November 8, 2026—“Crossing the Sea” (John 6:16-21)

Having just heard today’s passage read to you, you know that John chapter 6 is where—in John’s Gospel—Jesus walks on water. But what if I told you that walking on water was *not* the sign John intended to reveal through this passage? Not only did it happen privately (a condition of all seven signs); it isn’t the climax and surprising twist of the story John captures here. So, in the passage today, what exactly *is* the sign we’re supposed to discover—to appreciate who Jesus is and who He wants to be in our lives?

Let’s open our Bibles, and follow along the monomythic cycle (the single pattern of a story) that John records here in chapter 6. It begins with an opening comment:

> ***When evening came, Jesus’ disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum.***

This is intended to be heard as very matter-of-fact—nothing out of the ordinary here. Crossing the Sea of Galilee in small boats was common in the first century, and remember, a number of Jesus’ disciples were professional fisherman. This introduction isn’t intended to elicit any alarm bells—until John adds this final detail in verse 17:

> ***By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them.***

If John had created a movie instead of writing things down, this is a moment where the soundtrack would have shifted tones. On the surface, he’s simply reporting that Jesus was still praying alone on a mountain, having just completed the feeding of the five thousand. But the literary juxtaposition of the experience of darkness and Jesus’ absence is intentional—and we’ll see why as this story now develops.

So far, though, there's no real drama—that is, until they're deep into the lake:

> ***A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.***

Again, this was fairly common. The Sea of Galilee was 600-feet below sea level, so cool air from the south-eastern tablelands could rush in to displace warm air over the lake, churning up the water into a violent squall. Think of it as the first-century equivalent to the kind of "lake effect" weather people often experience along Lake Erie.

John's emphasis here, though, is best captured by a paraphrase like the Voice:

> ***Suddenly, the waves rose and a fierce wind began to rock the boat.***

Yes, the disciples knew what they were doing. Yes, crossing the sea in a boat together was no big deal. But—suddenly—they found themselves in quite a predicament.

Isn't that typically how life works? When you and I are thrown curveballs in our lives, they don't often develop slowly, predictably over time. Most of the time, they seem to come out of nowhere. And it's not just the curveball we're adjusting to; it's absorbing the shock and awe of how suddenly it appeared, and how suddenly things changed.

Press pause for a moment: what's your "suddenly" these days? Suddenly the tire was flat, or your basement's flooded. Suddenly, that pounding headache came on. After playing so well together, suddenly the kids are after each other. Suddenly a misunderstanding has escalated into a full-out fight with your spouse. Suddenly you received a message from the doctor regarding those test results. Suddenly you were called into the HR office with the news of the company's downsizing. Isn't that how most challenges in life appear? Here, the disciples were navigating their "suddenly".

And this is the point in the text where Jesus walks on water but, instead of alleviating their fears, at first, He only served to escalate them. Verse 19 says:

> ***When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened.***

Scholars believe that the detail of how far they'd rowed was to plot them right in the middle of the lake—about halfway from the eastern end where they started to the north-west corner where Capernaum was located. This detail is believed to correct any misunderstandings that the disciples saw Jesus walking along the shore—to clarify that He wasn't walking *by* the water, but was actually witnessed to be walking *on* the water!

What John doesn't clarify in his succinctness is why the disciples were frightened. Mark's Gospel account adds the detail that they believed Jesus was a ghost. Maybe that's the case here too, or maybe He just appeared with a flash of light, or maybe they were already struggling so much they mistook Jesus for what they believed was the angel of death! We don't know; all we know is that Jesus' appearance escalated them from struggling in the stormy conditions to inciting complete panic.

Has that ever happened to you—where, in the midst of a challenge, your thoughts turn to Jesus, but it only makes you more afraid? Finances are suddenly tight, but considering Jesus' way through the jam only intensifies the stress? Staring at a sudden health challenge, reflecting on where you're at spiritually only makes matters worse? Caught in a secret sin, the thought of confessing only freaks you out more?

As succinctly as John is capturing this episode with Jesus' disciples, I feel like He's doing so in a tremendously honest and human way. Because it's not always, "Jesus to the rescue", is it? To them, Jesus' presence initially made matters worse.

But then Jesus did something that seemed far less spectacular than walking on water. He said something to them—something very specific—recorded in verse 20:

But Jesus said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid."

Now, if we're going to understand the punch of this passage—let alone the sign of Jesus that John intends here—we need to appreciate how John's original readers would have heard this response. Because in it, Jesus is saying two very specific things.

On the one hand, his identification of, "It is I…" is more accurately translated as "I am". This was the same way God initially and repeatedly revealed Himself to Moses:

> ***God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'"***

God became known to the People of Israel as the Great "I am". Jesus taps into that.

He also taps into language commonly used both with Moses and his successor Joshua, who—together—accounted for the front-to-back human leadership provided to the nation of Israel through their time in history known as the Exodus—where God relieved them from slavery in Egypt and led them to a land He'd promised to give them.

Among other places, as Israel prepared to inhabit the Promised Land, God said:

> ***Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.***

See, when it came to the story of the Exodus of Israel—saving them *from* oppression in Egypt, and saving them *for* abundance in Canaan—these two phrases through these two human leaders were defining: identifying God as "I am", and instructing His people to, "Don't be afraid." The phrases Jesus used were synonymous with God's presence.

And—perhaps equally surprising—was the impact those phrases had. Verse 21:

Then they were willing to take him into the boat…

The KJV describes the disciples as "warmly receiving" Jesus. I'm not sure what exactly changed their tune, and I'm not exactly sure what, in fact they received to change it—they didn't receive lifejackets, they didn't receive a 100-HP motor, and they didn't receive calming music. All they received was Jesus' presence, together with them in the boat. But, in response to the way Jesus identified Himself, they willingly received Him.

And, in response to willingly receiving Jesus' presence, Jesus delivered the fifth of the seven signs John records in his Gospel account. Verse 21 concludes this way:

… And immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Again, John tells this story in the most brief and efficient way possible. But I believe he's intending to capture something significant by the way he describes Jesus' work.

The emphasis—and, the miraculous sign here—is captured by the word "immediately". Not only did this defy any other reasonable explanation; it also contrasted the very exodus story that Jesus had linked Himself to through the identifying comments of "I am" and "Don't be afraid." See, Israel's journey from Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land was archived over forty years. But the author of Deuteronomy said:

These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan… (It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road).

The exodus was supposed to take eleven days, but because of Israel's faithlessness, it took forty years. But when the disciples welcomed Jesus, His impact was immediate!

Do you see the contrast that John is capturing here through this story? John has already made it clear that this whole chapter is in reference to the exodus of Israel (including the feeding of the five thousand that we looked at last week). And on first glance, the simplicity and brevity with which John tells this story can miss the Moses and Joshua motifs, that would have been immediately obvious to John's initial hearers.

As summative as it is, this is a story of *rescue*. It's a story that began kind of dark and apart from Jesus, but ended with a rescue that was immediate as a result of embracing Jesus' presence. And beyond the symbolism of deliverance from death at sea that, in John's day, was understood to be divine, the identification of Jesus to be like Moses and like Joshua and the impact of Jesus as the inverse of the exodus of Israel reveals a core aspect of Jesus' nature: a sign to John's hearers, and to you and I today.

Where the Old Testament story of the Exodus of Israel was a picture of God's heart for rescue—what is often referred to by the more spiritual word "salvation"—Jesus is now the perfect and complete fulfillment. **Jesus is perfect and complete exodus.** Jesus is perfect and complete rescue. Jesus is perfect and complete deliverance. And Jesus is perfect and complete salvation. That's what this sign of Jesus seeks to reveal.

And what's interesting for us to note today is that this picture of salvation—of a rescue so immediate and so complete whenever Jesus is warmly received in response to recognizing and trusting who He is—isn't about what happens after you die. It's in the here and the now, in the today and—more importantly—in the midst of the "suddenly" emerging challenges that we face in the everyday of our humanity. Jesus is alive and looking to be the perfect Moses and the perfect Joshua to rescue us from our "suddenly" and offer us His presence that can free us and support us immediately!

Now, for sure, in the already-but-not-yet era we live in—where Jesus has fully *achieved* victory over sin, death, and evil, but not yet fully *claimed* that victory—some of the full effects of His salvation will only be realized in eternity. But make no mistake about it, John's vision of who Jesus is can be fully *experienced* today, by anyone who, in recognizing who Jesus is, will warmly receive His presence for themselves. And, while not necessarily changing every circumstance, Jesus can deliver a full and complete experience of His presence right now—His comfort, His peace, His strength, and His love—in a way that can be experienced immediately, by opening our hearts to Him.

So, the question for each of us to consider today is: **where do we most need rescue these days?** What's breaking our hearts and causing us stress—most likely in a "suddenly" kind of way? What health challenge, what job or financial stress, or what relational dynamic has us most in need of perfect and complete rescue these days?

And then, even if at first it might frighten us to turn to Jesus, what's stopping us from giving Jesus a chance to make an immediate difference, by warmly receiving His presence? In what ways could Jesus' comfort, or His strength, or His peace, or His love be the game-changer that He's waiting to fully and completely and perfectly unleash in our lives, if only we'll give Him the chance? What's stopping us from warmly receiving Jesus' presence for ourselves, and enabling the experience of His perfect exodus?

That's the sign of Jesus John provides today—both to his original hearers, and to us: that **Jesus is eager to take the challenges of our "suddenly" and provide rescue immediately whenever we'll receive Him warmly.** He's the perfect Moses and Joshua. He's the full and complete exodus. And He's true salvation. That's who Jesus is, and the difference He desires His presence to make in our lives today!