

“OUR UNFURNISHED EYES”
JOHN 6:11-21
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
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Today’s text comes from the Gospel of John, chapter six, verses 11-21—we begin with an unfed crowd of 5,000 crowding around Jesus. Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The Word of the Lord, let us pray: may the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight; O Lord, our Rock & our Redeemer.

It had been a busy week for Jesus and his disciples. Passover was around the corner, the hope and frenzy of Spring bursting with memory, memory of the celebrated Exodus, the parted seas, manna from God to squelch their unending hunger, memory of wonders and the salvation YHWH, *I am who I am* had brought.

Jesus was been gaining notoriety. First the wine, then the official’s son and the Sabbath healing of the man ill for 38 years. “A large crowd followed,” reports John in 6:2, “**because** they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Overwhelmed by the crowd, Jesus was attempting to retreat with his disciples when he realized that the pilgrims who had gathered for a glimpse of his wonder-working likely had nothing to eat.

There was not a deli in Jerusalem that could've fed all gathered. But from a gift of five loaves and two fishes Jesus produced a meal that satisfied, leaving enough for twelve baskets of leftovers.

The pilgrims, full of bread and with Passover's promise of a messianic deliverer on their minds, decided that the best reaction to Jesus' wonder-working was to make him King.

These strange verses, the fourth and fifth Signs in John, are saturated with irony. We know that this is indeed the Messiah, God from God, the light coming into the world. But the crowd does not. In the wonder-worker they see political hope, a leader who will give them *their* fill, who will satisfy *their* needs (recall: *because* they saw signs they had come). They followed Jesus not from faithfulness but because they thought he might *do* something for them. And they sought him to make him their king—after all if he could multiply such meager means surely he could reckon mightily with the Roman rulers.

Jesus, distraught by their misguided expectations, flees.

I was born with terrible vision. My muscles weren't strong enough, I couldn't focus, and it appeared that before my birth the good Lord had switched out my corneas with those of an octogenarian, if not a centenarian. My first surgery came at six months old and succeeded in correcting a few of the myriad issues, while also giving my mother the opportunity to style my extravagant 80s puff-paint onesies, and later toddler-wear, with a sticker-covered eye-patch for pizzaz.

But of course I needed glasses too, so I was fitted with a new pair each year. From third to fifth grade I took inspiration from television-and-not-style icon Sally Jessy Raphael. I insisted on a pair of giant red glasses that also served, because of their sheer size, to protect my face from all sorts of flotsam and jetsam. Not only were the glasses great in volume, they were about three-quarters of an inch thick, which is exactly what you want as an elementary schooler.

So it is that one afternoon in 5th grade Adam Kelley looked at me square in the glasses and demanded to know why in the world I was wearing ketchup bottles on my face. It was a good barb, a nice shot at both the size and color of my eyewear, and I'm quite sure my face reddened to match the deep hue of the frames. I attempted to return the shots in kind, but in the end I simply threw off the glasses, announced I didn't need them, turned around, and marched directly into a pole.

It turns out that when you can't see a pair of glasses is a surely good tool for ordering the world around you. The trick is recognizing when it is that you start to lose sight.

The disciples left for Capernaum without Jesus. Perhaps they, like the crowd before them, were filled with disappointment at the coronation that could have been. Perhaps they feared that this man was not who they thought he was, that the wonder-worker, the could-be political messiah, just had a streak of good luck and a mean grasp of magic.

They got a good enough start but as dusk settled into dark winds begin to stir up the otherwise calm Sea of Galilee. They were four miles out, water beating at their backs while they rowed. The storm raged, the atmospheric conditions matching their inner tumult.

Where was Jesus, they must've wondered, the absent light, their strange leader?

Who was Jesus, this man who could heal children and multiply loaves but withdrew from adoring crowds?

And what in the world were they doing in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in a gathering storm?

The story is tersely narrated to highlight its urgency. There was no hope. They could only row.

And then Jesus appeared. Walking on the water.

He did not call them forward, as in Matthew and Mark. He did not still the waves. He forged ahead, **walking** across the tumultuous surface of the Sea. They recognized him immediately. But saw also something different about him. And they were afraid.

This is Jesus' fifth sign in John, and perhaps its most strange. After all, Jesus' walking on water profits no one, heals no one, resurrects no one. No new disciples are brought into the fold. It seems to be a deed only for the doing.

Which makes me wonder if I've been seeing it wrong all along, focusing on the sign, the *how* of walking, while altogether ignoring the heart of the thing signified.

The disciples and the gathered crowds had been following Jesus the wonder-worker. They followed him as he taught and prayed, healed and multiplied.

Following without faith, true faith engendered in selfless discipleship, they failed to understand not only where they were going, but more pertinently with whom they travelled.

It took walking on water for the disciples to see what had been in front of them all along.

Time and again we read in Scripture of God's power over water. God called forth the earth from chaos, separating water from land; God parted the sea at Passover, allowing safe passage for the fleeing Hebrews; God sent Jonah to the belly of a whale, brought the waters down around Noah's ark and offered the comfort of safe passage to those in exile.

Stranded in the middle of the Sea the disciples looked out to see Jesus walking toward them on the water. Here—at Passover!, the ancient feast that recalls the parting sea—was the wonder-worker—unaffected by gravity, by the beating waves. And if that is not enough, we hear this man utter as his own the divine name, first revealed to Moses at the burning bush: *I AM*.

I AM, said the Word before the World, *do not be afraid*.

Our translation, “It is I” does a profound disservice to the Greek text. Spoken here the for first of eight times in his Gospel, John has Jesus speak a powerful theological truth, aligning himself totally with the God of Israel. *Ego emi—I AM*.

After weeks of following the disciples finally catch a glimpse of the God with whom they have travelled. They are gifted eyes to see, and they become participants in divine revelation. *I AM*, and though you may have every reason to, *do not be afraid*.

Jesus, by walking on water, shows them who he is—and he shows us too: this man is more than a tribal leader, more than a political asset, more than a quote generator, more than a vending machine of blessings and favors. This man, born of flesh, is indeed God. *I AM, Do not be afraid*.

Since the enlightenment any number of Christian apologists have attempted to explain away Jesus' walking on water in hopes of making it more reasonable: perhaps Jesus stumbled upon an embankment of rock so that it only appeared he was walking on water, perhaps the sea was shockingly shallow at those coordinates, perhaps a deep freeze set upon the raging waters.

We can argue about that all day long. We can get stuck in the hows and whys, as if the sum of faith is explaining mystery, making the impossible palpable. But it seems to me that the question of this text—the reason we find the feeding of the 5,000, the failed coronation, and Jesus' gravity-defying sign side-by-side is to force us reckon with a much more profound revelation. The question of discipleship is not “*did Jesus walk on water?*,” but rather could it be

*that the infinite was enfleshed,
the light was made to know darkness,
the Way crucified?*

Could it be that

*the bread was broken?
the truth named false,
the shepherd slaughtered for his sheep?*

Did Jesus walk on water? The text calls us to a much more profound question, *Does God walk among us today?*

I AM, called the man walking on the waves, *do not be afraid*.

It is a radical affirmation. To claim that Jesus is *I AM* means that God is not a fiction of a simpler time, nor a dispassionate idea, a principle of creation unconcerned with its goings on. To claim that Jesus is *I AM* is to claim that God remains, that God is as near to us as this moment, that God is present in all of our storms, and that God is calling us to Capernaum's shores, wherever they might be.

To claim that Jesus is *I AM* means that God remains deeply concerned about the poor, about systems of economic injustice, about widows and orphans and refugees.

And to claim that Jesus is *I AM* means we might should be afraid, because God's righteousness is mighty, and we have indeed failed. We have failed in our neighborliness, we have loved manna more than God, we have built up boundaries and empires where God calls for an ever-widening Kingdom. Yet, from the one who will take our place we hear the words of comfort amidst the storm: *do not fear*.

In the following chapters we will hear Jesus repeat it time and again, *ego emi*, I am the bread, the light, the sheepdoor, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth, the true vine. Here though, Jesus claims the name in its most profound simplicity, and it echos from the burning bush, to the raging sea to our pews: "I AM, do not be afraid."
Can you believe it?!

The Lord spoke the very same words to the patriarchs before us, to the Hebrews fleeing slavery, to the Jews in Exile—*do not be afraid!* On Jesus' lips the promise is extended: a promise of nearness and of presence. It was not a promise of safety, but of radical companionship. The storm raged that day, but they arrived at shore led by *I AM*. *Do not be afraid*.

*Not "Revelation" — 'tis — that waits, wrote Emily Dickinson,
But our unfurnished eyes —*

I had seen that pole a thousand times, stared at it while the carpool line creeped by. I could reach out and touch it blindfolded. I knew where I was going, knew how to make my point, I knew the way. But I took off my glasses.

Next thing I knew I was laid out on the floor with a knot the size of a golf ball square on my forehead.

God is calling. Calling us beyond our limited vision, beyond what we think we know and into the life of the impossible: life following the living Word, the breathing Spirit. God is calling us to the wine of Cana and the cross of Jerusalem, neither of which would we could ever get to on our own.

The question of discipleship is the same today as it was on that boat. Are you looking only for personal satisfaction? For your fill? For comfort and wealth and the good things of our world? Are you looking for a safety net, looking for a king who will heal you and yours, who will enshrine your preferences and prejudices, look out for kin, and leave the rest alone?

Or are you looking for God?

The glasses are there, perhaps now a bit more stylish, perhaps not. Find them, furnish your eyes, and look around! There is much to do on the road, and undoubtably many storms in the sky above. But in front of us calls still today *I AM. Do not be afraid.*