

THE NEW RESOURCE

by Ray C. Stedman

I have been listening to some of the commentators review the past year and almost all of them were negative on 1983. They felt it was a bad year for the United States and for the world in general. Certainly all will agree that international tensions were much higher at the end of the year than they were at the beginning. The nuclear threat grows as each day passes. Moral darkness deepens on every side. There are not many encouraging signs in what we see happening around us.

I have just returned from England, where I witnessed much discouragement in the churches. Yet while I was there the one message I felt I could bring was the Apostle Paul's words to the church at Ephesus, which also was living through difficult and dark days. His advice to them was, "Buy up the opportunity because the days are evil," {cf, Eph 5:16}. What he was saying, of course, was that evil days create great opportunities. When men's hearts are cold and empty it is then they are hungry for answers to the problems and dilemmas of life. When people grow jaded with material prosperity they also become more open to spiritual reality.

There are some encouraging signs that this is happening. The churches and much of the church life of Western Europe is empty and cold today, but a secular theater in Paris is currently running a play based on the life of Jesus, called *A Man Named Jesus*. For the past month that 4,000-seat theater has been packed every night. People are being bused from as far away as Lyon, 200 miles to the south, to see the play, and the theater is booked up through January. There is no explaining the sudden interest that has seized upon the people of France to hear again the wonderful story of Jesus.

Marvelous things are happening in the Catholic church today. The most recent hero of Catholicism is none other than Martin Luther! Sixteen books were written by French Catholics last year about Martin Luther, while one Catholic theologian suggested that Luther was probably the greatest Christian since the Apostle Paul. These occurrences indicate how God works. When things get dark they are often on the verge of getting much, much better. People's hearts are being prepared to hear what they would ordinarily refuse to listen to.

That brings us, then, to the theme of our study this morning in the Gospel of John. We return to the sixth chapter of this marvelous gospel, to the sequel to the miracle of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. We all love that story of the feeding of the five thousand, even though, perhaps, we do not understand its full meaning.

I am reminded of the story of the little boy who was asked what was his favorite Bible story, and he replied, "I like the one where everybody just loafs and fishes!" We will look at that miracle and at what happened immediately following it, the wonderful sign of Jesus walking on the water.

This is probably the miracle for which Jesus is most famous in many circles today. When one is over impressed with his own abilities he is sometimes challenged to demonstrate his power by walking on water. Today we will look at that story as it is found in the Gospel of John. The twin miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on water are the only ones reported in all four gospels. That suggests that these are very significant events, filled with great meaning.

John gives a brief summary of the setting of this miracle, beginning with Verse 16 of Chapter 6:

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing. {John 6:16-18 RSV}

Remember that John wrote his gospel some 30 or 40 years after the other gospels had been written, thus he did not feel it necessary to repeat many of the details that they had already given. This is one reason why his

gospel is different from the other three; John expects us to supply many of the intimate details of these stories from the other gospels. For instance, Mark writes that the disciples did not want to leave Jesus when he told them to go to Capernaum, while John simply says that they got into the boat and started out for Capernaum. But Mark tells us that they did this very reluctantly. In fact, he says, Jesus had to use a little persuasion with them. He told the disciples to get in the boat and go back to Capernaum and leave him alone on the shore. They argued because they did not want to do that. Unquestionably he narrowed his eyes, his voice took on an edge, and he said more sharply, "Get in the boat!"

They did so, and started across to the other shore. But a problem arose. John suggests that they expected to pick Jesus up somewhere along the road. The disciples were on the eastern shore of the northern part of the Sea of Galilee (where the miracle of feeding the five thousand took place), thus to row back to Capernaum was merely to parallel the northern shore all the way back. They rowed across the northern tip of the lake and would never have been very far from shore as they went directly across. John indicates that they expected Jesus to meet them somewhere along the way before dark settled in. But he tells us that it had already grown dark and "Jesus had not yet come."

The disciples were facing a problem. It was now so dark they could not see the shore. To make matters worse, "a strong wind was blowing." In that section of the country the wind almost invariably blows from the north, out of the mountains of Lebanon and Mt. Hermon, down the valley and across the lake toward the south. As darkness settled in, the disciples were rowing to try to get across to Capernaum, but the wind was driving them farther and farther south, so that they lost sight of the shore and all possibility of picking up Jesus. Yet, faithful to his command they were toiling and rowing, trying to get across the lake. Matthew confirms what we have suggested here, saying at three o'clock in the morning the disciples found themselves right in the middle of the lake, far south of their intended course.

John now continues the account, Verse 19:

When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat. They were frightened, but he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. {John 6:19-21 RSV}

Some commentators try to explain this by saying Jesus was not actually walking on the water, but standing on the seashore. They draw upon the fact that as the disciples were taking their planned course they would never have been more than perhaps 50 or 100 yards from shore, thus they saw Jesus simply standing beside the sea, so close to the water that it looked as though he was standing on it. The problem with that solution, of course, is it does not explain why the disciples were afraid when they saw Jesus, or how he could appear to be walking on the billowing sea if he was standing secure on solid ground.

As in most of these facile explanations there is something left out that is not explained by them. The only possible explanation for the disciples' fear was that they were indeed in the middle of the lake, far from the shore; darkness had fallen, a storm was blowing, and yet to their amazement they saw Jesus not far away from the boat, walking on the water. They were frightened. You would have been, too! They thought it was a spirit, or a ghost, Matthew tells us, and fear clutched at their hearts. I know many people who claim they do not believe in ghosts, but I have noticed that they stay out of graveyards in the evening!

Jesus immediately answers the disciples' fear with these words, "It is I; do not be afraid." If you think about those words for a moment you can see what amazing reassurance is to be found in them. What Jesus is saying is, "That which scares the living daylight out of you, this strange form appearing in the midst of the sea, doing what is absolutely impossible for men to do, that is I! The very things that oppose you, the boisterous sea, the buffeting winds, I already have under my feet. I am in control of these events, therefore there is no need to fear." Matthew tells us that this was the time when Peter saw the Lord, and called out to him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me to come to you on the water," {Matt 14:28 RSV}. Jesus immediately replied, "Come." Peter crawled out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward the Lord. Many think that Jesus was the only one who walked on water, but that is not true, Peter did too. He started out boldly and confidently, as was his natural personality, but as he looked at the waves, and felt the wind, his confidence failed, and he began to

sink into the water. I think Jesus let him go until he began to bubble, and then Peter prayed the shortest prayer in the Bible: "Help!" Jesus reached out to him, took his hand, and said, "Oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?" {cf, Matt 14:31}.

Those are very wonderful words for us, because our Lord is saying these same things for our benefit. This whole incident is designed to teach his disciples the resources they have in their risen Lord. This is why John follows immediately by saying, "they were glad to take him into the boat." Their fear was immediately relieved when they realized it was indeed Jesus who was walking on the water, and he was in control of all events, so they willingly received him into the boat. Immediately there was a further demonstration of the power of Jesus, for they were instantly on the other side of the lake, to which they were going. The three or four remaining miles of the journey was suddenly accomplished, and they found themselves at the dock in Capernaum.

What is the meaning of this strange event? C. S. Lewis calls this a miracle of the new creation. Lewis called the feeding of the five thousand with the bread and the fishes a miracle of the old creation. There Jesus used natural objects -- bread and fish -- to feed a mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers in a supernatural use of the things of the natural world. But Lewis calls the miracle of Jesus' walking on the water a miracle of the new creation, by which he means, not the world to come, but the invisible realm of life, the invisible realities which are present in every believer. This, therefore, is a miracle intended only for those who believe, unlike the feeding of the five thousand, which was intended for anybody who happened to be there. It is to teach believers the resources that are available to them to quiet the agony of uncertainty and anxiety that often grips the heart in time of trouble.

We stand today at the beginning of 1984. If this year is anything at all like the years of the past, we are headed for some big problems, both individually and collectively. Some of you are going to face very frightening circumstances in your own homes. Disease, death, accident, war, moral decay, corruption, foulness, desertion or divorce may take their terrible emotional toll of you. We may all find ourselves in a sea of trouble like these disciples. But what Jesus is saying to the disciples, as he is saying to us as well, is, "That which frightens you, that very thing which scares you, is me. I am coming to you in and through that circumstance, so you do not need to be afraid. I am in charge of it. I have chosen it for you, therefore you do not need to be afraid."

As John reflected on this event he realized that Jesus had deliberately set this up for the disciples. He had chosen it for them. He had sent them off against their will into this dark night and deliberately delayed his coming so that they might learn what he can do in time of trouble. As I read this account I find myself realizing afresh how God loves to dramatize in order to teach. (This is where Ron Ritchie gets all his illustrations -- from a God who loves to dramatize.) God video-screens truth so that we can hear and taste and feel it right in the circumstances of our lives. If our faith responds, as these disciples' faith responded, and we take him into the boat, we welcome him into the circumstance, we suddenly find ourselves on the other side of the waters of difficulty, steadied, and strengthened, and at peace. We find we have arrived at the goal, but not by our toiling and rowing and struggling through.

John reduces this story to its essentials in order that we can see how it ties in with the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. Our Lord teaches us by means of the Lord's Supper to look back at his death and the resurrection -- but it is clear in this account he is teaching the disciples before these events, to understand what their meaning would be.

Let me quote here the words of Professor Godet, a professor of theology in Neuchatel, Switzerland, writing in the 1870's, and one of the finest commentators on the Gospel of John:

In the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, Jesus had foreshadowed the sacrifice which he would make of his flesh for the food of the world. In the terrible night of darkness and separation which followed, he had suffered them to feel a foretaste of that more painful and more real separation which would follow his death. Now in this unexpected and triumphant return across the waves he prefigured his glorious resurrection and even his triumphant ascension, in which his church was to share, by being raised with him to heavenly places by the bread of his Spirit. The discourses which follow prove that the symbolical character which we have attributed to these miracles was not remote from the mind of St. John, nor from that of the Lord himself.

On subsequent Sundays, we will be looking at the remarkable discourse on the bread of life that followed these twin miracles. What we need to see now in these events is that our Lord is prefiguring events that have eternal significance for all believers at all times. He is teaching us, by means of this story, the resources that are available to us which the world knows nothing about.

As I travel about, I am startled by the number of Christians who do not act upon this truth, but seem to succumb to the pressures and the problems of life and react just like a non-Christian would. They grumble and complain, feeling set upon and put upon. They despair and strike out and strike back; they rely upon worldly schemes to deliver them from difficulties, oftentimes even becoming involved in illegal or wrong activities. What is more amazing is how many times I have experienced the joy of Jesus' presence, freeing me from the circumstances, and yet how many times I go right back and react the same way that others do in times of pressure and danger. Yet, here indeed, is the sign of the New Covenant, the new creation: Jesus with us in the very circumstances we find ourselves; triumphant, in control, Lord of all those circumstances, the new hidden resource for life which is available to believers but which the world knows nothing about.

This leaves us with really only one question: Why don't we believe this? Why are we so much like Peter, who, even in the midst of experiencing the power of God to walk above his circumstances, loses his faith and begins to sink beneath the waves? That is why we all feel so close to Peter; at least I do. He is the disciple who seems to be our representative in the apostolic band, the one who only opens his mouth to change feet! And yet you can always tell the man or woman who does learn this secret, who does welcome the Lord into the boat of difficulty, who does hear his Word, "It is I; be not afraid." Jesus is always saying to his disciples, "Fear not. Be not afraid. Do not let your heart be troubled." That word is everywhere in the Scripture. The apostles say the same thing. Our Lord always accompanied this with the words, "for I am with you," {Matt 28:20}. That is why we do not fear, not because we are so smart we can find a way out, or because we have wealthy friends, or influence in the right places, or whatever. We fear not, because he is with us and he is in charge.

When we accept that fact we will find that it reveals itself in our very countenance. I find that people who have discovered this have a quiet peace in their eyes even when things are going wrong. They have a confidence that everything is going to finally work its way out to what God's intended purpose was. There is not a word of complaint or grumbling. They regard the circumstances as necessary to what God wants to do in their lives -- which is always for their own good, for their own ultimate happiness -- and they accept them. They are a joy to be around. When you go to encourage them you find they encourage you.

Have you found that? They are steady and strong. They do not succumb to the desire to strike back and get even and take matters into their own hands.

Do you know why? It is because they have already taken Jesus into the boat. When people do that, they discover that they have already arrived at the goal toward which the rest of us are still struggling. They are already there; they have found love and joy and peace.

That is why these accounts are here in the Scriptures -- to teach us the hidden resource of life, the place to run to when things get overwhelming and we find ourselves pressured. And this is not something to be reserved only for the great trials of life. It is available for any time of pressure, or any degree of it.

When we accept it on that level, we are discovering the new creation, the new resource, the world knows nothing about.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray indeed that this may be the circumstance we will find repeatedly through 1984. We can find little comfort in the anticipation of what is to come in our world in this year. We know it will be filled with toil and trouble and difficulty and threat and danger, heartbreak and heartache, and yet in the midst of it, Lord, you have promised to be there, and you can come through the darkest night and over the most troubled sea into the boat of our lives. May the eyes of our faith be fixed upon you, Lord. May we understand afresh the inner resources by which we are expected to remain calm and confident in the midst of trouble and danger. Help

us to manifest this, Lord, as a testimony to your presence. We ask it in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

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