

Today, we have moved away from Mark's account of the ministry of Jesus and his followers, to John's Gospel, chapter 6, verses 1 to 21. It should be noted here that Mark and John are not the only gospel writers to include some details about this narrative based on the feeding of the five thousand. All four gospel writers share some details about this event, details about this story. But several writers add more tidbits of information than others, writing to entice the reader to go deeper. Only Matthew and Mark include the story of Jesus walking on water to meet up with the disciples who find themselves in peril on the lake. John includes some different details in this story than Mark and Matthew. Luke's gospel does not include very much detail about this event.

Herb O'Driscoll, who lived a very productive and long life, was one of my favourite theologians. Herb passed away this past week at the age of 94. I have relied on his material for years. Herb wrote about Jesus' activity in this passage as being laid out in five distinct parts. As the sixth chapter of John's gospel begins, Jesus has crossed over the lake to the other side to find a place to rest and recreate with his disciples. This is something I spoke about in last week's sermon. One problem seems to be preventing them from finding the solitude they crave. The problem here would be the crowds, which John tells us in verse 2, "kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick."

Jesus, being human, as well as being divine, would probably have been subject to growing tired, verging even on becoming exhausted. Exhaustion which stems from his ministry to the crowds which gathered around him, and from teaching his followers. Together, Jesus and his followers had traveled many kilometers and they had healed many sick persons. Now, the disciples and for that matter, Jesus, needed to rest, needed to recharge, and needed to pray.

If, you recall last week's gospel reading taken from Mark, chapter six, you may recall the disciples have just returned from their first mission to preach and heal, a mission without Jesus being physically present with them. They were excited to share with Jesus all they had done and how they had been received by so many. Now, they need to rest, as does Jesus. So, they cross the lake to get to a location which they believe will be a secluded place away from the crowds, away from those who seek their attention.

In today's reading from John, Jesus and the disciples arrive on the other side of the lake to find the crowds already waiting for Jesus. There is no time to rest. Instead, Jesus has compassion upon the crowds. But they must wait because Jesus knows he first needs to teach his followers. He takes the disciples up the slope of what is described as a mountain but which was most probably a large hill. Here, he begins to teach his disciples. He teaches them to further open their minds to knowledge about the kingdom of God.

But the crowds press in on them. The people wish to be in his presence and to be healed of their sicknesses. And Jesus, having compassion for their needs, is willing to respond.

As the day begins to draw toward late afternoon, the crowd has now grown tired and hungry. Jesus sees the physical distress of the crowd and the lack of food available for them. But, there is no source of food nearby. He turns to his followers and begins to teach them how to be compassionate toward others. He asks the disciples one question, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

Now, Jesus already has a plan to minister to the needs of the large crowd. But he asks this of his followers because He intends to bring the disciples into the experience so they might learn how they are to respond to the needs of others as part of their ministry for God's kingdom. For the disciples, they are discovering that ministry involves challenges which are best handled with compassion, and by sharing whatever they have, and then waiting for God to work through them.

Jesus takes the five barley loaves and the two fish, gives thanks to God, and has the disciples distribute the fish and bread to everyone present. Scripture tells us that all were fed until they were satisfied, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers collected. The crowd of about five thousand men, another five thousand women or so, and probably another eight to ten thousand children, has witnessed this teacher do things which were not humanly possible. They realize they have witnessed

this happen again and again, and the crowd desires to make Jesus their sovereign, their new king. They quickly formulate plans to make this happen.

Jesus realizing what they are doing, departs from that place alone to seek refuge in the mountains, to pray, to rest, and to recreate with God.

Here, John's gospel, as does Mark and Matthew's, jumps forward to nightfall. In Mark and Matthew's gospels, Jesus sends the disciples across the lake before he goes off by himself to pray. In John's gospel, the disciples make the decision on their own to cross the lake back to Capernaum, and they do so after Jesus departs for the seclusion he desires for himself. Now as I pointed out to you several weeks ago, some of them are seasoned fisherman. Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John had been fisherman on this very lake long before they met Jesus. They had knowledge of how this lake was capable of blowing up and they believed they could handle anything the lake could throw their way. So, as night descends, they begin their journey.

A little side note to refresh your memory from my sermon of several weeks ago. The Sea of Galilee was a substantial body of water. It was approximately 13 km across, east to west, by 21 km long, north to south. The lake itself sat in a low valley, surrounded by high hills. Hills which caused the wind to funnel down onto the lake resulting in gale force storms which would blow up with little notice. On this particular night, the disciples

rowed about five or six km across the water. It is dark, and there is no natural light by which they can navigate when the storm hits. They are caught in a storm which is dangerous, and many of them believed the darkness itself harboured evil spirits which could take their lives. And Jesus, he is not with them.

The wind begins to howl. The waves become almost insurmountable. Yet they are not fearful, they are steadfast in their determination to do this on their own. But then something changes. In the distance they see something coming toward the boat, walking on the surface of the water. Now remember, it is night, and night is the time when evil lurks about, trying to find places to inhabit. So, there could be ghosts out there. At least, that is what many of the people of that day believed. Matthew and Mark, both tell us the disciples believed they were seeing a ghost. John's gospel does not make such a claim.

Jesus calls out to the disciples, "it is I; do not be afraid." Now, John tells us the disciples were quite willing to receive Jesus into the boat. And somehow, something beyond their comprehension happened at that moment. The boat carrying the disciples and Jesus was suddenly at the other shore. How did they get there? What was going on? They again find themselves not being able to understand who this Jesus is.

God's hand delivered them from the chaos of the storm into a place of peace, arriving safely on the shore. All of this happened

because Jesus, the embodiment of God's grace and blessing, came into their midst.

We ourselves have struggled to find places of comfort and peace in these troubled times. Yet Jesus has been ever near us. When God has seemed to be absent in our lives, it is because we do not see the Creator waiting for us. Waiting for us to accept grace and blessings into our lives. God has never abandoned us. God has never turned away from us, it is we who turn away from the Creator. What we need to realize is this, God is speaking to us, telling us that we need to become a church like nothing we have ever known before. Change is in the wind. Of that we can be sure.

God's church is being reborn in wonderful new ways. New ways of sharing the good news of the kingdom, of support for all humanity, of love for our neighbours, and above all of love for the one who created us. These are exciting times, times of change and new direction for all God's children and our parish is right in the centre of that change as we seek a new spiritual leader.

The disciples needed Jesus to lead them through the trouble they faced. His voice alone was sufficient to calm their fears. And like the disciples, we need to listen for the still, small voice of God speaking into our lives. God is leading our parish into what God knows is the path we need to follow. So, I ask you to listen for the Holy Spirit speaking into your life. And listen for

Jesus' promise of comfort in your life. Hear his words of comfort: "It is I; do not be afraid."

Listen for His voice, and let Jesus lead you into the Creator's gift of grace and love. Amen.