

Super Powers

John 6:16-24

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Inevitably, when there's a group of people doing get-to-know you activities, someone will think it's a good idea to ask a question like "If you were an animal, which animal would you be?" I never have an answer to that one. Nor do I have a favorite movie. My favorite ice cream flavor is chocolate chip cookie dough. I have had the same answer to this question for years, though: "If you could have a superpower, what superpower would you choose?" I always say, "I want to be able to teleport."

This has been my answer since we lived in Flatonia, and I commuted to downtown San Antonio 4 days a week. Imagine being able to just blink my eyes—I always imagined the "I Dream of Jeannie" character at this point—and just appear in the church office in San Antonio. And then at the end of the day, blink my eyes and return home, just like that! Imagine the time I would save! Imagine all the other things I could get done! It would be wonderfully handy! I arrive here at the church and realize I've forgotten something at home. No problem! Just teleport home, grab the thing, and teleport back. You'd hardly know I was gone!

It turns out that Jesus not only could turn water into wine, and feed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, but he could also teleport! John's version of Jesus walking on the water includes teleportation. Let me catch you up. We skipped these verses a couple of weeks ago—this is immediately after the feeding of the 5000 miracle, or sign, as John prefers to call them. Jesus walking on water appears in Matthew and Mark, and not surprisingly, John's version is a little different. And the teleportation is one of those differences. Let's take the story in order, though.

The disciples had gotten in the boat and headed for Capernaum, a town on the Sea of Galilee that is sort of home base for them. And remember, they're fishermen by trade, so being in a boat on the Sea of Galilee wasn't out of character or unusual for them. They knew what they were doing. It's gotten dark, though, and of course they wouldn't have any lights, nor would there be much light from the shore, where they were heading. When it was dark, it was really dark. The wind has kicked up and the sea has gotten rough. But they aren't scared yet. Again, this was not a big deal to them, not beyond what they could handle due to their fishing experience.

Then, though it's dark, they see Jesus walking toward them on the water. Unlike in Matthew and Mark, where they think it might be a ghost, they aren't confused about who it is. They know it's Jesus. It's at this point that they get scared. Terrified, actually. They're not scared of the bad weather in the dark. But they are scared of Jesus walking on the water, despite the miracles they had witnessed themselves, including one that very day. Jesus doesn't chastise them for being scared. He simply says "I am." Our version has him say "It is I," but it's an "I am," which John uses multiple times, just with no description. It's almost certainly meant to evoke the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush: I am who I am.

"I am. Don't be afraid." He doesn't add "oh you of little faith," or chastise them in any way for being afraid. It reminds me of when I'm here at the church by myself and any one of you comes by and lets yourself in with the key. "It's just me, Monica." Or, "It's Etta. Or Beth. Or Fred." Any of you do this, and I do the same for you. I left the kids here in the office on Thursday while I ran out in the rain to get them a pizza for lunch. When I came back in the door, I said, ungrammatically, "It's me!" And implied after we say that is, "Don't be afraid." It's me, someone you know, someone you love. No need to be afraid, even for just a second, that it's someone who might harm you. "I am. Don't be afraid."

Even so, then they want him to get in the boat. For his sake? Are they worried he'll sink? For their sake? We'd feel a lot better if you were with us, Jesus. Do they feel more comfortable with a Jesus who acts within normal human parameters? Is it just too much to take in for one day?

Though John doesn't say it explicitly, it seems that Jesus gets in the boat, because this is when the teleportation occurs. Immediately, the boat reaches the shore. They—disciples, Jesus, boat and all—are transported from wherever in the sea they were to their destination. Immediately. Mark uses that word constantly, but John only uses it three times, so it seems significant that he uses it here. This is maybe not the most important piece of this passage, but it struck me this time. Jesus does not teleport in Mark's or Matthew's version, but it sure sounds like he does here, and that he has the ability to bring other people and objects along with him. It is yet another sign, this time for the disciples alone, that he is not strictly bound by human limitations, and another sign of his divinity.

I included the next handful of verses in our reading this morning. They're sort of a transition paragraph between the walking on the water and the rest of the chapter, which is all about the bread of life and bread of heaven and food that endures that we talked about last week. But those verses do let us know that the

crowd noticed that Jesus had somehow gotten across the sea without taking a boat. They had seen that only one boat was missing, the boat the disciples took. And they noticed that Jesus had not gone with them. But yet Jesus wasn't there, so they all head to Capernaum too, to find him. It somehow seems reasonable to them that he managed to get from point A to point B without any visible means of transportation. A superpower is the best explanation they can come up with, and they aren't wrong.

Jesus's superpowers were a sign, to those who were paying attention, of the very presence of God in their midst. Anyone who fed the multitudes and walked on water and teleported from one place to the next and said "I am" was simply a human person, but was also divine.

We don't have superpowers. We may not even want them. I'm sure there are downsides to teleporting that I haven't thought through all the way. I daresay we don't need superpowers. What we do need is to recognize the presence of God among us. We need to hear "don't be afraid" fairly often—some weeks more often than others. We need to receive Jesus as he comes, however he comes. We need not be surprised when Jesus breaks our expectations and ideas. We have the signs of God's presence. Don't be afraid.