get too close to

somebody who can manipulate the laws of nature? Can any of us? Do we want to invite that kind of power into our boat?

Jesus reassures them that it will be okay. He says, “Don’t be afraid.” It’s at that point that John says the disciples are willing to take him into the boat.

We looked at what it was like before Jesus got there. What did they experience once Jesus was in the boat?

First they found **comfort**. He calmed their fears. They didn’t need to worry about whether or not they would survive the storm when they had the God of the universe riding in their boat.

They also had his **companionship**. He stayed with them for the remainder of the journey. They were no longer facing things on their own, feeling alone in the world.

Jesus offered them **peace**, too. If we look at the other accounts of this event, we discover that the storm calmed down. Jesus may have the power to walk right through a storm, but he also has the power to bring the storm to an end.

And finally, they found **fulfillment**. They reached their goal. John says immediately they reached the other side. That immediate isn’t talking necessarily about a miraculous end to everything. It just means they made it. All the hard work they had been doing on their own didn’t get them very far. Jesus was able to take them all the way to the finish.

In 1991, the Andrea Gail set out from Gloucester, Mass on a fishing expedition to the North Atlantic. Two weeks into the trip, something happened that had never before occurred in recorded history. A thunderstorm and hurricane converged to form the most powerful storm ever seen.

They made a book and a movie about it called The Perfect Storm. In it the crew of the Andrea Gail did everything they could to battle through it. But the storm was just too big. They couldn’t do it. They threw all their best ingenuity, teamwork and resources at it, and they still came up short. Despite their tremendous will to survive, the entire crew was lost at sea.

One reviewer pointed out that nobody prayed in the entire movie. I don’t know whether or not that was true in real life, but it made the movie into a metaphor. The cast really was trying to do it on their own. They represented the very best of human effort. But sooner or later, for all of us, someday a storm is going to come along that we can’t tackle on our own. And when it comes to the ultimate storm, death itself, we’ll never be able to conquer it by ourselves. We will capsize and drown.

We need God. We need Jesus. I need Jesus. And on the most basic level, the question is, have you been willing to take him into your boat? Are you rowing and struggling against the waves yourself, trying to stay afloat?

Ps 107:23-30

*Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their
distress.
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.*

Jesus is the only one who can take us to our desired haven – who can get us safely to the far shore of life. He's the only one who can help us to overcome all the storms.

As we close, I'll leave you with three questions to consider for yourself:

First, what's your storm? What are the wind and waves in your life right now?

Second, if you could identify one of the feelings the disciples felt that most closely matched where you're at right now, which would it be?

Finally, is Jesus in your boat? Have you been willing to let him step in and take the helm?

When we finally reach a point where we let him in the boat, we'll find we're met with all the same things the disciples found. Where we're afraid, he'll comfort us. Where we once were lonely, we'll have his companionship. He'll bring us peace where there was fear and chaos. And he'll give us fulfillment and get us where we need to go.

If you're here this morning and you're saying, "Yes. That's what I want. I want Jesus in my boat," and you've never invited him into your life before, you can have that today. He will climb on board immediately and stay with you. Just pray this prayer with me: Lord Jesus, I can't do this on my own. I believe you can. I believe you even conquered death when you died and rose again. Please come into my life, forgive my sins and take charge of where I'm headed." If that's your prayer this morning, while nobody is looking around, would you just slip up your hand so I can be praying for you?

There are other people here this morning who are already disciples, going through storms, looking for Jesus in the middle of it. If you'd like prayer this morning, would you just slip up your hand as well?