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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

John 6:16-21

In the Storm

It's amazing how quickly circumstances can change.

Earlier that very same day, as evening approached, the disciples were on a mountainside with Jesus. Thousands of people had followed them. Jesus did some teaching and some healing, but mostly that day Jesus did some feeding. With five barley loaves and two small fish, Jesus fed the multitude. After everyone had eaten until they were full, the disciples had walked again through the crowd on the mountainside picking up leftovers—twelve baskets of leftover bread from the five barley loaves.

What an awesome experience that must have been! Thousands of hungry people. A few loaves of bread and some fish. Then thousands of filled-up people. In between was Jesus. And Peter and Andrew and John and Phillip and the rest were right there to see it all happen. They didn't just see it, they participated in it. Jesus invited them to join with him in a miracle of more than enough.

Jesus' disciples had to be bursting with the joy and excitement that come with being with Jesus when he's changing people's lives. They had to be pumped up with the courage and confidence that comes from knowing that with Jesus nothing is impossible.

It's amazing how quickly circumstances can change. One sudden, unexpected turn of events and our joy and excitement can turn into blinding anxiety. One reminder that we are not in control and the future is uncertain and our courage and confidence can turn into paralyzing fear.

The day is over. Night has come. The mountainside and the crowd have been left behind. Peter and Andrew and John and Phillip and the rest are not with Jesus anymore. Jesus has gone off by himself for some alone time. Jesus' disciples are in a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps a few are trimming the sails. Some are rowing, because (Mark explains) the winds are against them. The others are talking and laughing, rehearsing every detail of the day--the crowds, the bread, the fish, Jesus gently and firmly issuing commands, the baskets of leftovers. They aren't afraid. The lake is calm, and they have been experienced seamen with them.

Even when the sun goes down and the stars come out, they are not concerned. They know where they are headed, and they expect that Jesus will meet them there.

Then the wind picks up. The waves get rough. The disciples stop laughing. They stop talking. They aren't exactly terrified. Not yet. But they are more than a little bit concerned. Storms can come up in a flash on the Sea of Galilee, and storms are dangerous. It's not a good thing to be a long way from shore in a small boat when a storm kicks up.

All of a sudden, the Twelve are feeling terribly alone and vulnerable. Joy and excitement are gone. Courage and confidence are fading fast. It's dark. A storm is rolling in. They are far from shore. And, worst of all, Jesus is not in the boat with them.

Circumstances can change in the blink of an eye, and our attitudes so easily change with them. We human beings are a fickle bunch.

When the sun is shining and our bellies are full and we can sense the presence of Jesus right there with us, we feel good. We are filled with joy, excitement, courage, and confidence, and we're ready to shout to the world that nothing is impossible with Jesus.

As soon as it gets dark, and the winds start to blow, and the waves start to sweep over the edge of the boat, and Jesus isn't saying anything and we can't see him or feel his touch, we don't feel so good anymore. Joy and excitement and courage and confidence give way to uncertainty and vulnerability and loneliness and fear.

It's happened to me. It's probably happened to you at one time or another. Why do we do that? Were our joy and excitement and courage and confidence all based on nothing more certain than sunshine and full bellies? Didn't our joy and excitement and courage and confidence have something to do with Jesus? Sure, our circumstances changed. But Jesus didn't change, did he?

This remarkable change of circumstances happens more than we would like. It seems like it frequently happens right after we've been blessed with an awesome experience of Jesus' presence and power.

Sometimes it's the devil coming after us. He hates to see followers of Jesus filled with the joy and excitement that come with being with Jesus when he's changing lives. He hates to see followers of Jesus filled with the courage and confidence that come with knowing that with Jesus nothing is impossible.

It's not uncommon for the enemy to send a barrage of attacks right after a believer has an amazing experience with Jesus. Just when it seems like everything is finally going smoothly...bam—the lights go out and the wind picks up and the waves get choppy. Just when it seems like everything is going right, something changes and everything that can go wrong does go wrong. The enemy tries very hard to discredit our experiences with Jesus and erode the hope that Jesus has given us. The closer to Jesus we feel, the more the enemy will throw distractions at us and cast shadows around us trying to get us to lose our focus on Jesus.

Sometimes, though, it's not the enemy. Sometimes Jesus himself withdraws for awhile after giving us a particularly amazing experience of his presence and power.

That's what happened in this account from John 6. After feeding the multitude and filling his followers with joy and excitement and courage and confidence, Jesus went off by himself. The disciples were left alone. They got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. Sudden storms are a natural occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. It's not so surprising, perhaps, that they got caught in a storm. Storms aren't always a targeted attack by the enemy. Sometimes storms just happen because they happen. Sometimes Jesus withdraws for awhile, especially after giving us a mountaintop experience with him.

Why would he do that? Consider the possibility that he wants to build our relationship with him strong enough that we might not be so fickle. Consider the possibility that he wants to deepen our faith enough that our joy and excitement and

courage and confidence have more to do with him and less to do with having full bellies and calm seas.

New believers often experience something like this. For awhile after giving their lives to Christ, new believers are often showered with tangible reminders of Jesus' presence and his abounding love for them. Miracles seem to happen every day. Obstacles seem to melt away. It's like Jesus wants to build them up when their faith is in its infancy and encourage them to trust him more and more.

Then, after a while, it changes. It's like Jesus withdraws. Obstacles grow more stubborn. Miracles don't happen so often. Even when they listen hard, they don't hear Jesus' voice for awhile.

Is Jesus abandoning them? No! He's nudging them to grow, to take their faith to a deeper lever, to trust him even more. He wants them to be less dependent on circumstances and more dependent on him.

Mature believers who have a deep and abiding faith often experience this too. Right when they've become accustomed to hearing Jesus' voice every day and sensing his hand upon their shoulder no matter what happens, Jesus gets quiet and his hand seems to withdraw for awhile.

Is Jesus abandoning them? No! He's nudging them to grow, to take their faith to a deeper lever, to trust him even more. He wants them to be less dependent on circumstances and more dependent on him.

All of us experience something like this from time to time. Gradually or quickly, a storm envelopes us and Jesus isn't in the boat with us. It's easy, then, for joy and confidence to ebb and loneliness and fear to increase. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is nudging us to grow, to take our faith to a deeper level, to trust him even more.

Peter and Andrew and John and Phillip and the others had the opportunity to learn at least three things from their experience in the storm that night—something about Jesus, something about themselves, and something about storms.

What did they learn about Jesus? Even when he isn't in the boat with him and they can't see him or hear his voice, Jesus knows where they are and what they are facing and he isn't about to let them face the storm alone.

Have you ever played peek-a-boo with a small child? When they cover their eyes, they cannot see you, and they are convinced that you cannot see them. In their understanding of the world, if they can't see you then you can't see them either.

Sometimes we're like that with Jesus. We think that if we can't see him then he can't see us. It doesn't work that way.

Even when we can't see him or hear him or feel his presence, Jesus knows exactly where we are and what we are facing, and he will not let us face the storm alone.

What did the disciples learn about themselves? That when the storm is raging and it's dark, they have a hard time recognizing Jesus. Their Lord and Master and Rescuer was approaching them across the lake and they thought he was a ghost. Instead of being comforted, they were terrified.

Sometimes we can be like that with Jesus. When it's dark and stormy, sometimes we're so jumpy that we run away when Jesus reaches out to us. Maybe there's some value to learning how to recognize Jesus in the dark. Maybe we need to keep looking for Jesus even when we think he isn't around.

What did the disciples learn about the storm? That it can't keep Jesus away from them.

Did you notice? Jesus came walking across the water to the boat in the midst of the storm. The wind was blowing. The waves were high. Every once in awhile they lost sight of the figure approaching them because the waves were so high. Jesus didn't calm the storm before coming to his disciples. He came to his disciples in the midst of the storm.

Sometimes when I'm in the midst of a storm--a weather-related storm or some other kind of storm--and I'm feeling lonely and vulnerable and afraid, the thing I want most is for the storm to stop. That's it. That's what I want. The storm to just stop!

Sometimes, though, that isn't really the most important thing. Sometimes the most important thing is for us to keep our eyes open for Jesus coming to us in the midst of the storm.

Sometimes I have to remind myself to stop looking for the storm to stop and start looking for Jesus. When I can see Jesus, I can ride out the storm.

Jesus didn't calm the storm before coming to his disciples. He came to his disciples in the midst of the storm, while they were lonely and vulnerable, unable to recognize him and afraid. He didn't wait for the storm to calm down before he came. He didn't wait for his disciples to calm down before he came. Jesus came in the midst of the storm.

Even when we can't see him or hear him or feel his presence, Jesus knows exactly where we are and what we are facing, and he will not let us face the storm alone.

We need to learn to recognize Jesus in the dark, and we need to keep looking for Jesus even when we think he isn't around.

Storms do not isolate us from Jesus. Jesus comes to us in the midst of the storms.

Thanks be to God. Amen.