

**“Taking Him Into the Boat”**  
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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 6.14-25

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Why does Jesus walk on the water?<sup>1</sup>

His disciples have left without him. Maybe they forgot him . . . probably not. More likely, he told them to go on without him. That would make sense. He goes off for some much-needed alone-time with God the Father. He will catch up. Walking to Capernaum where they are going, along the shore of Lake Galilee, will take about three hours.<sup>2</sup> No problem.

Instead, however, he decides to walk across the lake. Why?

We have no hint the disciples in the boat are in danger. Yes, storms on Galilee can be dangerous. Another time, Jesus was boating there with them. He was sleeping. A storm came up, and even these hardened fishermen were terrified. Jesus awoke and silenced the tempest.<sup>3</sup>

Not this time, though. We hear nothing of them being afraid this time. Not *until Jesus strolls up to them, over the deep!*

Maybe this is what should shake us up too . . . when Jesus walks over.

II

We left off last week with Jesus leaving behind a crowd. Escaping a mob, actually. They are seething with zealous fervour because of Jesus. They've done the math, you see.

Imagine it's December 24. A young couple stumbles into town. She's most pregnant, and on a donkey. Strange! Also, familiar. Certain things would come to mind. For this crowd following Jesus, it's almost Passover.<sup>4</sup> They are primed to hear echoes of Exodus. Moses is on their minds.

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<sup>1</sup> To me, the often-asked question of how he did it is much less interesting. Over the years, people have come up with ways to explain this episode in terms they think we can easily understand. For example, Jesus was really on the shore, and his disciples got confused. Or, Jesus was really on a sandbar, and his disciples didn't notice. How to suck the life out of a great story! I wonder if these say more about how hard it is for us to accept Jesus, and who he is, and what he might do. We try to fit him into our narrow frames of understanding, but he won't fit. Not neatly.

<sup>2</sup> Calculated using Google Maps, and assuming a starting point just north of modern Tiberias near the foot of Mount Arbel.

<sup>3</sup> This first episode is recounted in Mark 4.35-41, also Matthew 8.23-27 and Luke 8.22-25.

<sup>4</sup> John 6:4.

Now add this. They have followed Jesus into the “wilderness.”<sup>5</sup> Moses led God’s People into the wilderness.

Now add this. Jesus goes up a mountain to teach.<sup>6</sup> It might have been Mount Arbel, near Tiberias.<sup>7</sup> Moses went up Mount Sinai, and came back with God’s Word.

Now add this. The crowd gets hungry. Jesus feeds them, making an abundance starting with just 5 small loaves and 2 fish. In Moses’ day, God fed Israel when there was no food in the wilderness.

Now add this. In the last book in the Jewish Torah, Deuteronomy, God promises Moses: *“I’ll raise up a prophet for [my people] from among their fellow Israelites—one just like you [Moses].”*<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy ends with this: *No prophet like Moses has yet emerged in Israel.*<sup>9</sup> They are still waiting. Add that in too.

They total it up, and the crowd goes wild. *“This Jesus must be . . . must be . . . the prophet God promised! . . . The prophet like no other! . . . The prophet like Moses! Jesus!”* And they know exactly what Jesus should do next.

Jesus leaves them. He refuses to shrink himself into our plans.

### III

Shortly after, he walks across the lake. Why?

Here’s where my mind goes. Go back to the math, and keep adding it up. We have all these resonances of Passover, Exodus, and Moses. I can’t help but think of when God commanded the waters, and busted the slaves out right through them.

Our “Invitation to worship” this morning had parts from Psalm 77. That psalm remembers God doing this.

*The waters saw You, God — the waters saw You and reeled!  
Even the deep depths shook! . . .  
Your way went straight through the sea;  
Your pathways went right through the mighty waters.  
But Your footprints left no trace!<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> John simply identifies it as a place with “much grass” (6:10). In their tellings of the event, the other gospel writers use the term *erēmos*, variously translated as “wilderness” or “desolate place” (Matthew 14:13, Mark 6:31 and Luke 9.12).

<sup>6</sup> John 6:3.

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Arbel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Arbel)

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 18:18 (Common English Bible)

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10-12 (CEB)

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 77.16,19 (CEB)

I wonder if Jesus left footprints on the water.

Of course, by now the big, tough, in-the-boat disciples are having a bit of a meltdown. So Jesus says, “Do not be afraid! I AM!”

“I AM” . . . might mean more than simply “It’s me!” When Moses asked God, “What’s your name?” the Voice from the burning bush said, “I Am who I Am.”<sup>11</sup> This phrase, “Yah-Veh” is so holy that when righteous Jews come across it, they will instead say “the Lord” (*Adonai*) or “the Name” (*Ha Shem*), rather than risk getting God’s name wrong.

Now, Jesus uses God’s Name, I AM, to speak of himself!

“I AM. Do not be afraid.”

Look again at our “Invitation to Worship” today. I got some of it from the prophet Isaiah. Through him, God says to God’s People:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; . . .  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; . . .  
I am the I AM your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . .  
Do not fear. I am with you.*<sup>12</sup>

God’s words! Jesus echoes them now, as his own words.<sup>13</sup> “I AM. Do not fear!”

When the crowd back there added things together, decided that Jesus is Moses Part II, and tried to make him their king, it’s not that they thought too much of Jesus. They thought too little. Yes, Moses led Israel, but it was God who delivered God’s People. Moses led them through the sea, but it was God who commanded the waters. Moses led them through the wilderness, but it was God who fed them.

Jesus is acting like the One who called Moses. Jesus is acting like the One who spoke to Moses. Jesus is acting like the helping, rescuing, leading, commanding, judging, forgiving, merciful, and almighty Holy One of Israel.

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<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:14. “In Jewish interpretation the phrase means ‘I will be who I will be,’ i.e., ‘I will be named by my deeds,’ which is a dramatic way of promising the saving, helping, merciful presence of God in his people’s times of trouble (cf. Exod. 34:6), which is exactly his ‘name’ and significance in the center of our present Gospel story.” Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 374.

<sup>12</sup> Excerpts from Isaiah 43:1-5, adapted from the CEB.

<sup>13</sup> David Mark Ball writes, “most striking of all is the fact that Jesus takes on himself a phrase that [in Isaiah] is reserved for Yahweh alone and thus intimately identifies himself with God’s acts of creation and salvation.” Quoted in Bruner, 375.

If we are doing the math, at this point the calculator freezes. This Jesus is beyond our capacity to compute. No wonder the disciples are terrified with wonder. So should we all be!

#### IV

Then, they get glad. Glad to take Jesus into their boat.

I don't imagine they are thinking he needs help. He seems to be doing fine.

As I've been saying, I don't imagine they think they need help. It is windy, and choppy, but there is no hint they think they are in trouble.

But now they see him . . . now they know it is him . . . now their minds, and their hearts, and their science — they knew water better than most of us, and they knew people don't walk on it — and their theology, and their expectations, . . . now their "everything" is being blown and tossed, not by the wind, but by Jesus . . . they have a choice. Do they take him in? Or, do they get as far away as they can? (Although maybe Jesus will not let them get away.)

Whatever, they are glad to take him into their boat.

Now, we are not those first disciples. God did not place us back then. God has put us here, now. We're rowing along together. Sometimes it gets windy and choppy, but we are doing okay. We've done this before.

We are remembering those great things Jesus did before ("Remember what he did with the bread and the fish, and what he did at the wedding with the water and the wine, and beside the pool with the guy who couldn't walk. Those were good times!")

And we can look forward to what he might do next . . . wherever that is . . . someday. . . .

Then, Jesus shows up. We are not expecting him right now. We've got no way to explain it. Whatever we thought of him before, now he is blowing away! ("We thought he is Moses. What now?!")

Are we glad to take him in?

The crowd back there was eager to take him, and make Jesus who they wanted him to be. That's always a temptation for us. Apparently, though, he will have none of it. Jesus will only come to us on his terms. As we will see the story continue over the next few weeks, that won't always sit well. Not with those first disciples. Not with us.

Are we glad to take him in?