

## “It Is I; Do not Be Afraid.”

### The Twentieth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John’

*Texts: John 6:16-27; Exodus 3:1-14*

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Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana. He cleansed the Jerusalem temple of the merchants and money-changers who profaned it. He healed a nobleman’s son, and then while in Jerusalem to celebrate a feast of the Jews, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. In all of these miracles, Jesus has demonstrated that he is the word made flesh and the Son of God who has come into the world to grant eternal life, raise those dead in sin, and create faith (trust) that he is the redeemer and Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament. When a large crowd followed Jesus out into a barren wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus miraculously turned five barley loaves and two small fish into a meal which fed well over five thousand people. In this dramatic miracle, Jesus shows himself to be a new Moses leading the people of God in a New Exodus. And then later that same night, Jesus will miraculously walk across the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a storm and join his disciples. Jesus is not only the New Moses, he is Lord of the sea. He feeds the multitudes and calms the storm. The one who tells us “it is I, do not be afraid,” is continuing to reveal just who he is and what he has come to do.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are working our way through the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, one of the richest and most theologically profound passages in all the Bible. Since the chapter is packed with important doctrines, it would not be good to rush through the entire chapter in one sermon—after all chapter 6 has 71 verses. To most effectively cover this ground, I have broken the passage into six small sections. Last time, we covered the first fifteen verses of John 6—the account of Jesus miraculously feeding well over five thousand people out in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee. This is the fifth of seven miraculous signs in John’s Gospel which confirm Jesus’ identity as the word made flesh and the Son of God. In this sermon, we will be looking at the second miracle recorded in John 6 (Jesus walking on the water as the disciples attempt to cross the Sea of Galilee by boat), and which, like the feeding of the five thousand, helps set the stage for the lengthy discourse which follows.

Next time, Lord willing, we will take up the first part of the so-called “bread of life” discourse which runs from John 6:22-58 (although we will touch briefly on the introductory portion of the discourse this time). We will spend three Sundays going through the details of the discourse, before we look at the consequence of Jesus’ teaching—our Lord says a number of things in this passage which were so difficult for the crowds to accept that many of his followers turned their back on Jesus and walked away (vv. 59-71). Throughout this chapter (in both miracles, as well as in the details of the discourse) Jesus repeatedly places himself at the center of Israel’s history, and either alludes to, or directly identifies himself with the great turning points in Israel’s history. The passage is remarkable and well worth our time and attention.

As we saw last time, in John 6:1, the scene shifts from Jerusalem back to the region of the Galilee. By this point in his ministry, Jesus is attracting larger and larger crowds who are now following him everywhere he goes. Many people see in Jesus a miracle-worker who can help them with their most desperate needs—they seek healing for themselves or for their loved ones, or deliverance from demonic oppression. But others see in Jesus’ miracle working power and willingness to confront the Jewish religious leadership someone fit to lead an insurrection against the hated Romans who occupied the Jewish homeland. Now, wherever Jesus goes, word about his arrival spreads, and as we see in John 6, Jesus is unable to shake these large crowds, or find solitude to rest and to pray.

When the crowds followed Jesus out into the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus miraculously turned five small barley loaves and two dried fish into a meal capable of feeding more than five thousand people. Jesus performed his fifth sign about the time of the Jewish Passover, an indication to all that Jesus is a new Moses who will lead the people of God in a New Exodus. Just as God fed the Israelites in the wilderness after they had been delivered from their bondage in Egypt, so too Jesus now feeds the hungry people in the midst of a wilderness. But the miracle was not really about Jesus' ability to create food which fills the stomach. Rather, the miracle was intended as a sign (which is why John specifically identifies it as such) pointing to Jesus' true identity as the living bread who comes down from heaven to provide his people with a heavenly food (his flesh) which both grants and sustains eternal life.

Although many of the people following Jesus correctly made the connection between Jesus' miracle and Moses, even calling Jesus "*the Prophet who is to come into the world!*" as foretold by Moses, sadly, we also see the evidence as to how badly the people misunderstood Jesus' identity and nature of his mission. This becomes clear in verse 15 when we read, "*perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*" The crowds had just witnessed a dramatic miracle, and with messianic expectations running at a fever pitch, many wanted to make Jesus king, by force, if Jesus was unwilling to do so.

But the crowds had no way of knowing that Jesus' kingly office would culminate in a victory far greater than anything of which they could conceive or even hope. Jesus will win a great victory over sin and the curse through his own death upon the cross, and through his resurrection from the dead. Sadly, the people's desire to be delivered from Rome blinded them to their real need—to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin. This is the very thing which Jesus came to accomplish for his people and was the true focus of his kingly office. But the people do not understand, or even desire such a thing. All they know is that if Jesus can feed over five thousand people in the wilderness, he can lead them to deliverance from Rome. Jesus knew their intentions and defused the situation by withdrawing.

When we left off last time, Jesus healed many of the sick, he taught extensively, and then fed the crowds in an lush and green area in the midst of a barren wilderness, recalling to mind the Garden of Eden, or the green pastures spoken of by the Psalmist. It was getting dark out in the wilderness, east of the Sea of Galilee and the people were heading home, or to nearby villages to spend the night. The crowd had eaten a meal unlike any other. They ate their fill, and were able to collect twelve basketfuls of leftovers—much more food than Jesus began with. Knowing their intention to make him king, and unwilling to accede to their misguided desire, we read that Jesus withdrew by himself further into the wilderness. We know from Mark's account of this same event (Mark 6:46), that Jesus had gone off alone to pray so as to re-gather his strength to continue his mission. Jesus' disciples also left and began their journey by boat back across the Sea of Galilee to the western side to the village of Capernaum, which functioned as home base for Jesus and his disciples during this point of his messianic mission.

Beginning in verse 16 (as we turn to our text), John recounts what happened after the crowds began to disperse from the scene of the miraculous feeding. Jesus will perform yet another dramatic miracle, but John does identify it as one of his seven signs, likely because this miracle was witnessed only by the twelve disciples, and not by the multitudes. John tells us that "*when evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.*" Getting back into the boat that brought them to the eastern side of the Sea, the disciples began heading back to the west.

Although they do not know it yet, this boat trip will be as remarkable as the journey into the wilderness

had been. The fact that John only mentions that it was dark (and not the specific hour as in Mark's account) has been taken by some as only an indication that it was well into the evening, and that night had fallen. Others believe that John may be drawing a connection between the absence of Jesus and the resulting darkness—an interesting point, even if we cannot be absolutely sure this is what John intends.<sup>1</sup>

Some brief geography is important here to understand what happens next. The Sea of Galilee (actually a lake) is nearly six hundred feet below sea level, and located between tablelands to the south and east, and the hill country to the north and west. Cool dry winds often blow from the south into the natural bowl in which the sea sits, mixing with the warmer damp air which collects directly over the lake (the lowest point in the natural bowl). Whenever this happens the normally placid sea quickly develops a severe chop and even localized rain squalls with severe winds. Local fishermen had great respect for the weather on the sea—knowing it can be a dangerous place because such storms blew up with little warning. During the night after Jesus fed the five thousand, John reports in verse 18 that such a storm blew in and “*the sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.*” This report sets the stage for the miracle which follows, and also gives us additional evidence that the gospels contain factually accurate reports about things as mundane such as local weather and geography.

The strong winds made things very difficult for the disciples to sail to the west, and makes what happens next all the more unexpected. According to verse 19, “*when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened.*” Because the wind was so strong and created so much chop, the disciples spent much of the night rowing. They had succeeded in reaching the middle of the lake, but were nowhere near completing their crossing. No doubt, they were growing tired and weary. This had all the signs of being a long and miserable night!

Suddenly, one of the disciples sees Jesus approaching, walking on the water, headed directly toward their boat. John tells us that the disciples were frightened! I'll bet they were frightened! In Mark's Gospel, Mark mentions the fact that the disciples were afraid because at first they thought Jesus was a ghost. No doubt, fishermen who sailed on this lake for much of their lives had developed all kinds of superstitions and legends. John, however, does not mention why the disciples were afraid, but certainly the sight of someone walking on water during a gale would be unnerving, at the very least.

Jesus immediately alleviates their fears by announcing his presence as recounted in verse 20. “*But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'*” The Greek text is the simple *ego emi* (“I am”). On the one hand, this is the normal way we would expect Jesus to identify himself to people who knew him. “It is I.” His voice reassures the disciples that it is indeed their Lord who has drawn near, even if in a surprising and miraculous way. On the other hand the miraculous nature of his approach (walking upon the water of the lake during a storm), along with the scene in the wilderness just a few hours earlier (his re-enactment of one of Israel's greatest miracles—God's feeding his chosen people in the midst of an Exodus journey through the wilderness) leads many to believe that at the very least, Jesus' declaration “it is I” prepares the disciples for statements Jesus will make later on in the discourse in which his deity is either strongly implied or expressly stated using the same words (John 6:35, 51 and John 8:58).

In one of Jesus' statements in the subsequent discourse (John 6:35), Jesus uses the same expression *ego emi* in reference to his claim to be the bread of life in whom the people of God are to believe (trust) so as to have eternal life. “*Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger,*

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 274.

*and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* As we will see, this is a theologically loaded expression which directly ties Jesus to YHWH’s provision for the Israelites in the wilderness. In verse 51 of same discourse, Jesus will say something quite similar. *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* At the very least, his deity is implied in these words in which Jesus identifies himself with YHWH and his mighty works in saving his people.

And then later on in John 8:58, Jesus will tell the Pharisees—whom he knows are already plotting to kill him—*“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”* In the John 8:58 declaration, *ego emi*, Jesus is telling the Jewish religious leaders that he is the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush as recounted in Exodus 3:1-14, our Old Testament lesson. Every Jew knew that it was YHWH who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, declaring himself to be the great “I am.” In John 8:58, Jesus tells them that he was the one speaking to Moses, and that before Abraham was born, “I am.” There can be only one conclusion. Jesus is one with YHWH. This is why as soon as he utters the words *ego emi* in John 8, the Jews picked up stones to kill him for blaspheming (which, of course, he was, if he was not the one speaking to Moses from the burning bush).

Therefore, although, we need not see Jesus’ statement to the disciples on the sea in verse 20 as a direct affirmation of deity when he says “it is I” (*ego emi*), we also need to keep in mind that Jesus does use the exact same expression later on in reference his claim to be identified with YHWH. Slowly but surely, the one who can feed the people of God in the middle of a barren wilderness, and who is Lord of nature and can walk upon water, is revealing his true identity to the twelve. He is the eternal word who took to himself a true human nature. He is the Son of God. And now he begins to identify himself as YHWH, and is, as the creed puts it, of the same essence as the Father. I would not be surprised to learn that although the disciples took Jesus to be merely identifying himself to them when he said “it is I,” when they looked back upon this event later on, they understood his words in a different light.

Realizing that it was Jesus who was approaching on the sea, we read in verse 21, *“then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.”* The disciples welcomed Jesus into their boat—no doubt, they were glad to see Jesus in the midst of such a frightening and trying circumstances—and according to Mark, once Jesus entered the boat, the storm quieted down as quickly as it had come up. In fact, in his account (Mark 6:51-52), Mark also gives us a clue about the miraculous feeding which occurred earlier in the day, information which helps us understand Jesus’ words which open the “bread of life” discourse. *“And [Jesus] got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”*

Two things important things emerge here when we look at Mark’s and John’s accounts together. The first thing to notice is that even the twelve disciples did not grasp the significance of what had happened in the wilderness. Like the crowds who ate their fill and then wanted to make Jesus king, the disciples own hearts were hardened. The implication is that they too saw the miracle as tied to earthly food, and did not make the connection between the miracle and Jesus’ messianic mission. The feeding of the five thousand was the sign that something much greater was at hand. The crowds did not understand the significance of this, and sadly, neither did the disciples.

The second thing to notice is that another miracle may have occurred (a third)—we read that the boat reached the other shore immediately, perhaps by some sort of supernatural means. But John also may be telling us that once the wind calmed down, the disciples reached the other side of the sea very quickly

(this is how I take this comment). Whether miraculous or not, John's point is that Jesus and the disciples arrived on the western side of the sea of Galilee, before the crowds who were following them.

There is also a loud and profound echo from Psalm 107:23-32 found in verse 21 of John 6. In Psalm 107, we read "*some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven; they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their evil plight; they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.*" It is Jesus, who, like YHWH, commands the seas and who stills the storm.

These echoes from, and allusions to Old Testament texts, as well as the references to the most important events in Israel's history are found throughout this entire discourse. Those who understand what Jesus is doing (making claims to deity) are the ones who are the most offended by his teaching. Those who do indeed understand what Jesus is saying (but who do not believe him) are the ones who walk away at the end of the discourse. In fact, driving away those selfish followers who want Jesus to comply with their personal and sinful agendas is, in part, Jesus' purpose in uttering such difficult words.

The disciples' arrival on the western shore of the Galilee the morning of the next day becomes the occasion for crowds to once again seek out Jesus—only this time with even greater zeal and enthusiasm than before, the people now having heard of, or witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness. In verse 22, John tells us "*on the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only lone boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.*" Those who had been fed in the wilderness knew that Jesus had withdrawn by himself into the wilderness without his disciples. Witnesses had seen the disciples get into the boat heading back to the west, but did not see Jesus with them.

Word was quickly spreading throughout the area about what had happened in the wilderness the previous day. What happened in the wilderness did not stay in the wilderness. We can only imagine the excitement spreading throughout the villages surrounding the sea that morning as people began telling their families, neighbors, and acquaintances about the miraculous meal they had eaten in the wilderness the previous afternoon. John describes the chaotic scene for us in verses 23-24. "*Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.*"

The village of Tiberias is located on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Whether the presence of fisherman who were forced further out into the sea from the southwestern shore by the storm might explain this arrival of people in boats, or else people were now able to sail back across to the eastern shore in the aftermath of the storm, we do not know. We do know that the Jewish historian Josephus speaks of several hundred fishing boats being active on the sea at any given time. So, John's account certainly has the ring of truth when he tells us that the people are out in their boats looking for Jesus, as well as walking along the shore of the sea seeking him out if he left the area on foot. But one thing was very clear—Jesus is no longer in the area where he fed the crowd, and people saw the disciples leave without him. Where did he go? John indicates that by morning, many of the inhabitants of the region

were out seeking to discover where Jesus went. The most likely place to find him would be Capernaum.

Sure enough, that is where Jesus turns up. “*When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’*” Since they searched everywhere and did not find Jesus, how was it that he shows up so soon in the synagogue in Capernaum (the next morning), since Capernaum is a good distance from the scene of the feeding of the five thousand? Not quite knowing what to make of these events, they address Jesus using the title “Rabbi” (teacher) even though they will soon disagree with much of what he will teach them. As we will learn in verse 59 of the discourse, all of what follows in the bread of life discourse, (vv. 26-58) took place in the synagogue. Jesus’ appearance in the synagogue and his being identified as “Rabbi” is remarkable, especially in light of the fact that lectionary reading for the Passover included Exodus 16 (which deals with “bread from heaven” i.e., manna) and Isaiah 54 (which speaks of a covenant of peace and the need to be taught by God).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it was these readings from the Old Testament which prompted the discourse which follows.

Jesus opens his discourse without answering the question put to him, about how it was that he arrived in Capernaum so quickly without being noticed. Had Jesus told them that he had walked across the sea, they might have been impressed, but still would have missed the point. Instead, Jesus questions their motives as to why they have been searching for him all night. The discourse which follows and to which we will turn next time) opens with a reference to the people’s unbelief (which includes his own disciples—according to Mark) and yet another reference to his identity as being one with the Father. In verses 26-27, we read “*Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.’*”

The people call Jesus a prophet—indeed the prophet predicted by Moses. They desire to make him king. But these are signs of misunderstanding, not of faith. Jesus now exposes their hardness of heart and unbelief driving them to seek him out. They have seen the signs but miss the point of them. They know God is with Jesus. Jesus even speaks of his Father placing his seal (his approval) upon Jesus through these signs. The people see in Jesus someone who can provide them with food, someone who can lead them—unlike their own Sanhedrin, or their Roman puppet of a king, Herod. The crowds are so enamored of Jesus’ power that they followed him out into a barren wilderness without food, and spent the night searching for him around the entire Sea of Galilee. They call him Rabbi. They want to follow him. Their bellies are full, many have been healed, and no one had ever seen anything like it.

Jesus did not come to fill our stomachs, but to give us something much, much, better—eternal life. This, says Jesus, is the meaning behind the sign of the miraculous feeding of over five thousand in the wilderness. But when Jesus says this, and as we will see in the discourse which follows, the people did not care about eternal life. They wanted another meal—a second course, if you will, and then a third, and then . . . Their bellies may be full, but their hearts are hard. Bread and fish are important, and sustain life. But such food perishes. Just as will we. Jesus is about to offer them something so much better—life giving bread from heaven—yet they do not seem to care or understand. Even his own disciples—who just heard Jesus tell them in the midst of a storm “*do not be afraid, it is I*”—hearts are hard. Like the crowds, they too are utterly astounded by what they have seen and heard. And it won’t get any easier for them in the discourse which follows. Even the twelve will be tempted to leave.

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 299-300.