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Never Beyond Jesus' Reach

John 6:16-21

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDY 201st General Assembly

- **TUESDAY (SESSION) @ 8:00 AM**
IN ROOM 203, RYAN BLDG.
- **WEDNESDAY (EVERY) @ 1:00 PM**
IN ROOM 203, RYAN BLDG.

Capitol Commission Bible studies are held on Tuesday and Wednesday. The legislator Bible study meets from 8:00-8:45 AM in Room 203, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). An open-to-all Bible study meets from 1:00-1:30 PM in Room 203, Ryan Bldg. (during session weeks). The Bible studies are nonpartisan and non-denominational, and will focus on the Gospel of John for the 2017/2018 General Assembly.

– Jeff Whitebread, Pennsylvania State Minister, Capitol Commission

John 6:16-21: “Never Beyond Jesus’ Reach”

In the original 1968 movie, *The Planet of the Apes*, a key moment takes place when a small group of humans were fleeing from an army of apes by swimming across a small lake, leaving their pursuers frustrated in the rear.

Come to find out, most monkeys and apes don't like to swim, a fact the movie exploits in this scene. That, like much else in the movie is, of course, an echo of a biblical story, and there are no surprises here in discovering which one it is.

John had already made it clear that this chapter is to be all about the Exodus, and so, when we consider the scene of Jesus walking on the water, our minds should connect it as part of that same story.

The children of Israel began their journey from slavery to freedom by crossing the Red Sea, with the water opening for them and closing on those who were in pursuit, seeking to enslave them once again. It was Moses, of course, who led the people, and now the crowds declare that Jesus is the prophet that was coming into the world – the prophet who is like Moses.

While the crowds' understanding of Jesus was inadequate, He steps into an interaction with the disciples which they later come to understand in terms of the Exodus story, the story of God's deliverance and redemption and interaction in their real-life.

Jesus Watches His Disciples

John 6:16: *When evening came* - At this point it had been a day full of surprises and activity. It had started with the expectation of getting some time alone with Jesus. From there, this quiet and tranquil setting had become one of the most dramatic experiences in the lives of these disciples. They had spent the day carrying food all over the countryside in order to distribute it to the hungry masses that had gathered around Jesus.

Time after time they left with food, probably more food than what was contained in the original small lunch provided by the boy, and then made it available to the people. One might wonder how many times would they have watched Jesus break the loaves and the fish until no more food was needed to satisfy the people?

As the sun goes down and the day draws to a close, one can imagine their emotions were running high. As they make ready the boat to make the trip to Capernaum, excitement is in the air and, during this preparation, they catch moments with one another to discuss what just took place. Maybe they overheard the conversation among the crowds about their intentions concerning Jesus, and the plans to make Him king by force. Probably they saw little wrong with this idea and maybe this was the reason they ended up in the boat by Jesus' direction, as other Gospel accounts make clear.

John 6:17: *They got into a boat and set off across the lake* – The disciples hoped to cover the short distance to Capernaum while daylight lasted, but darkness had fallen before they began their journey. The fact that the text mentions Jesus had not yet joined them may imply that they had waited until the last possible moment for him before they departed. Up on the hillside Jesus prayed and communed with His Father. The moon was full, since it was close to Passover, and with evening approaching, the light from the moon would have brightened the sea as it reflected upon the water's surface.

Reflection: Down on the lake below, Jesus would have been able to see the boat and his disciples' journey across the lake; but I'm sure, from the disciples' perspective, it wouldn't appear so, and often this is true of our lives. We live with the false narrative that we are alone in this world and, even if God exists, he is far removed from the cares and concerns of our lives. And so we get on with life as best we can, trying to secure our futures with our own resources. This account, the gospel message, and the totality of Jesus' life declares that we are in a God-saturated world. The God that Jesus knows is one who risks and sacrifices to make the availability of His presence and power accessible to all those who would come to Him, to those who would believe Him, those who would receive Him into their life by placing their confidence in Him.

Jesus Joins His Disciples

John 6:18: *A strong wind blowing, and the waters grew rough* - The sea of Galilee is landlocked and, situated nearly 700 ft. below the sea level, it sets in a bowl-like depression surrounded by mountains into which are cut deep valleys. When the sun sets and the air cools, this cooler air from the west rushes down the hillside and the strong winds from the Mediterranean can

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stir the water of the lake. Along with the shallow depth of the sea, it makes for treacherous sailing conditions and is always subject to sudden and violent storms.

John 6:19a: *When they had rowed three or four miles* - John records that the disciples had rowed a relatively short distance from their point of departure. But this took them approximately nine hours, since Jesus appeared at the 4th watch, as recorded in other Gospel accounts. One can imagine the disciples were threatened with near exhaustion. The exuberance that took place earlier in the day has been swept away, and by this point they would have been at the mercy of the waves and in desperate need of help.

John 6:19b: *They saw Jesus approaching the boat, and they were frightened* - Without question, the appearing of Jesus would have startled the disciples. Since they were pulling against the wind, they would have probably had their backs towards their destination, and would have been looking towards the shore, which they had left several hours ago. Now, to see a figure approaching them, moving faster against the wind than the boat could travel, and rapidly overtaking them would have been very disconcerting if not unnerving. Jesus, probably sensing their fear says to them, "It is I, don't be afraid."

Reflection: As mentioned earlier, Jesus is not distant and removed from our life and circumstances; but while he is available, he is not always obvious. As we consider our life, our mind might spin like a top, thinking of all the things we could have done differently to avoid the challenges we may face. And yet, a major consideration is God's participation with us in the events of our life. The deepening of the disciples' faith was not possible apart from the mental and physical exertion they experienced. Let's be clear, Jesus is not after the easy life for us, but transformation, becoming those who would not only naturally and easily do the things that Jesus would do, but mature to the point where we value nothing else.

This process is one of cooperation, it is stepping into the unknown with the confidence that Jesus will meet us there. This is where we begin in the training school of Jesus, it is the confidence of following him into what he tells us to do, even when all the world is screaming that we are fools for doing so. Yet we can step into these specific challenges with love, joy, and peace because we increasingly come to know - to experience God's activity in our lives. God does not bully or overwhelm, he will not carry us along on a wave of emotion, so life involves no risk or sacrifice on our part. Our lives gain new territory for God through death to self, and His new life breathed into those very real and visceral moments of our life

The Disciples Receives Jesus

John 6:21a: *Then they were willing to take him into the boat* - In learning it was Jesus, the disciples let him into the boat. There is no immediate reaction on the part of the disciples that is recorded in this account. The miracle revealed Jesus' power over nature, and it completes the picture of His

manifest deity. The fact that Jesus refused to be made king by the crowd did not mean He was not the Messiah, nor that His power was in any way deficient. As the multiplication of the loaves and fish showed his power over matter, so the walking on water revealed his divine power over the forces of nature. This is one more step in the education of his disciples.

Reflection: This effect on the disciples doubtlessly contributed to their steadfast commitment to him. Later on, Jesus teaches some hard things, not only for the crowds, but even for some of his many disciples who chose to leave him at this point. Regardless of their initial feeling concerning the challenging nature of his teachings, the Twelve were able to maintain their confidence in him and his ways. This may be helpful for us to consider. What are the ways, the markers in your life, when you have experienced the reality of God's activity with you? If none come to mind, it might be helpful to set aside some time to reflect upon this. For John, this encounter with Jesus was permanently etched in his mind and was one of the key moments that shaped the trajectory of his life.

John 6:21b: *Immediately the boat reached the shore where they were going* - Whether "immediately" is intended to describe the boat instantaneously being transported to shore, or merely a speedy arrival without any further hindrance is open for discussion. But what we find is that bringing Jesus into the boat was the key component of this account. As mentioned earlier, it took both the disciples' departure and struggle with the wind and waves, along with their receiving Jesus into the boat as necessary aspects in arriving at their destination.

Reflection: This removes from us the passive understanding of waiting at the water's edge of our lives and expecting Jesus to do it all for us. May we remember, we are increasingly entering into a dynamic relationship with God, and while this relationship is all grace; make no mistake, it is not opposed to effort; but earning. Earning is an attitude that makes demands upon God, effort is what is required from us when we seek to pursue anything of value - from learning to play the piano or running a marathon. Should a Christ-like life cost us any less? Jesus tells us to strive to enter through the narrow way. Never forget, the biblical understanding of grace is always God's action in one's life. Without question, it is unmerited favor, but if that is all you know about grace, it's not much, and makes it difficult to understand how we are able to step into a life of interaction with God.

Book referenced:

Wright, NT. John for Everyone. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002

Legislator Bible study: Tuesday (Session), at 8 AM,
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Open-To-All Bible Study: Wednesday (Session), at 1
PM, Room 203 - Ryan Office Building