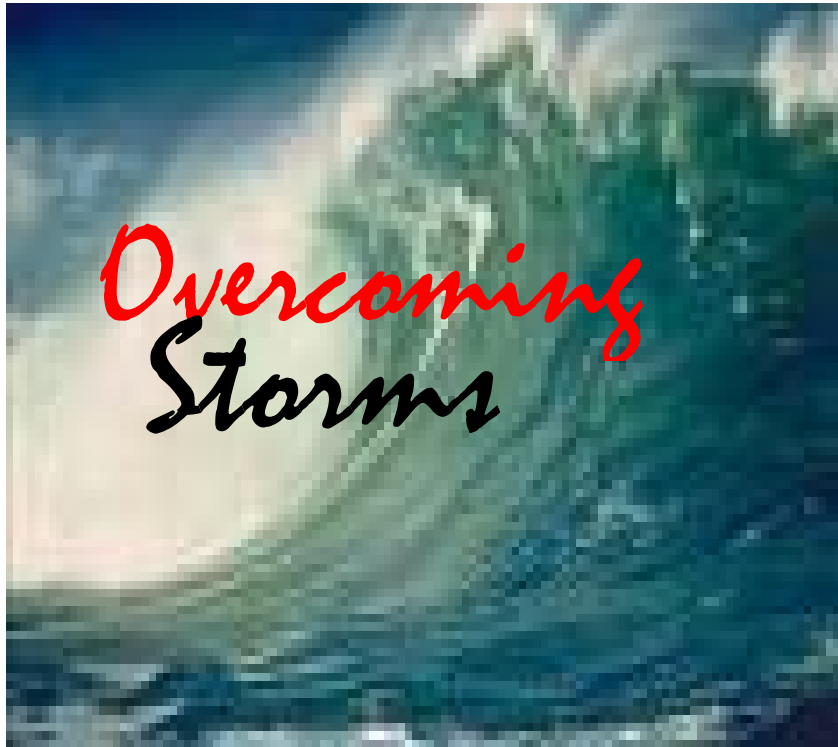


The Covenant Pulpit



John 6:16-21

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In the deepest depths of the ocean an earthquake rumbles, creating ripple-like waves on the surface. They are so small that they are barely discernable. But as they move, they pick up energy and velocity until they are racing at 600 miles an hour—more than the speed of a jet airliner. When they hit shallow coastal waters, these speeding waves come to a screeching halt. Crashing into each other like semi-trailers in a massive freeway pileup, they build a tower of water more than 100 feet high. For a moment this newborn tsunami pauses to gather its full fury. Then, with an eerie death moan, it lumbers murderously toward the trembling seashore.

Who can forget the tsunami that roared out of the Indian Ocean and slammed into Indonesia the day after Christmas in 2004? That monster wave had the destructive energy of 23,000 Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs. No wonder it killed more than 15,000 people within hours.

But tsunamis pale in comparison to hurricanes. The combined nuclear arsenals of the world couldn't provide enough energy to keep a full-blown hurricane going for a single day. If it could be harnessed, a hurricane would provide all the electrical needs of the United States for 3-4 years. During the Labor Day hurricane of 1935, winds surpassed 200 mph and people caught outside were sandblasted to death. Rescue workers found nothing of their remains but shoes and belt buckles. In 1970 a hurricane drowned half a million people in Bangladesh. A 1938 hurricane put Providence, Rhode Island under ten feet of ocean. The waves generated by that storm caused seismographs in Alaska to pick up their impact 5,000 miles away.

Pressure of up to six tons per square foot has been measured in breaking waves. Killer waves lifted a 27,000 ton breakwater *en masse* and deposited it inside the harbor at Wick Scotland. They blasted open a steel door 195 feet above sea level at Unst Light in the Shetland Islands. They heaved a half-ton boulder 91 feet into the air at Tillamook Rock, Oregon.

There are few things more terrifying than a storm at sea—especially on the Sea of Galilee. At first glance it hardly seems possible. The sea is no bigger than a small lake, only six miles wide and sixteen miles long. Yet it sits in a bowl, surrounded by high cliffs and hills. In the evening, gales can roar into that wind tunnel at 60-70 miles per hour. When they slam into that lake, waves can swell as high as 35 feet—making this one of the most dangerous bodies of water on the face of planet earth.

Our Lord's disciples are on an open fishing boat that is less than 20 feet long, hardly big enough for twelve men. And the sea is a boiling cauldron of

monster waves, each bent on smashing this tiny boat. For hours they have battled their long night of terror. The boat is almost swamped, they are totally spent, and the shoreline is no closer.

Are you going through storms right now? Are the waves that batter your soul beginning to erode your hope? Like the disciples, do you wonder if you will make it to the other side? Take heart, my friend. Here's the good news from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John:

**We can overcome the storms *around* us
when Jesus overcomes the storms *within* us.**

In the children's classic, *Winnie the Pooh*, little Piglet stands alone in a storm, surrounded by a flood. "It's a little anxious" says Piglet, "to be a very small animal entirely surrounded by water." Piglet is right. The problem is not the water surrounding us, but the fear which fills us. Jesus wants us to learn to have inner stillness even while gale force winds are howling outside.

We think that peace is found in the absence of storms. We want them to go away so that we might find peace. But the storms won't go away. Massive sea changes are taking place in our culture, political storms are battering nations, war clouds thunder on distant horizons, and institutions are crumbling before the onslaught of economic tsunamis. People are battling through dark nights just to keep themselves afloat.

And storms can come so suddenly. Friday evening, about 220 of us gathered at the Hilton for the Pastors' "I Love You" party. After it was over some 70 of us stayed behind to enjoy the dance floor. Shari Wilson turned to her husband, Harry, and said, "I feel dizzy." She collapsed, unable to breathe. Her heart shut down, and a storm was upon us. For more than 20 minutes, Luke Arnold and Harry gave her CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Again and again we heard the frantic whisper, "We've lost her!" Members of our Covenant family were on the floor praying fervently. She went flat line for several minutes at a time. When the paramedics came to take her by ambulance to the hospital, they shook their heads. We all were afraid that even if she lived, her brain would be permanently damaged. Again, some 70 Presbyterians gathered in a desperate circle and prayed with the fervency of Pentecostals. Storms come with devastating suddenness.

Roy and Carol Enders discovered that last week when their son-in-law, who is at Covenant Theological Seminary, went into the hospital with an ear ache. Within hours he was fighting for his life. Today, Ben Edwards' family is here to help their father battle his last days with a cancer that exploded

with ravaging destructiveness. Two weeks ago Evelyn Huyser slipped out of her bed, only to entangle her feet in a blanket that had fallen on the floor. She hit her head against the corner of a dresser and, within hours, was on life support. Storms come suddenly, often when we are least prepared. So it is important that we learn these four principles of storm management.

1. Storms shape and strengthen disciples.

Sometimes we can hardly believe that a loving God would allow us to go through such extreme stress. But he not only allows it, he actually *wills* it. I remember words uttered by a Christian who was battling to overcome his homosexual lusts: "Whom the Lord royally elects, he ruthlessly perfects."

How bad was this storm on the Sea of Galilee? John says in verse 17, "...it was dark." The original Greek language gives the picture of utter darkness. As the son of a salmon fisherman, I remember that night our boat sank in British Columbia. In that moonless night, we could hear waves pounding against jagged rocks. You cannot imagine the terror of drifting toward the sounds of destruction. The dark magnifies fear. How many of us have tossed and turned in our beds in the black of night, our imaginations running riot until we begin to drown in a sea of anxiety?

Matthew 24:24 says of that storm, "...the boat was distressed..." In the original language the boat was being broken apart as nails popped and planks separated. Storms dismantle boats. What boat are you using to get to the other side? Maybe it's an investment portfolio you thought would carry you through retirement. Or a career that you hoped would supply your family's financial needs and satisfy your craving for significance. Or it's a relationship. Or your health. But the storms are dismantling your boat, and you aren't sure you will make it to the other side.

Mark 6:24 says of this same storm, "...the disciples were distressed..." Like their boats, their spiritual and emotional timber were being broken apart and dismantled. When the things we trust in to get us to the other side fall apart, so do we. Storms reveal a common problem of disciples: we put too much stock in our boats.

Why are the disciples out at sea on a night like this? Mark 6:45 says, "Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him." The original language has the sense that he compelled them against their will. Some of these disciples had spent their entire lives fishing this lake. They knew a killer storm was brewing, and they must have protested. But Jesus forced

them out on the lake and into the storm. Sometimes obedience to God will put us in the middle of a storm. Jesus never calls us to safe harbors.

Notice that little phrase tucked away at the end of John 6:17: "...and Jesus had not yet joined them." Jesus not only sent them into a monster storm, he let them go without him. Mark 6:47&48 says that Jesus sat on a hillside and watched them battle the storm, waiting six hours before he came to their rescue. In a storm, six hours is an eternity of terror. Is there anything more maddening than to cry out to God in a storm, only to discover that he is nowhere to be found? .

But why does Jesus put them through this terror? Early that day, he had performed one of his greatest miracles: the feeding of the 5,000. Yet his disciples were clueless. Mark 6:51&52 says, "Their hearts were hardened and they didn't understand the miracle of the loaves and fishes." Both Matthew and Mark tell us that, despite this miracle, the disciples still didn't see that Jesus was God. To them, he was just another miracle worker. It was only after he walked out to them on the water, and calmed the storm with a word, that Matthew 14:33 says, "They fell at his feet and worshipped him." After spending two years with him, this is the first time they declare Jesus to be God. Jesus uses the storm to push them across the line of faith.

Friday night, we were all petrified that our dear friend Shari would die, or at least have brain damage. It was a terrifying storm that lasted until early Saturday morning. But the next day, she was sitting up in bed with no brain damage and her heart was beating normally. The doctors admit that she came back from the dead and her heart was strong. They said that it wasn't possible, and were turning over every stone to find a rational, scientific reason for what we all know is a miraculous answer to the frantic prayers of disciples in a storm. God uses storms to shape and strengthen disciples. Our faith is enlarged, Jesus is magnified, joy is unspeakable, and we are made stronger for greater storms ahead.

2. See the "I" in the storm.

In John 6:1-20 we read, "A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water, and they were terrified. But he said to them, 'It is I, don't be afraid.'" Jesus finally came, just as these frantic disciples were about to go under. He specializes in coming at the end of the eleventh hour and 59th minute. He milks every moment he can from our crises so that he can give us every molecule of faith possible.

Verse 19 says that, when they saw him coming on the water, "...they were terrified..." We can understand their terror of the storm, but why did their terror heighten when they saw Jesus? You would think they would be relieved. But Matthew 14:2 says that they thought Jesus was a ghost. In other words, he wasn't real. He was just a hallucination, an illusionary figment of their over-excited minds.

Isn't it like us disciples to pray, but still not believe in the reality of God to come to our rescue? When St. Peter was thrown in jail, the church at Jerusalem gathered in an all-night prayer meeting to pray for his release. While they were praying, Peter was supernaturally set free. He arrived at the prayer meeting and knocked on the door. The lady who opened it said, "You can't be Peter! Peter is in jail right now, and we are praying for his release." She was just like those disciples on the Sea of Galilee. A lot of us are like them. During a severe drought, a preacher called his congregation to an all-day prayer meeting. The church was packed as expectant people readied themselves to pray for rain. But the pastor rebuked them for not having enough faith. When they protested, he replied, "If you expected God to answer your prayers why didn't you bring your umbrellas?"

Notice what Jesus says to those terrified men in verse 20, "...it is I..." In the original language it is "...I am here..." The quintessential Jewish name for God is *I AM*. Jesus is literally saying, "The *I AM* is here." He is saying, "I am the Lord of seas and storms." The God who spoke worlds into existence only has to say a word and winds will hush and seas grow calm. We in Florida know all about the eye of the hurricane. If we could fight through the ferocious outer winds to the "eye" we would find a place of dead calm. Jesus says, "...I am here..." He is the "I" in this Sea of Galilee storm—the only place where there can be dead calm in any of our storms.

Peter is the first to figure it out. Matthew 19:29 says that he cries out to Jesus, and the Master replies, "Come to me!" With amazing faith, Peter steps out of the boat and walks on the water toward Jesus. He understands a critical principle: **it is safer to be out on the stormy waters with Jesus, than to be in the boat without him.** The other disciples continued to cling to their doomed boat. We are so like them. Even Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, and looks at the waves. His faith falters, and he begins to sink. In desperation, he prays the shortest prayer in the Bible: "Help!" Jesus takes his hand and pulls him up. All around them, the storm is raging, but in the Master's arms Peter is in the safe harbor of the great *I AM*. If you are in a storm today, don't focus on the waves or cling to a sinking boat. Find the "I" of the hurricane and cling to him. There you will find your calm.

3. The ultimate issue is the storm *inside*, not the storm *out there*.

Jesus says to his disciples in verse 20, "Do not be afraid." In Matthew's account of the storm he says, "Be of good cheer." Jesus wants us to know that no storm can take us down. St. Paul promises in 1 Corinthians 10:13,

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Storms may batter you, but they shouldn't break you. It's the inner storm that poses our greatest danger. St. Paul promises, "...he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear..." God knows exactly how much stress we can handle. But we add to the stress. Our fears magnify the storm. We hear the pounding of surf on imaginary reefs that aren't really there. We row and bail instead of resting at our oars in the great "I" of the storm.

When Amy Carmichael went to Japan as a novice missionary, she was held up by a boat that didn't arrive on time. Days went by without a sign of the boat. Amy worried and fretted, while imagining all the consequences of arriving late. Before long, she had worked herself into a state of high anxiety, sure that her missionary efforts in Japan were going to go down in blazing defeat before she even got started. Finally an older missionary woman responded, "My dear, God knows all about boats." That statement became Amy Carmichael's maxim of faith for the rest of her life.

God knows all about the condition of our boat, the size of the storm, and the limits of our endurance. St. Paul promises that he will never give us more than we can handle. St. Paul gives another promise: "...but when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." Jesus rescued those disciples in the nick of time, and will provide a way out for us. I live by this maxim: "God is often late, but he is always on time." I don't have to be afraid. In fact, I can even be of good cheer. Once the storm *inside* is overcome, the storms *out there* can be ridden to victory.

When Jesus gets into your boat, you've already arrived at your final destination

The story ends in verse twenty-one: "Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were headed." We have already seen the miracle of the calming of the storm. But here we see a second miracle, or the miracle within a miracle. For six hours

they've battled the storm and have only made it halfway across the sea. But the instant Jesus gets into the boat, it is at the other side. With Jesus aboard, the boat covers three and a half miles in a split second.

What is the application for our life? First of all, we have to answer the question: what is the other side? In this gospel account, *the other side* is where Jesus had originally commanded them to go: the other side of the lake. The point of our faith is to get to that place where Jesus wants us to be.

Where does Jesus want you to be? I suspect that I know where *you* want to be: out of the storms of life and into calm waters. But where *you* want to be is not the ultimate issue of life. Again, where does *Jesus* want you to be? He wants you to be with him, in the peace of his embrace. He is the only destination that really matters. When you are with him you are already at the other side.

It's not the storms on the outside, but those on the inside that Jesus must calm. I wonder if St. John later remembered that storm on the Sea of Galilee some sixty years later. As an old man he had been through plenty of storms in his life. But now he was facing the biggest one of all. A mad Roman emperor by the name of Diocletian had unleashed a horrific persecution on the church. Everywhere, Christians were being fed to the lions. Humanly-speaking, the church was hanging on by a thread. John himself had been banished to the barren island of Patmos, part of the Roman prison system.

But John had learned something during that storm on the Sea of Galilee some 60 years before. He chose to focus on Jesus through prayer, rather than to look at the waves stirred by Diocletian. As he was praying, Jesus called him to come up to heaven in the same way he had called Peter to get out of the boat and come to him. John was caught up into the very throne room of God. And now he was standing before the great *I AM*, standing on a sea of glass—flat and calm, not even a ripple on its smooth surface. He was surrounded by legions of angels and multitudes of worshipping saints. He was given a revelation of God's victory plan for the ages. And John was in total peace ("immediately on the other side") even though the world around him was convulsing in monster storms.

That's exactly where Jesus wants you. The winds may rage *out there*, but you are calm *within* wrapped in the embrace of the "I" of the storm.