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Series: The Gospel of John
Message: A Growing Faith

Transcribed Message
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John 6:16-21

The name J.B. Phillips might be a name that is familiar to many of you. If you hear that name, J.B. Phillips, you might think in terms of the New Testament translation, the Phillips translation. It's probably better known as a paraphrase because it's not so much a translation as him putting it into modern English. J.B. was an Anglican minister, and he was also an author. In fact, he wrote many, many books. One of the books that he wrote is entitled, *Your God is Too Small*. It's a great title, isn't it? When you write a book, a title says so much it grabs our attention. This one grabs your attention, doesn't it? *Your God is Too Small*. And that might very well explain why oftentimes as we go through life we can be overcome by fear and anxiety, maybe a sense of hopelessness and despair. All the things that can come against us remind us that sometimes our God is too small. Flowing out sometimes of our bad theology is that very misunderstanding of who our God is and how big He is and how able He is. Phillips in that book, *Your God is Too Small*, basically puts forward the idea that we like the idea of a God who we can manage, a God that we can explain, that we can control, that we don't have to wonder what He's doing because we know what He's doing. Well, of course, that's not our God, is it? Our God is much greater than that. And John in his gospel won't let us think of having a small God.

We turn to the sixth chapter and these verses this morning in 16 to 21, and we want to see that our God is a big God, isn't He? Our God is transcendent. That simply means He's inexplicable. He is so vast, so immense, so great that there's no way as puny human beings we could ever explain, manage, or understand all the ways of our God. But He's also eminent, which is to say He's with us, He's among us, He is connected with us in this personal relationship, and He is trustworthy. And as we have seen repeatedly, even in John's gospel, He's able to meet all our needs.

So, a quick review of this sixth chapter that we've seen to this point. In one sentence, I would describe John chapter 6 in this way. Chapter 6 is two miracles, one long discourse, and a diminished following. It's all those things. You could argue in this sixth chapter, that opening story that we looked at last week, and the feeding of the 15 plus thousand potentially, you could argue that that's the height of Jesus's popularity in terms of the flow of John's gospel. You remember in the closing verses from our study last week in 15 and 16, their stomachs were full, and they were excited that this was in fact the prophet. This was the promised one, and they were going to take and make Him king. Look in terms of the popularity of our Lord, and we were peaking at the end of this incredible miracle of the feeding of the 15,000. Then you get to the end of this chapter, and you read at the end of this chapter in verse 66, that many of His disciples left Him. They abandoned Him at this point, and we're going to understand a little bit more of why that is, because Jesus is going to say some really hard stuff in the rest of this sixth chapter. But His popularity peaks, and then it falls way down as we come to the end of the chapter.

Just one other note about what these two miracles we're looking at in contrast to each other. The feeding of the 15,000 that we looked at last week was obviously a very public miracle. It was very dramatic. You could argue that it was for the multitudes, right? Jesus is putting on display to the multitudes the magnificence and the glory of who He is. The Son of God taking five barley loaves and two fish and feeding this massive number of people. So, it really puts it front and forward for the multitudes.

This miracle this morning would appear by all accounts to have simply been for the disciples. It's never mentioned again in any of the gospel records. It is recorded here, and then never spoken, never referenced again. You get this sense of contrast that as Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, has come to His people, and as John is presenting Him as being just that, you see the contrast between the miracles that He does for everybody to see, and then those that are for just the disciples.

Let's look at this fifth sign this morning, this matter of walking on water. And we start off by noting that Jesus is absent from the disciples. Now if you know anything about the disciples, you know when we say the statement, Jesus is absent from the disciples, you know immediately that anything is possible in the rest of the story.

Whatever is going to happen here, we're not going to be too surprised by it, because we would be the same, no doubt, as they.

The setting is what I want us to begin with, and I want you to notice just four things as John lays out the setting for us, because verse 16 starts off and tells us when evening came. So, the first thing we note is we're in the evening. This is another long day in the life and ministry of our Lord. Starting off in the morning, and now here we're at the evening. We're late in the day. Verse 17 says, in fact, that it's now dark. We're at that point of the day that it's now dark. John loves the motif of light and darkness. He starts off the prologue and makes reference to that. Jesus references it in the third chapter, that men love darkness rather than light. Jesus presents himself as being the light. John draws these contrasts, and while we don't want to read too much into it here, there's certainly reason to think, in terms of that motif of darkness and light, that there is a reason that the Holy Spirit prompts John to say not just that it's late in the day, but it's now dark. And oftentimes, darkness, of course, symbolizes and pictures separation, doesn't it? And it pictures people without Christ. We don't have to push it to that extent here, because it's just simply saying the disciples are on their own. Jesus isn't with them. There's a separation from Jesus and the disciples. They're headed to Capernaum.

If you look at the map, we've been on the east side, the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is called the Sea of Galilee, but it's more of a lake, obviously. It's 8 miles wide at the farthest point. It's 13 miles long at the greatest length. So, it's not even a really a big lake, is it? But here they are going to leave this area of Bethsaida, and they're going to go west across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum.

Now, Capernaum has become, as we mentioned before, the home base of Jesus during his ministry. The people of Nazareth, his hometown, said, hey, we're not interested in you. We don't really have any need for you. You can leave. And so Jesus did. He left Nazareth, and his ministry now is based in Capernaum. And so that's where they're going to be headed.

Mark, in his gospel, tells us something that John doesn't. He tells us that this time alone that Jesus has before him is for praying. We said that last Sunday as well, that oftentimes we find Jesus going off by himself and praying. I'm wondering if in this

instance, John doesn't give us a little bit of a hint at what might, in fact, have been on the heart of our Lord. Because when you look at verse 15, we saw this last week. Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

In Jesus's temptation experiences in the wilderness with Satan. Certainly here, we see this offer of kingship and messiahship being made apart from the cross. Here, just immediately following this experience, Satan said, you know, Jesus, you can have everything. You can be elevated, you can have preeminence, you can have power but just don't do the cross thing. Well, here they want to elevate him to be the king because their stomachs are full and they envision a whole lot more of that if he is, in fact, their king. They have no interest in anything he's going to say to them about the very reason for which he has come. They're more than happy to skirt past that issue as well.

And you almost wonder if this isn't, in fact, where Jesus finds himself with this message that has now resonated even in the heart of his disciples. Oh, wow. If Jesus was king, who would we be? We would be right there with him, right? And so very likely, as Jesus experiences this closing scene in the feeding of the 15,000, he's drawn away to pray and to be reminded. And even the struggle that he had in the garden, remember? If it is possible, Father, let this cup pass from me. This was very real in the human side of our Lord as he struggled with that aspect of the cross and all that that meant. It's just a reminder to us again, though, of the strong appeal of the praise of men. And we have seen this already in the Gospel of John, and I think all of us, as we have said before, we know what that feels like. We know how good that feels when other people offer us approbation, and they offer us uplifting words of praise that maybe go beyond what we might even be deserving of it just in terms of encouragement. So, Jesus doesn't want that for himself, and he doesn't want it for his disciples.

And so, we see a storm in verses 16 to 18. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started to cross the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. The Sea of Galilee sits down like in a bowl. If you've been there, you understand that visual, because there are hills predominant all around the Sea of Galilee. It sits six, seven hundred feet below sea level. And just to the west, of

course, is the Mediterranean Sea. And the winds come off the Mediterranean, and with great force they come and stir up, very often, the Sea of Galilee. When Bonnie and I were there in our time in Israel, the opportunity to go out on the Sea of Galilee and experience something of what that would be like just simply hinged day-to-day on whether that was even going to be possible just because of the weather. They were very careful not to go out because the winds and the force of the winds would be very strong in the wave. That's what's happening here.

The word that John uses for strong wind is *megalous*. It was a strong wind. It was a forceful wind, a very common occurrence. But here's the important detail that John doesn't tell us, but that Matthew and Mark do. And he tells us that the separation between Jesus and the disciples is not by choice, and it's not by chance, it's by command. It's by command. In Mark chapter 6 and verse 45, this is what Mark says, immediately. The offer is being made, let's make him king. This is the promised Messiah. Our stomachs are full. We love what this man does. Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side to Bethsaida while he dismissed the crowd. So, it wasn't by their choice, and it wasn't by chance. It was in fact by command that the disciples are in the boat and they are headed out into the sea.

The word that Mark uses is he made them, he compelled them, he commanded them to do this. This brings to my mind a couple questions. And the first question is this: Didn't Jesus know that a storm was coming? The answer of course is yes. Yes, he did. But why then did he wait so long to come to them in the midst of this storm? Again, John doesn't speak to it. Matthew and Mark tell us that it was in about the third hour that Jesus finally arrives while they're in the midst of this storm. The third hour is like three o'clock in the morning to six o'clock a.m. in the morning. Just put this picture together. Here are the details of what's happened. They're in a storm and Jesus knows they're in a storm. They're rowing for all their worth for eight to ten hours. They're just rowing against the wind and against the waves and they're about three and a half to four miles out. They're about halfway across the Sea of Galilee. After all that time of rowing, we know that Jesus hasn't forgotten them because he's the one that has told them to do this. He's just not in a hurry to get there.

We have to stop and ask ourselves, don't we? Does that ever describe us? Does that ever describe our circumstance? Does that ever describe your situation in life? Does that sound familiar to anyone? Does anybody ever feel those same things? We're in a storm. Jesus knows we're in a storm. We're doing all that we can to keep our heads above water, and he's just not in a hurry to get there. What do you do? What do you do when you're in that storm?

Well, I think you remind yourself often of the promises of God, don't you? You remind yourself often of the promises of God. You remind yourself of the fact that he knows you. You're his child by faith in Christ. He knows you. He loves you. He cares about you. He's promised to be with you. He's promised you that whatever is happening in your life, it is ultimately for your good. His timing is always perfect.

It takes me to the story of Joseph. I mean, you talk about a man and even a younger boy and a young man and an adult. You talk about somebody who when you look at their life that it is described as a storm. This man lived in a storm for a big chunk of his life as a young man, as a boy. The things that he experienced, and yet we know that when he gets to the end of the story in Genesis 50 and verse 20, enduring all that he had, can you imagine the times in Joseph's life as he's in the storm when he's wondering if God even knows anything about what's happening to it? And yet he stands before his brothers and he says, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And that's, I think, what we hold on to.

Now, look at, secondly, Jesus comes to the disciples in verses 19 and 20. We begin by just noting the appearance of the Lord in verse 19. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat and they were frightened. He's just in time, right? He's just in time. There had to have been a point of time in this experience as they're eight to ten hours rowing like crazy against the waves and the wind and getting very little distance. There had to be a time somewhere in there when somebody in the boat remembered that they had been in this experience before. Mark tells us in the fourth chapter of another time when they were out, probably the same guys, the same kind of storm, maybe the same boat. Remember that time Jesus was with them, but he was asleep. And somebody finally gets the great idea to wake him up. We are going to all die. They woke him up and

immediately he stilled the waves and the sea was silent. I suppose somewhere in this whole thing, somebody thinks about that and they say, go get Jesus. Only he's not there, is he? He's not physically with them. Or is he?

Look at that next point. Jesus, is that you? They saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat. And they think it's a phantom. It's a phantom. That's exactly what Mark says in his gospel in 6:49. They saw him walking on the sea and they said, praise the Lord, Jesus is here. Well, not exactly, right? They saw him walking on the sea and they thought it was a ghost and they cried out. That's the word for ghost – the word *phantosma*. Phantom. And when I think of the phantom and I think of their experience right now, the musical score of *Phantom of the Opera* comes into my mind. Or maybe in this case, it would be better if it was the Jaws theme that came up, right? Here they are in the middle of the lake. It's three o'clock in the morning. They've been rowing for eight to ten hours. People do not come walking to you on the water in that experience, right? It's a good reason to be afraid.

Just look at the last part of verse 19. They saw Jesus walking on the water, coming near the boat and they were frightened. John says they were frightened. Mark says they were terrified. They cried out. Now, another question. Why did Jesus come walking on the water? And do not say to get to the other side. Why did Jesus come walking on the water? And don't say he wanted to teach his disciples how to walk on water. John doesn't record it, but it was this same incident that Peter gets out of the boat and takes about one step and then he sinks.

We shouldn't disconnect this story from the previous one. There is a connection between the miracle of the feeding of the 15,000, which we said was for the multitude, and this miracle of Jesus walking on the water, which is for the disciples. And the connecting link between the two of them is Jesus is putting on display for all to see whether multitude or disciples, exactly who he is. He's putting on display the magnificence and the glory of the Son of God. The ability and the capacity to do these things. He's saying to them, your God is too small. You are trusting in something other than me. I think that is clearly the intent that John would have for us, is to say to us, yes, this is simply Jesus underscoring the glory and magnificence of who he is and that he is all that we need.

Interesting that as you read this account, there isn't anything here about them being afraid in the storm until Jesus is seen walking on the water towards them. Isn't that an interesting thing? John doesn't say they were frightened and afraid. Now, you know, I suppose human nature being what it is, there had to be some sense of concern after rowing for eight hours and not getting very far. But a bunch of these guys are fishermen. Some of these guys have experienced something similar to this probably many times as they had been out on the lake and a storm came up unexpectedly. So that element itself is not the cause of their fear. John makes it very clear that it is when they saw Jesus that then they were frightened. They know a storm. They're fishermen. They know how to handle and how to respond to that. What they don't know is how to respond when they see somebody walking on the water towards them. They don't know the glory and the wonder and the power of the God-man Jesus. He's doing what only God can do and that he makes very clear in verse 20.

Look at this emphatic identification. But he said to them, it is I, do not be afraid. That phrase, it is I, that should be familiar to you. In the Greek, it's *ego eimi*. It's the translation of Exodus chapter 3 when the translators took the Hebrew text and translated it into Greek in the Septuagint and they came to this passage in Exodus chapter 3 and verse 13. Then Moses said to God, if I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, what is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. *Ego eimi*. And he said, say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you. God also said to Moses, say this to the people of Israel, the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob has sent me to you. This is my name forever and thus I am remembered throughout all generations.

Jesus is taking them right back to Exodus 3 and he is saying to them by way of identification, *ego eimi*, I am he. I am presenting myself to you as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the creator God. I am the God who created the waters on which I'm walking. I am the coming promised one, the Messiah, the redeemer of Israel. All the Old Testament is pointed to this moment, at this time. That's what he's declaring here. It's an incredible declaration of who he is.

I don't know if this would have been true, but I wonder if as they reflected on this later, and if maybe even John had it in the back of his mind, but listen to Psalm 107, and think in terms of what these men are experiencing here in verse 4. Some wandered in desert waste, finding no way to a city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. We just saw in the previous miracle that the people were faint. They were hungry. They needed sustenance. They needed food, didn't they? And then you come to verse 11. For though they had rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High, so he bowed their hearts down with hard labor. They fell down with none to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness in the shadow of death and burst their bonds apart. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the Son of Man.

Then over to verse 23. Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters. They saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven. They went down to the depths. Their courage melted away in their evil plight.

There is in the psalmist a picture of this God in his magnificence and his capacity and his ability to control even the elements of nature. Here are his 12 disciples experiencing that revelation.

Now look at this. This revelation is followed by a command, and that command in that 20th verse, but he said to them, it is I. Do not be afraid. That's an imperative. Do not be afraid. One of, if not the most repeated imperative in all of scripture. Fear not. Do not be afraid. Jesus gives this self-revelation. It is I. I am here. I am no longer absent. I am with you. Do not be afraid. As simple, as profound, as comforting as any statement can be. I'm here. I'm with you. Don't be afraid. Every parent in this room and those that are watching knows what it's like in the middle of the night to hear a cry from a distant room and somebody is afraid. And you know that as you get up and you begin to walk towards that room and you call out, you want them to know somebody's coming, don't you? You want them to know that there's someone coming to give them comfort, and then of course you step on a Lego and then the whole thing goes bad. But you're

coming to them, aren't you? And the whole idea of presence is what they're longing for. Or you have that experience where it's the dead night and you get this eerie sense that somebody is looking at you. And you open your eyes and five inches from your nose is this little face, right? Daddy, I'm scared. Well, mommy's right over there. Yeah. She's ready to help you. That's what the disciples are dealing with, aren't they? They're terrified and afraid, not of the storm, but of the absence of our Lord.

Look at the amazing miracle of verse 21. Then they were glad to take him into the boat and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. His word calmed them. That's the first part, right? But they were glad, probably more than just glad. They were ecstatic. They were glad to take him into the boat. This is the story of Jesus getting into the boat. That's the point here. This story is not about the storm and this story is not about the waves. This story is not about the wind and it's not about rowing for eight hours. The story is about Jesus getting into the boat. Jesus is in the boat, and the story is over. It's not, how do I get out of the storm? That's what we want. That's our natural human tendency and reaction, isn't it? How do I get out of the storm? The question rightly needs to be, how do I get Jesus into my boat? How do I get Jesus into this situation in the sense that I am aware of his presence with me, trusting him with my situation?

Listen, we all have a boat, don't we? We all have a boat, and in our life experiences just in this auditorium this morning, there's all kinds of storms within our lives. Some of them are known, and some of them are not known. There are the storms of health and broken health, and a diagnosis that's fearful. There's a job situation, or financial, or a lack of job. There's grief, isn't there? There's loss. Many of you are dealing with the sadness of what that is. There's a child or a grandchild who's wandering away from the Lord. There are those of you that are dealing with broken family relationships. These are real storms of life, aren't they? There's emotional stress, depression, and anxiety. There's shame. There's guilt. There's failure. Those are storms that rock our boat. In the midst of the waves and the wind, we're rowing, and we're rowing, and we're rowing, and what do we need? What do we need? We need an awareness that Jesus is in the boat with us. We need an awareness that He's in the boat with us. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Take every thought captive to Christ.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. There are so many great and precious promises that the Spirit of God would bring to our mind.

Then just look at the end of this 21st verse. His presence calmed the sea. They were glad to take Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. Now, John doesn't give us any more insight. Is this another miracle? It says immediately, doesn't it? Sounds like another miracle to me. Wherever they were, they were where they wanted to be immediately. Mark, in his gospel, in the first storm, Jesus spoke, and everything quieted. In this instance, Mark says that Jesus got into the boat, and the wind stopped. John doesn't reference either of those, but we know that's what happened from those other accounts, but John says immediately the boat was where they wanted to be, utterly and completely astonished. Prior to that moment, their God had been too small. Now, God manifests and shows Himself as being the transcendent one, the great one, the Lord of the storm, as well as just the Lord of our daily lives. I just say to you again, our God is so big. He's transcendent, yet He's eminent. He's trustworthy. He's able and capable of meeting our every need.

So, what do we take away? Our focus can't be the storm. Our focus can't be the storm. It's got to be on the Lord of the storm. We've got to practice the presence of Christ. We have to be mindful of what He has promised in all these circumstances. He even uses these storms to grow our faith, to strengthen us in our walk with Him. Our ability and our capacity to trust Him increases when we go through the storms of life. If life was just one placid sea, then our faith muscle would never be strengthened, but we are to give thanks, James says, every time we come into a storm. We need to realize that those trials, those storms are to deepen our faith. He uses those storms to grow our faith when we keep our eyes on Him.

I just say to you this morning, what has been said so many times, you're either going into a storm, you're in a storm, or you're going out of a storm, right? Wherever we are, we have to remember our God is big. Our God is able. Our God cares about us. He loves us. He is with us.

If you don't know Jesus as your Savior, then none of those things are true for you in the way that God wants them to be true for you. Oh, you may know there's a God, and you may believe there's a God, and you may even believe there's a man called

Jesus. But there's so much more than that. This God who has created the world and created you and me, He's designed us and intends for us to have a personal relationship with Him, to be in fellowship and communion with Him. The Bible says that sin is what prevents that from happening. And it isn't just the really bad people that that's true of, it's true of all of us.

For all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death, and death is separation from God in time and then for all of eternity if we don't trust Jesus as our Savior. But that's why He came. He came to make Himself known to us as our Savior and Redeemer. If you've never put your faith and trust in Christ alone, let this be the morning when you step into that truth in a personal, intimate way.

It's very simple. It's not complicated and difficult. It is simply to agree with God that what He says about you is true, that you've sinned and fallen short. You agree with Him as to what He has said about Jesus, His Son, that He came to this earth, lived a perfect life, died a terrible death. He didn't do it just to be a good example. He did it in payment for sin. If you want your sins forgiven, and you want the gift of eternal life, and you want that internal hole in your heart filled as God intended it to be filled, then put your trust in faith in Jesus this morning, right now, right where you're sitting. You can say that to God, and God will do all of that and so much more.

Let's pray. Father God, we're grateful for these amazing stories from the life of our Lord, stories that encourage us in our faith walk, that remind us, even as we are in the storms of life, that you know that, that you've designed those storms to strengthen our faith, to draw us closer to you. We're grateful for that. We pray for a faith that is strengthened by the promises of your Word. We ask, Father God, if there is someone here this morning who has never trusted Jesus as their Savior, they'll do that even in these closing moments and experience the wonder and the joy of sins forgiven and the gift of eternal life. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.