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THE AROMA OF CINNABONS

John 6:16-21

My kids are apparently very different from me. I recall the days when we took each of them to college for the first time. For Laurie and me it was very emotional, almost to the point of being traumatic. It was so hard leaving them in their dorm rooms and saying goodbye. We went out to our car and cried for a bit before we drove home. What I remember was that they weren’t like that at all. In fact, both of them respectively seemed kind of eager for us to leave. It was quite, “Bye, Mom and Dad, don’t let the door hit you on the way out,” but it wasn’t all that far from that either.

The contrast is when my parents took me to college for the first time. When I was left in my dorm room I felt alone. Seriously alone. For the first time in my life I was living away from my mom and dad. To make it harder, I did not know anyone on my campus. I was flying completely solo. I did not like that feeling. There was a lot going on in those first few days, so I didn’t sit around dwelling on that fact much. I had much to do. But as time went on, even though I made a few friends, that sense of isolation actually grew. I’d been around guys, played on athletic teams, been in the locker room, so I had been exposed to how crude guys often are. But I was not prepared for what I experienced those first few weeks of college. The level of debauchery that seemed to be standard was appalling. I had no Christian friends to stand with me, no one who seemed to share my values in any way. This was back in the stone age when there was no such thing as cell phones, so I was not in constant communication with family or friends. There was one phone on the floor of my dorm. I called my parents once a week or so, and that was the only contact I had with the world that was familiar to me. I recall one night when I called home during a time that it was all feeling too much for me. I remember telling my parents if they would let me and I could figure out a way to do it, I would come home that night.

I survived those lonely times, but I’ve never forgotten them. I’ve never forgotten what it is like to be truly alone. What a difference it would have made to have someone to stand with me in those times. Today we are going to be reminded of a truth that is crucial for times like that, but really for all times, whatever our circumstances. It is a truth we all need to know. We will encounter this truth in John 6:16-21.

JESUS MADE A STARTLING APPEARANCE

What do you do for an encore after you’ve just fed a crowd of thousands of people with a couple of fish tacos? You would think that’s a pretty tough act to follow. But what happens next in Jesus’ life is just as astonishing as that dramatic miracle. After an exhausting day ministering to people and pulling off this dramatic lesson about his ability to supply what we need, Jesus took some time off by himself. He sent his disciples back across the lake in a boat. That night the disciples were rowing their boat across the lake as a strong wind was blowing. Matthew tells us that they were having a rough time getting across the lake because they were being buffeted by the waves driven by that strong wind. You might think that wind wouldn’t have that much affect on you when you’re rowing a boat, but I learned through experience that it does. Years ago Laurie and I were with our kids on vacation on Kauai and we decided to take a kayak trip up the Wailua River. Most people start out that trip early in the morning, but when we’re on vacation we don’t like to do things early in the morning. So we arranged to have kayaks available to us around the late morning. We paddled upstream and it was a lot of work. It was hard going against the current, but we consoled ourselves that later when we were coming back we would be paddling with the current and it would be so much easier. We figured we would hardly have to work at all. We had a surprise coming. In the afternoon the wind shifted. Whereas in the morning it was either calm or it was blowing down river towards the ocean, in the afternoon the wind shifted around and began blowing off the ocean up the river. This meant that we were going against the wind on our way back down stream. To our surprise and dismay we discovered that the wind made it just as hard to row as going against the current had. That night the disciples found out that rowing into the wind is difficult and they were not making very good headway.

That’s when they get the shocker of the night. They spotted through the gloom of that night what appeared to be a human figure walking on top of the water! These days we are kind of used to seeing people doing what almost appears to be walking on water. But they aren’t walking, they’re on stand up paddle boards. That’s a very different thing. Standing on a paddleboard is very understandable, walking on water is astounding. No, it’s more than that. It’s impossible. If you don’t believe me, try it sometime. But prepare to get wet. The disciples were frightened. That’s perfectly understandable. They had no context in which to put what they were seeing. There was no reasonable explanation for it. How do you walk on top of water? The answer is you don’t. And yet, there was this person walking on the water. They cried out in fear, “it’s a ghost!” The Greek word that John put in their mouth was phantasm. They thought they were seeing a phantom. But Jesus called out to them and told him it was him and not to worry.

Peter needed some evidence that this really was Jesus, some sort of apparition. Matthew and Mark tell us that Peter challenged the Lord saying if it’s really you then tell me to come out and walk on the water with you. Well it really was Jesus and so he did what Peter asked. To his own amazement Peter found himself walking on water like Jesus. A few years ago Laurie and I were on vacation and decided to walk on water. Well, we decided to go stand up paddle boarding. What we failed to notice was that the area where we were going to be paddle boarding, which normally is very placid because it’s inside a reef, was actually fairly rough. A big swell had come in and the waves were rolling over the reef into this inner more placid area. Which meant it was not placid. In retrospect, I think we also failed to get boards that were big enough for us. Of course, a board big enough for me I think is roughly the size of an aircraft carrier. We got out in the water and I was having a difficult time getting up on the board and staying up on it. But I did manage it. However, as I was paddling along unsteadily I saw a big wave coming and I thought uh oh, this is trouble. Frankly, I got a little panicky and sure enough when the wave hit I fell off my board and ended up scraping my calf on some coral. That wound would later got infected. What happened to me on that paddleboard kind of happened to Peter when he walked on the water. He looked around and saw the waves coming and it suddenly hit him, I can’t do this. And sure enough he couldn’t. As soon as he quit looking on and trusting in Jesus he went swimming the hard way. Fortunately, Jesus pulled him out of the water and saved his life.

Once they were convinced it was Jesus and not some sort of freaky ghost that they were seeing out there on the water, the disciples were happy to have him join him in the boat. Here’s the question about that incident. Why did Jesus do that? Of all the things he could’ve done, why walking on water? That’s a pretty bizarre miracle if you ask me. So what was the point of that? It wasn’t to entertain the troops, to wow his followers with yet another amazing feat from his bag of tricks.

JESUS WAS TEACHING AN IMPORTANT LESSON

Have you considered the weirdness of this incident? I can’t even understand how this would happen. Why is it like to walk on water? John tells us the water was rough. As Jesus was walking across it did he walk over the waves like walking over a little rise, or did he cut right through the waves and the chop?

There have now been countless movies made about comic book super heroes with amazing powers. It all started with Superman. But now we have also had Superwomen, Supergirl and Superboy. The only thing they haven’t come up with is Super Old Man. He’s able to propel his wheel chair faster than a supersonic jet. Able to actually hear what people say without hearing aids and without saying, “Huh? What’s that, Sonny? Speak up.” Hmm, maybe there’s a reason they haven’t made that one. Now we have added Batman, Spider-Man, Ant Man, Aqua Man and countless others. Surely it’s only a matter of time before we get Dog Man or Banana Slug Mam. I’m going to date myself here I fear. I might make some people unhappy, but if I were King of the world I’d make an edict that Hollywood can make no more super hero or comic book movies. I’m tired of it. I’d try to force them to be more creative.

Why talk about this? Because we’ve got heroes that fly, it’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s…Superman! They can run faster than a locomotive. They have super strength or x-Ray vision, or bullets bounce off them, but they don’t walk on water, as far as I know. I suspect that’s because it’s not the most useful of powers. I guess it would work for Super Lifeguard. If someone was in trouble out in the water he could just run out there and pluck them out of the ocean. My point here is that this certainly demonstrated in a vivid way that Jesus had super power, divine ability. But it also, to me, verifies the truthfulness of this account. The strangeness of this incident speaks to its veracity. If a person was trying to create a legend that their guy was more than human, who would come up with walking on water? No one. The disciples of Jesus only came up with this weird story because they saw it happen.

I think that’s part of the reason for this incident. But Jesus was also making a point that his followers then and now badly need to know. . Later, when he was about to leave them, he would say, “I am with you always even until the end of the age.” That’s a little bit like what he was saying by his actions here. He would be with them no matter where they went. No matter how far he seemed to be from them he would be right there with him. Later after he left, they wouldn’t be able to see him, but he would still be there despite what their eyes told them. What a comfort for them if they would go out to preach the good news of the kingdom and be opposed. In many cases they would be persecuted, sometimes severely. Yet the entire time Jesus would be with them, even if it seemed impossible. Jesus makes the same promise to us. He will always be with us. He will never leave us. No matter what we face, Jesus will be with us.

Life can be and often is hard. The Collins English Dictionary recently announced that their word for the year for 2022 is “permacrisis.” It depicts the state of our world, stuck in never ending crisis. As we face the endless array of challenges life brings our way, it makes an enormous difference to know that Jesus is with us. Sometimes that doesn’t seem possible, especially because we can’t see him or hear him. But it wasn’t possible for Jesus to be with his disciples in the middle of that wind blown, wave-tossed lake, yet suddenly there he was. He did that to vividly teach them that he would be with them always.

How important is it for us to remember this lesson? It was big enough that Jesus chose to walk on the water of the Sea of Galilee to give his followers a vivid, unforgettable picture of it. He didn’t need to walk on the water. He could have gone in the boat with his men, or walked around to the far shore, or just transported himself there. But he chose this memorable act to cement in their minds that he was with them when it was impossible for him to do so.

We also get a sense of the importance of this truth by noting how often it shows up in Scripture. In Exodus 3:11 after God told Moses he wanted him to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses objected because he was inadequate for that task. He said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring Israel out of Egypt?” Do you know what God said in verse 12? “I am with you.” That was the solution to his problem. In Exodus 33 after Israel had failed by worshiping an idol and had experienced God’s judgment, Moses again was feeling incapable of leading this often rebellious people. In verse 14 God’s answer to that problem was, “My presence will go with you and I will give you rest.”

In Numbers 14 as Israel was poised on the border of Canaan, the promised land, after they had explored the land they refused to enter it and take it over as God had commanded them. The people in the land were too big, too strong, too numerous. And the Israelis were afraid of them. Joshua and Caleb pleaded with them not to disobey God, but to attack the land in faith. In verse 9 they said, “Do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us.” The Lord was with them, and that was all that mattered.

In Joshua 1 after Moses had died, God called Joshua to the daunting task of replacing him and leading Israel. In verse 9 God told him, “Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” In Judges 6 God called a random guy named Gideon to step up and lead Israel in battle to defeat the stronger Midianites who had been oppressing them. He wasn’t a military guy. He’d never been a leader. How was a simple rando like him supposed to do that? No way he could pull that off. In verse 15 he said, “Pardon me, my Lord, but how can I save Israel?” He objected that he was an insignificant nobody with no special skills. God answered him in verse 16, “I will be with you.”

In 2 Chronicles 20 Israel was being attacked by a powerful force of several neighboring states. King Jehoshaphat prayed and told God, “We do not know what to do.” They were badly outmanned and outgunned. It looked like a massacre was coming. In verse 17 God answered Jehoshaphat, “Do not be afraid and do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.”

Jeremiah was a young man, faithful to God, at a time when Israel was living in rampant rejection of God and rebellion. God called him to be a prophet. He felt totally incapable of that. In Jeremiah 1:6 he responded, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” God answered him in verse 8, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you.” In Isaiah 43:2 God said to Israel, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

In Matthew 1:23 after the angel Gabriel had informed Mary of the astounding truth that she was going to have a miraculous child, Matthew tells us this was to fulfill a prophecy from Isaiah. “The virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Immanuel, which means, ‘God with us.” One of the last things Jesus said to his followers before he ascended into heaven was, according to Matthew 28:20, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Do you see a theme here? God wanted his people to know in the often stressful situations he put them in that the one thing that made all the difference was, God was with them. The big message of the arrival of Messiah was it meant that God is with his people. Jesus said the crucial thing for us to remember is he is always with us.

In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan says that we in the church most of the time are not impressive. The world seems more powerful, more numerous, smarter, more talented, they have more money, better production values. Then he says there’s only one thing that sets us apart. The Lord is with us.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THE EFFECTS OF JESUS BEING WITH US

He gives us comfort. Last week our daughter, Carissa, had to have a medical test lasting 3 hours and it was at the UCSD hospital in Hillcrest. She’s fine. But this was going to be a 5 hour long deal including travel time. She is all grown up so she could have done it by herself. Michael is recovering from surgery, so he couldn’t go with her. I thought if I were in her shoes I would rather not have to do that whole thing alone. We asked if she would like someone to go with her and she eagerly said yes. So I went with her. Any time you have to do something stressful it is much easier to have someone with you.

There’s a lot about life that is stressful. Going through it all alone is hard. It is a big comfort to know that we don’t have to. Jesus is with us. That is huge. There is a familiar verse from the Psalms that has been very important to me recently. In Psalm 23 David wrote those familiar words that “the Lord is my shepherd.” In verse 4 in that Psalm he wrote, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

Over the past few months as I have dealt with an ominous medical situation there have been a couple of nights where I have awakened and not been able to go back to sleep. I recently read an interesting article about that. It said when you’ve been asleep for several hours and wake up the way your brain wakes up is significant. The part of your brain that wakes up first has to do with emotion and fear, while the more objective, rational part of your brain wakes up later. That’s why in those hours your thoughts tend to go to the fearful and the negative. I had that happen as those thoughts about how this could turn out very badly pressed in on me. In those times Psalm 23:4 was very important to me. As I focused my mind on the idea that God was with me, I remembered times in the past when God clearly was with me. It reminded me that he has not abandoned me. It comforted me to know that as God has been with me in the past, so he is still with me as I go through this dark valley. If Jesus could be with his disciples in the middle of the night in the middle of a stormy lake, he can be with me even though I can’t see him. And that brings some peace.

He gives us encouragement. Think about that statement that he is with us. It implies more than he is simply present. When I went with Carissa to her test at the hospital it was because I love her and care about what is going on in her life. I was there for her. The same is true when Jesus is with us. It means certainly he is not against us. It also means he is not indifferent toward us. He is for us, he is in our corner. Sometimes that’s hard for us to believe. We find it hard to accept that we matter to him at all, or that he really does love us and care about us. We need to remember if the disciples didn’t matter to Jesus he certainly would not have walked across the water of that lake to be with them. He doesn’t walk across a lake to be with us, but he does make it his priority to be with us because we matter to him and he cares about us.

There’s a woman named Nicole Johnson who writes a blog. She pointed out in one blog how it is easy for a mom to feel like she is invisible at times. She wrote, “It all began to make sense—the blank stares, the lack of response, the way one of the kids will walk into the room while I am on the phone and ask to be taken to the store. And inside I am thinking, Can't you see? I am on the phone. Obviously not. No one can see if I am on the phone or cooking or sweeping the floor or even standing on my head in the corner because no one can see me at all. *I am invisible*. Some days I am only a pair of hands, nothing more. 'Can you fix this? Can you tie this? Can you open this?' Some days we all have a fundamental need to be seen. That's why we say, "Watch me, Mommy! Watch me, Daddy!" We don't want anyone else to watch; we actually just want it to be my mom or my dad. I don't want my friend's mom coming to watch me play hockey; I want my mom coming to watch me play hockey.”

One wise man said, "You don't really understand human nature unless you know why a child on a merry-go-round will wave at his parents every time around—and why his parents will always wave back." It makes all the difference in the world because to be seen is to be significant,  That’s absolutely true. I am amazed by how many times our grandson says, “Bapaw, look.” He wants me to look, to see him, to see what he is doing, because somehow that validates him. We are all the same way. We want to be noticed, seen. That Jesus is with us means that he sees us, he notices us, he cares about us, and that makes all the difference in the world.

He gives us hope and strength. Former pastor, John Ortberg told a story of a time he went surfing and found that the beach was nearly deserted. There was only one guy on the beach. It was a huge, muscular man practicing martial arts on the sand. Ortberg paddled out and began surfing. After a while a boy paddled up on a board next to him. Ortberg said he couldn’t believe this little wisp of a boy was out in the ocean by himself. He was so small he didn’t look like he needed a board. He could have surfed on a frisbee. The precocious boy introduced himself. His name was Shane. He asked how long Ortberg had been surfing. After telling him John asked how long he’d been surfing. Shane said, “7 years.” Ortberg asked, “How old are you?” He said he was 8. The boy said, “What I like about surfing is it is so peaceful. You meet a lot of nice people out here.” They chatted a while longer, then Ortberg asked, “How did you get here, Shane?” The boy said, “My dad brought me.” Then he turned around and waved to the huge man on the beach. The man waved back and said, “Hi, Son.” Ortberg wrote, “Then I knew why Shane was so at home in the ocean. It wasn’t his size. It wasn’t his skill. It was who was watching on the beach. He wasn’t alone.”

We aren’t alone either. Jesus is with us every moment of every day. The one who walked on water, who made bread miraculously show up for an enormous crowd, who eventually even defeated death, is with us. He is always there. The one who fed thousands of people with a tiny bit of fish and bread,, who walked on water, who overcame diseases and eventually beat death, is with us. He is watching over us. That means we are never without hope, for nothing is too hard for him.

PRACTICE THE PRESENCE OF JESUS

Recently when Laurie and I were with our granddaughters, little 5 year old Cara, who has some challenges she has to overcome, had an epic meltdown. It was not rational. It was quite impressive though. Laurie was trying to calm her down at one point. Cara said she couldn’t calm down. Laurie said, “Well, ask Jesus to help you calm down.” Cara said, “He’s too far away.” We know how she feels. But she’s wrong. Jesus is not far away. He is right here with us. He will help us if we ask.

Dallas Willard, the late philosophy professor at USC, said, “How lonely life is! Oh, we can get by in life with a God who does not speak… But it is not much of a life, and certainly not the life God intends for us or the abundant life Jesus came to make available.” He’s right. Jesus wants us to live knowing he is with us and will never bail on us. We can be at peace even in the darkest of times when we know that Jesus is with us.

Most of the time we know that and count on it by faith. But there will be times, usually the hardest times, when he will make his presence felt in a powerful way. For me, one of those times happened when I was in my second year of seminary. That year was by far the hardest I had in grad school. The school work load was overwhelming. I was working to support myself while going to school. I got sick, and I didn’t get better for months. I was literally sick for 3 months. I was exhausted, lonely, sad, hurting and starting to feel hopeless. I didn’t think I could keep going. One evening I was at a communion service at my church. There was a quiet moment during the service when music was playing. During those moments as I cried out to the Lord for help quietly, I felt this peace start to come over me. I didn’t literally hear a voice, but almost that vividly I sensed Jesus saying to me, “I’m here with you, Rick. I’m going to get you through this. I have a plan for you, and better times are ahead. Just stay calm, and know that I am with you and will get you through this.” It was very unusual. After that experience nothing in my life was different. Things were just as hard as they had been. But I was different. A few weeks later my health finally improved. I soon got a much better job. I made it through that semester of school, and not long after that I met this beautiful young woman named Laurie. I had no idea when I met her that this woman would change my life forever, and that because of her I would never be that lonely again.

That’s just my experience, and it was highly unusual for me. It was definitely not the norm. But it was a reminder that Jesus is with us, and he can make his presence known when we most need him. Sometimes we wish we could sense the presence of Jesus more and it bothers us when we don’t. But take note of what writer Frederica Matthews Greene wrote in her book, *The Jesus Prayer*. “My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God’s presence, or you wouldn’t care.” She illustrates by suggesting you imagine yourself walking in a shopping mall when you catch a whiff of the odor of cinnamon. There is a Cinnabon store near by. She says you weren’t even hungry, but now you find yourself craving one of those delicious cinnamon rolls. She says your encounter with the odor of the cinnamon rolls was very real. It wasn’t a delusion or an emotional projection, it was real. Because of it, you want more. She wrote, “If you hunger to know the presence of God, it’s because you have already begun to sense it.”

If you’ve been a believer in Jesus for some time you can see that in another way. Wendell Berry is the author of a number of best selling novels. One of them is *Jayber Crow*. Jayber is the name of the main character of the book. At one point, reflecting on his life Jayber says, “Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there… I am an ignorant pilgrim crossing a dark valley. And yet, for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake the feeling that I have been led. Make of that what you will.” You might well know that feeling. What I make of that is that Jesus has been with you. David wrote, “He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” We don’t always know where we are going or why, but when we look back we can see that Jesus was with us, guiding us all along.

One of the classic Christian books of all time is *Practicing The Presence Of God*, by a monk who lived centuries ago whom we know only by the name Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence wrote, “We need only to recognize God intimately present with us…that we may beg his assistance for knowing his will in things doubtful, and for rightly performing those which we plainly see he requires of us…and giving thanks when we have done them…You need not cry very loud; he is nearer than we think.” The book is about how he lived in the presence of the Lord continually and that brought him meaning and comfort in every little act during his days.

Four days ago I had my most recent immune therapy treatment. The process involves having my blood drawn for lab tests, waiting for the lab results, meeting with my doctor, preparation for the infusions, then the infusions themselves. The whole thing takes about 5 hours. This week it started with a bang. The nurse who was going to take my blood and insert an IV in my arm said when she saw my arm, “Oh, great, you have very good veins. That makes it so much easier.” Then she proceeded to pretty much botch the task and treat me like a pin cushion. I felt bad for her. She was obviously embarrassed, especially when she had to get a relief sticker to come in and finish the job.

Laurie came with me. She said we were having an infusion date. Very romantic. I’ve gone through that now both with her and without her. With her is so much better. She actually adds some fun to the experience. She makes me laugh repeatedly. This time, for instance they gave me a blanket to keep me warm during the infusion. It was folded up, so I had to unfold it and drape it over myself, and somehow that ended up being awkward. Laurie said, “Yeah, blankets can be pretty tricky for someone who is all thumbs.” She has been pounding the “all thumbs” theme ever since I managed to smash my thumb in the car door. But she also provided needed wisdom and support. They have been infusing 2 medicines. One of them is harsher than the other, but also appears to provide longer results. The first treatment I had they gave me 3 times as much of that drug as the other, and it ended up making me so sick it bordered on dangerous so they had to shut the whole thing down. Since then they’ve reversed the ratio of the drugs and it has gone far better. But this last treatment was my last with two drugs. The doctor said he was considering going back to the initial dose, but said it was up to me. He asked what I wanted to do. I didn’t know. But Laurie asked several good and important questions. When I looked at her I knew exactly what she was thinking. She wanted to go for it. I was thinking that too, but having that confirmation from her was a huge help. What a difference to not be on my own in that situation.

I could have just ignored Laurie. I could have not talked to her, not paid attention to her, not listened when she expressed her thoughts. And I would have been much impoverished if I did so. I would have lost huge comfort, joy, hope and wisdom. And we will do the same if we ignore the presence of Jesus with us. We will lose out on his immense encouragement, comfort, strength, joy and hope.

For us to practice the presence of Jesus will require 4 things;

**Faith**. We have to believe that he is actually there.

**Communication**. We will have to practice talking to him and regarding him as actually being there.

**Submission**. We will have to let him be Lord, accepting whatever he brings our way.

**Gratitude**. Give thanks to him for being with us and for all he does for us.