

It is I Be not Afraid

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Date: 28 March 2021

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read, Gospel according to John chapter 6, and we may read again at verse 20.

But he that is Jesus saith unto them it is I, be not afraid. When considering a passage from the Bible, from one Gospel, it is useful to compare all the Gospel narratives which record that particular event.

In this passage, John records for us the crossing of the Sea of Galilee by the disciples of the Lord after the miracle of feeding of 5,000, and how they were caught in a storm.

The same incident is recorded for us in Matthew and in Mark. And usually Mark is the writer who we associate with brief reporting of events.

But in this particular instance, it is John's account that is marked by brief, terse, direct reporting.

[1 : 34] Matthew and Mark give us more details. Matthew 14 and Mark 6, for example, both tell us that it was Jesus' idea that they cross the Sea of Galilee.

It was actually Jesus' command that the disciples leave him behind and that they go ahead of him in the boat across the lake that night.

And he retires to the hills, presumably to spend time in prayer and in meditation. Matthew, in his account, focuses more on the reaction and experience of the disciples, and particularly the reaction of Peter.

Peter, as Jesus comes walking towards them in the boat, Peter wants to get out of the boat, you remember, and walk towards him.

And you may remember also that it doesn't go so well for Peter. But Matthew wants to highlight some of these issues and the disciples' questions and so on.

[2 : 52] John's retelling of the story, then, as I said, is much more brief. Is that because of his particular style of writing?

Or is there some other reason? And I believe there is another reason. And I think it is helpful for us to remind ourselves why John wrote his Gospel.

And he tells us, towards the end of his Gospel, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

And if you remember that every time you are reading John's Gospel, then I think it is very helpful to your understanding of the writings contained in this Gospel.

[3 : 57] The emphasis here is not so much on the experience of the disciples, but on the power and the majesty of Christ, who was in the beginning with God and was God.

The story, notice, builds towards the climactic statement of verse 20, where Jesus identifies himself to the disciples in the boat.

Be not afraid, or it is I, be not afraid. And our eyes are meant to linger on this Christ, who is revealed and disclosed to us in this story, to wrestle with who he really is, and all that that should mean for every one of us here today.

So, three points from this. First of all, the minimal facts told by John. Secondly, the motivation for the fear of the disciples.

And thirdly, the muffling of fear. Three Ms. The minimal facts told by John. The motivation for the fear and the muffling of fear.

[5 : 27] First then, the minimal facts told by John. Now, I know it is always very tempting to bring in all the data that John leaves out, and which we find in the other Gospel accounts.

But in this particular instance, I believe it would detract from the emphasis that John is setting before us in this particular incident.

Yes, John tells us of their struggle in the storm. And you don't need much imagination to think of the shrieking of the wind, the foaming of the water, the thud of boat and water coming together, the very creaking of the oars, as they desperately rode.

And all of these might have sounded to them as mocking their frailty and their helplessness against the might of the elements.

The power and the force of the storm, only serving to reinforce how feeble they were as they struggled against the might of the storm.

[6 : 55] And often the forces that sweep over you in life do the same, don't they? Forces against which you are powerless.

Forces that reinforce your total helplessness in situations where, as it were, you are born by the might of wind and wave.

If you are a Christian here today, you will inevitably, or you will, you will probably know that you feel the power of forces hostile to faith and godliness as they assail you suddenly and fiercely.

As you are caught up in trial of one kind or another. It's part of being a Christian in the world. And you know what?

Often, trial in the life of a believer arises after much blessing. Here, it was after the marvelous encouragement of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000.

[8 : 12] Here, the disciples were elated by what the Lord had done and what had taken place.

And now, so soon after such a time of fellowship and blessing, they are caught up in this fierce storm.

And according to the context, they persevered on their course. Perhaps an alternative course might have been more appealing. For those who are semen here, you will know that times it is more appropriate from you to deviate from your course in order to get some protection from the height of the storm.

But they didn't do that. And there is always the temptation in the life of believers to go in a different direction. Let's deviate from the path.

And of course, that leads logically to this. Let's deviate from the direction of the Bible. But you see, the exhortation of the Bible is, let us hold fast our confession.

[9 : 33] And let us not grow weary of doing good for in due season, we will reap if we do not give up. And when John wrote his gospel, and he wrote his gospel, we are told as an elderly man, many years later, he could recall that he too had a seat in the boat.

And note what he states, because it seems to me it's very significant. He tells us, it was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

And it's as if John is implying in that brief statement that everything was hopeless. You know, everything always appears worse in the night, doesn't it?

If you are ill in the night. You long for daylight. Because the night hours just seem to intensify and exacerbate the effect of illness.

But when John tells us about it was dark, he might also be telling us that the darkness is suggestive of isolation.

[10 : 48] a feeling of being cut off. There's no mention of other boats to keep them company. They are alone in the center of the storm.

And for every person here who has been at sea in a storm, even if you do have other boats for company, there is a measure in which you are alone. You are cut off. You are cut off when you're in the storm.

And I think John wants us to understand this. And he obviously attached significance to that. It was now dark.

As if there was, and Jesus hadn't come, as if there was a feeling of abandonment. And you know, that is too a temptation that the believer is faced with in the storms of life.

Not even the psalmist was immune from these thoughts in the psalm that we sung together here today. Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable?

[11 : 53] Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all times? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?

These are the kind of questions that arise in the minds of believers at times when they are caught up in spiritual storms and difficulties.

But you know, for every person in Christ, there is the marvelous promise that will ultimately, that they will be ultimately in a place of which this is true.

there will be no night there. And however dark your providence might be today, this is what the Bible says to every person in Christ, that ultimately they will be in a place where there is no night.

in other words, where you won't feel abundant, where you won't experience acute loneliness, where you won't feel the desolation of loneliness, or the intensity of suffering, because there will be no night there.

[13 : 25] There will be no night there. now, we don't know what the inner thought process of the disciples was, but there is more than a hint in the statement, it was now dark and Jesus had not yet come to them, as if there was an expectation on the part of the disciples that Jesus would intervene.

And do we not too have this expectation when we come face to face with our own inability and helplessness? Where is Jesus? And you pray, Lord, I'm struggling badly.

I don't know how to cope. I don't know where to turn. I've been carried this way and that in the storm that has engulfed me and I'm helpless. I'm bewildered, almost on the point of despair, because this is not what I expected when my life was turned around by your marvelous grace.

And you know, in those euphoric moments, when grace first shed its marvelous light into your life and into your heart, and your life was turned around, when everything was so new and wonderful, did you not think that he would always be there?

But now, where are you in the storm? I feel so alone. I'm in the dark. That is how the disciples seem to view this.

[15 : 07] And you might say, well, they had one another's company. They were all together. Oh, yes, they did. But you know, in a storm, everyone has his own private thoughts, cut off and alone.

And there is always the fear that if you disclose your thoughts in a storm to those who are with you, that you'll only cause more discouragement and despondency in the lives of those who are caught up with you in the storm.

That's true in the literal sense, let alone in the spiritual. And it reminds me of an old fisherman who is still living in his 90s, and he spent most of his life on a fishing boat.

And he told me one particular crossing of the mensh. They were coming from the mainland returning to the island here. He was never so glad to see the lights of Stornoway Harbour.

Irrespective of his experience and the long years he had spent at sea, but the lights of the harbour were something that gladdened his heart on that particular night.

[16 : 38] while alone in the storm. Is that how it is with you today? Do you feel isolated and cut off in darkness?

Where was Jesus? And Jesus says, Jesus, says John, withdrew again to the mountain by himself. What was he doing there?

and the implication is that he was praying. And despite their perception or even their expectation that Jesus had not yet come to them, Jesus is monitoring them.

And it's important to recognize this. They were under his caring eye the whole time as he measured out the trials that would strengthen their faith.

at what John implies is made explicit in Mark's account, and he saw they were making headway painfully. Where is Jesus?

[17 : 41] Well, it's true, he is at God's right hand, enthroned with authority and power. But he is looking upon you.

He can lift up nails, scarred hands, demonstrating the ones experienced in your place, as he intercedes for you.

Well, we could say this and all and more, but I must pass on. The minimal facts told by John, the motivation for their fear. The disciples, John says, leave Jesus at the shore and they begin probably late in the afternoon to cross the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum.

the darkness has fallen, the storm overtakes their boat. The Sea of Galilee is about 600 feet below sea level and the wind will sweep over the mountains that surround it and whip up the waters very quickly so that you can have violent squalls coming up extremely quickly and capable of causing great destruction to small craft on the water.

And even today, when the winds whip up storms on the Sea of Galilee, even power boats are required to remain at dock. It's too dangerous for them to venture out.

[19 : 19] And it is that kind of storm that engulfs the disciples in their boat that night. And we're told here that fear grips them.

But notice carefully what causes their anxiety and fear. It's not fear caused by the storm.

They are experienced fishermen. they knew these waters well. They knew when a storm was dangerous, when it threatened their boat, and when it did not. And it wasn't the storm that made them tremble that night.

No doubt it may have made many of us who have not much experience of being on water made us tremble.

But not these men. They knew what they were doing on that boat on that lake on that evening. And yet they were afraid. What made them tremble?

[20 : 21] Not the storm. It was Jesus. You know, many things in life can make us afraid. Here's the irony that John's story highlights for us.

While we run scared from many things that pose no real threat, we never think to tremble in the presence of Jesus.

Look at the story. It's dark. The sea is rough. The storm is raging. The boat's in the middle of the lake, the widest part of the lake probably.

And then through the darkness, John says, Jesus comes walking on the sea, coming near the boat. And the word for walking here highlights the effortless with which he comes to them.

He was, you might say, strolling over the waves, unperturbed, totally at ease.

[21 : 29] And you know, for those who were in the boat, it was eerie, it was uncanny, and totally beyond their experience and expertise. Boats they knew, the sea of Galilee they knew, storms and winds and waves they knew, but here is Jesus coming to them in a manner for which they simply had no category.

You see, back in verse 15, after the feeding of the 5,000, we learn that the crowds want to seize Jesus and make him king by force. Then later in verse 26, the next morning, as Jesus interacts with the crowd and they finally catch up with Jesus and the disciples, Jesus puts his finger on their real motives.

And you look at verse, Jesus answers, Verily, Verily, you seek me not because you saw the miracles, but because you did eat of the loaves and were filled. In other words, they want him because they can use him.

This is the Jesus who can give them something, who supplies their needs and offers a quick fix to their life and to their dilemmas.

I'll take that Jesus is what the crowd are really saying. But that night in the boat, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples in an altogether different light.

[22 : 54] He shows himself to be majestic and terrifying at one and the same time. man. He's not the puppet of any man. He's not subject to the whim and the appetites of the crowd.

Here's the Jesus of whom Psalm 77 speaks. And Psalm 77 is really reflecting on the Exodus story, a theme we'll come back to in a few moments.

And yet here it seems almost suggestive of this moment as Jesus comes walking through the storm to the disciples. When the water saw you, O God, when the water saw you, they were afraid.

Indeed, the dream trembled, the clouds poured out water, the skies gave forth thunder, your arrows flashed on every side, the crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind, your lightnings lighted up the world, the earth trembled and shook, your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints, where unseen.

Here is a Jesus to make us tremble, the God man who rules the elements, who rides upon the storm and walks over the waves.

[24 : 19] Here is the Lord, not a Jesus whose soul will is to fuel our comfort, but a Jesus who commands our utter submission and all.

Do you have room in your Christianity for a Jesus like that? The Jesus of majesty and power.

The disciples probably unintentionally had the balance right that night in the boat. it wasn't the storm that made them afraid, but Jesus made them tremble.

And I think that's highly significant. Something is wrong when we find ourselves quaking at things around every turn in life's road, while Jesus never makes us afraid.

We've gotten things out of proportion. The elements make us afraid. The storm makes us fear. Tomorrow, because we don't know what tomorrow might bring, makes us afraid.

[25 : 45] great. But have we forgotten that we live in the grip of the Lord, to whom the elements answer, who commands the storm, who governs tomorrow?

Tomorrow. Jesus, the ground of fear, a reason to fear, to tremble before the Lord.

that's the motivation of the fear. Minimal facts told by John, and finally, the muffling of fear.

If coming to them through the storm gave them reasons to tremble, then notice how he brought their fear to an end.

they are quaking as he comes close. The wind and the rain swirling around them, and you might say the vortex of the storm parts as Jesus comes through the darkness, and the waves flatten themselves to make a path for his feet, and they're lost for words.

[27 : 08] And then Jesus speaks, it is I being unafraid. Do you know, if as a child, do you ever remember being startled by something that made you afraid?

perhaps it was very dark, and you didn't recognize the person coming towards you, and then all of a sudden you heard a familiar voice, a voice that took away your fears, it is I, be not afraid.

And you know, it is something like that that we have here, the familiar voice of the elder brother, and he's addressing the fears of those whom he's not ashamed to call his brethren, and he's saying to them, it is I, be not afraid.

Words of reassurance and comfort and tenderness, words of understanding, and immediately his words have the desired effect.

The fear is gone and in his place comes gladness. John says, then were they glad, and strangely, the storm it seems immediately becomes calm and they swiftly are able to arrive at a safe haven.

[29 : 06] But you see, in retelling this story, John has been building up to this moment. And there is more going on in these words than just the mere self-identification of Christ.

This is the climax of the story. And John wants us to see, you know, we talk of the simplicity of John's gospel, but there is also a profundity to the gospel of John. And here we see a depth to these words that the disciples probably did not themselves grasp until much later.

and it is the context in which the story is told that helps us to see this part of John's point. When Jesus reaches Capernaum the next morning, he teaches the crowds the real significance of the miracle of feeding the five thousand.

And in verse 31, the crowds declare, Our fathers did eat manna in the desert as is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. And Jesus said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven, but my father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

And then Jesus says, I am the bread of life. So, the context for understanding all of this is the Exodus story and God's marvelous deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt and leading them by Moses through the wilderness, providing for them, bringing them safe to the land of promise.

[30 : 50] And that means that we ought to be alert for similar themes in these verses 16 to 21. You see, there is an echo, for example, of the crossing of the Red Sea when Jesus marched across the Sea of Galilee.

and I have illustrated that already from Psalm 77. The Lord's way is through the sea.

His footprints are lost and unseen. You know, if you walk in water, you cannot see your footprints, can you? And there is something very mysterious about the footprints and the footsteps of the Lord.

But you see, it is this that I want to focus on. When you read the climatic statement of verse 20 in the light of that Exodus theme, I think John's agenda becomes cleared.

As he arrives at the boat, John tells the disciples, Jesus tells the disciples, it is I. Now, in the Greek, it is simply this, I am.

[32 : 08] And if you have read John's gospel through and through, again and again these words appear on the lips of Jesus with profound significance.

I am. They are the Greek translation of the divine name. Remember in Exodus 3, God meets Moses, Moses asks, what shall I say to the people as your name and God tells him, I am, has sent me to you.

I am. And on that occasion we are told that Moses was overcome with fear. He hid his face. He was afraid to look at God. Later on when Israel meet with God in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, the Lord displays his glory and proclaims his name.

I am. And the mountain trembles. The people are terrified in the presence of the great I am. When the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple in the sixth chapter of his prophecy he cried, woe to me.

For I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips. I dwell in the midst of other people with unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. so that throughout the history of God's dealing with his people the presence of the great I am strikes fear into the hearts of all.

[33 : 37] Unmediated glory, unmediated holiness, unmediated majesty, when it meets human finitude and sin puts it in the dust. It puts us in the dust.

And here in John 6, as Jesus comes through the night and through the storm and over the waves, as Yahweh the great I am, the Lord, as the prophet Nahum puts it, the Lord his way is in the wilderness and storm and the clouds are the dust of his, as he comes close to them.

We ought to be braced for impact. We expect an explosive reaction. But look what happens. His presence doesn't put them in the dust as it did Moses, as it did the prophet Isaiah, or as it did the children of Israel in the wilderness filling them with terror.

No! This time Jesus says to the disciples, I am. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. You see, that's after all why Jesus came.

So that sinners like you and me might meet God in Jesus. and the terror of unmediated glory might be replaced with the comfort and gladness of his deliverance, his saving grace and mercy.

[34 : 59] In Jesus, God comes to us, not in the stunning displays of power, not shaking the mountains and blocking out the sun. In Jesus, God comes to us, united forever to human nature, that we might know him and draw near to him.

at last, coming close to the great I am and call him Abba, Father. As the hymn writer puts it veiled in flesh, the God had seen, hail the incarnate deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

In Jesus, God comes to us, that we might know him. That's what John himself says in chapter 1 and verse 18, no one has ever seen God but the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father.

He has made him know, in Jesus, the unknowable I am, comes to us, that we might know him. The God man, whom we can rest our trust, knowing that he understands, one who is touched with a feeling of our infirmities, one who is able to sympathize with his inner weaknesses, one upon whom everyone here can rest for hope and for peace in a world filled with nameless fears.

You see, the great paradox of the Christian life is that the presence of Jesus, the Lord, ought to make us tremble. He is the high and exalted one, infinite in his holiness and majesty and purity and might.

[36 : 49] We are weak, finite sinners. We ought to tremble. But if we know this Jesus is with us in love and grace, nothing else ought to make us tremble.

the presence of Jesus ought to make us tremble. But if he is with us, nothing else can. You know, one of the early church fathers, a man by the name of Clement of Alexandria, and he expressed it this way, and I think it's very significant the way he put it, Christ turns all those sunsets into dawns.

All those sunsets into dawns. In other words, he turns it all into a new beginning. When the sun goes down, the night comes in.

Ah, but with Jesus, all your sunsets are turned into dawns. when he is with us, then we can say, be still, my soul.

Thy God doth undertake to guide the future as he has the past. Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake. All now mysterious shall be bright at last.

[38 : 18] Be still, my soul, the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Yes, Jesus who can walk across the waves ought to make us tremble. But only a Jesus like this is worth trusting.

Perhaps we live under the tyranny of so many fear boxes in our lives. Maybe because our view of Jesus is far too small.

but you see Jesus is the great I am made flesh. The God who moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform, who plants his footsteps in the seas and rides upon the star.

And the disciples in a measured way understood that, that Jesus loved them and cared for them.

[39 : 25] They had as it were strayed out of sight of him. They left him on the shores. And here now they discover as he comes to them however far they may have wandered.

They have never wandered out of his sight. Oh do you find comfort in that my friend today. Do you remember how Job says when I turn to the right hand he's not there and to the left I cannot find him.

But do you remember the comfort that Job had? He knows the way that I take and though he test me I will come forth as gold.

He knows the way that I take. You can never stray beyond the sight or the grip of the grace of Jesus Christ. And he brings them safe to Lord.

Well the disciples I would suggest understood two things about Jesus that night. They understood that he was the Lord sovereign over the elements and they understood that the sovereign Lord loved them and that dispelled their fear and replaced it with gladness.

[40 : 46] Now we have a greater demonstration of these truths don't we? Remember the night in the garden of Gethsemane soldiers the iron mob and they come to him and they come looking and asking who's Jesus and remember how he stepped forward and said to them I am and the soldiers to a man fell to the ground it's as if he flattened them with the revelation of the majesty of his person he's the sovereign Lord and yet because he loves sinners he was bound and tried and tortured and crucified he is the sovereign Lord who loves us how do we know he gave himself for us he rules over all things and he bled to make sinners his own what fear do you have today that trust in him cannot dispel do you need to repent of too small of you of

Jesus and far too big of your circumstances have you lost sight of his sovereignty so that you rarely ever tremble before have you lost sight of his love and kindness and grace that you find it hard to trust the Lord Jesus today is calling you to look again to the one who rides over the storm and who comes to you and says I am do not be afraid trust me minimal facts told by John the motivation for their fear and the muffling of fear the discovery of who Jesus is how my friend have you discovered who he is for yourself let us pray to