

## Jesus Sightings

Sermon 146 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 17, 2022

John 6:14-21

Justin and I really love Jesus - this is something almost everyone - especially our closest friends knows about us. Because of this, one of our good friends got us a book for a wedding gift. I went looking for it this morning to see if I could find it to show you... I couldn't...

But it's a picture book of Jesus sightings.

Jesus in the clouds, Jesus in an omelet, Jesus in a Funyuns, you know... shapes and images in our everyday lives, that look like Jesus... many of which are shared on the internet and some even bring in high prices online... like the "Jesus on a pierogi" which a lucky woman named Donna Lee sold for \$1775 on eBay.

It seems Jesus sightings are everywhere if you're looking!

Silly as it sounds, there is one thing I truly do love about this book. It reminds me that no matter how much we learn, no matter how much we think we know about Jesus and his Gospel, Jesus will always surprise us. As soon as we get used to Jesus being in one place, he moves on to the next. This is especially true in the Gospel of John. As John Scholar and former Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, Dr. Gail O'Day writes,

"[John's] Gospel narrative is an attempt to provide fresh answers [concerning Jesus' identity]. It seeks to move the reader away from overly confident assumptions, false certitudes, and complacency about Jesus' identity. It offers each reader of the Gospel the opportunity to discover Jesus for himself or herself.

[The] purpose [is] to lead the reader to his or her own experience of Jesus..."

In order for these discoveries or encounters with Jesus to occur, Jesus is constantly moving from one place to the next, surprising the people with miraculous signs that convey who he is and what he came to do.

From Cana to Golgotha, from the Upper Room to the shore of Tiberias, Jesus is a man on the move. And when we pay attention, we can also see that Jesus' movement throughout the Gospel is much more than geography, it is also theology.

As Jesus moves, geographically and theologically, Jesus meets people where they are. And in those brief encounters, people see Jesus.

*Jesus sightings, all over Galilee.* Each one offering a unique glimpse into the heart of God, a God who meets us where we are – in every sense of that phrase.

There is no better example of this than today's reading.

Jesus has just fed the multitudes from a meager portion of loaves and fish that a young boy happened to have brought with him. Seeing this miracle, the disciples and the crowds knew that Jesus was the prophet, the messiah they had been waiting for. It was a Jesus sighting on the shore of Tiberias.

As soon as the crowd made sense of what was happening, as soon as they began to understand that they had witnessed a miracle, that they were in the presence of God, they said:

*This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world!*

And on this recognition, Jesus knew that they would want to keep him there, *to take him by force and make him king (v.15)*, to put him into their box, so to speak. So Jesus took off and withdrew to the mountain.

That same night, the disciples got into a boat and set out toward Capernaum. They were a few miles out from shore when the wind started to pick up, the water grew rough, and darkness covered the skies.

I can only imagine the level of anxiety and the worry they must have felt. Where was Jesus now? He was there on the shore to provide for the crowds earlier in the day, where was he now, now that his closest friends needed him? Where had he gone and why wasn't he there to calm the storm?

About that time, the disciples turned their gaze from the shore they'd left behind and looked up ahead to see a figure of a man. Surely they were seeing things because people can't just walk on the water. But as they drew near they heard the man speak saying, "It is I, do not be afraid."

It was another Jesus sighting, right there on the Sea.

Immediately, the disciples wanted to take him into the boat, to bring him close so he couldn't just slip away again, so he'd be right there when they needed him next; but before they could grab him and pull him in, the boat struck land.

They sound just like the crowds after Jesus feeds the five thousand, right? They experience a miracle, they see Jesus for who he really is, and then they want to snatch him up, hold

him tight, and make him fit into their little box where his identity is unchanging and his presence is unfailing. If Jesus is King, they'll always know where to find him.

In the same way, the disciples experience a miracle, they see Jesus for who he is, and they want to snatch him up, hold him tight, pull him into their boat where his ability to perform a miracle can serve as a shield of protection from the storms that rage around them. They want to keep him in their little box where his identity is unchanging and his presence is unfailing.

But Jesus – at least according to John – is always resisting that box, always pressing on and moving along. Jesus is on the move and in this Gospel, we can never be too certain where the next Jesus sighting is going to occur.

I saw Jesus this week; and even though it was in the most unusual place, a world away from Galilee and thousands of years from these sightings recorded in John's Gospel, I did... I saw Jesus this week.

Partnering with Together for Hope – Arkansas, I went with three others from this church and several other Cooperative Baptists to work alongside members of the community in Helena – West Helena. For twenty years this partnership has sponsored two weeks of summer camp at which local kids can learn how to swim, dance, play, make crafts, share meals, and study the Bible together. Some of the volunteers work at the camp while others complete construction projects on local homes and churches.

Months ago I started to feel a calling to be a part of this mission trip. I don't know why it felt so important to go, but it did, so I went. I signed up to do construction, thinking it would be good to get out of my head and do some manual labor. The date drew near and Carl Dawson let me know what the projects were supposed to be. Painting... Yes! My favorite! I got excited about working in an air-conditioned space, and about learning from Carl and the other veterans on the construction team.

A couple of days before we all left Raleigh, I got word that there was a desperate need for group leaders at the kids camp...

And then the call came: *Would you be willing to switch from construction to being a group leader?*

Now, I don't have anything against kids. But the experience of painting or maybe building a ramp with Carl Dawson is quite different from spending a full day outdoors, in the Arkansas heat, trying to wrangle 12 kids aged 6 to 9 years old. My excitement about this

trip started to wane and the winds of worry started to pick up. What in the world was I going to do with all those kids?

Monday came and my campers began to arrive. One by one they came to the tarp and introduced themselves to me and to each other. Some of them knew others from school, some of them didn't. The first day we traveled from sports, to pool, to music, then lunch... only to realize that lunch hadn't arrived. It was late. Like more than an hour late. So, with hungry stomachs, we went on with our afternoon rotations. Lunch did arrive, eventually. And when it did, we all scarfed down our food and went on with Bible study, pool, and crafts.

The third day everything seemed to be going well, sports, pool, music, then lunch. Half of my little group made it through the lunch line and back to our picnic area before we realized the food had run out. There was no more for the other campers in our group. Disappointed but accepting the reality of the situation, half of my team, my 6 – 9 year-old children, joined their friends around our little picnic table as the adults in charge scrambled to come up with a solution.

It didn't take long for the kids to come up with their own solution. We (the adults) were trying to think about how to create more food out of thin air. But those little kids, one by one... grabbed items from their lunch bags: chips, vegetables, sandwiches, applesauce, and milk... placing the foods they didn't want or need in the center of the table for their friends to enjoy. Tears of disappointment and hunger turned into joy as my little friends became the body of Christ around that old, rusty picnic table.

*Jesus sighting...* in Helena, Arkansas.

This wasn't the only divine encounter last week in Helena. You'll have to ask Carl and Lou and Joy to share some of their experiences. But much like in the Gospel accounts, Jesus seemed to show up right when we least expected and most needed to see him.

But on the other hand, isn't it just like Jesus to call us out, beyond our usual spaces and places of comfort, in hopes that we might meet him on the margins / out on the sea (perhaps)? And let me assure you, it doesn't get much more marginal than Helena, Arkansas.

The city was founded in 1833 as an important port of commerce along the Mississippi River. The main source of income was from the cotton grown on the farms surrounding the city.

It was a significant hold for the Union Army during the Civil War as runaway slaves who joined the Union cause in hopes of earning their freedom helped prevent the Confederacy from using the streets of Helena to access the larger city of Vicksburg.

In the 1940s and 50s, as the city continued to draw black workers to its surrounding farms, a vibrant culture of blues was born and juke joints filled the commercial properties up and down Cherry Street – the main drag.

However, due in large part to mechanization, the farm jobs began to deteriorate leaving the city's predominantly black population with little economic opportunity. The 1980s and 90s were especially difficult for Helena as it became more clear that the town was declining. The middle-class residents which included small business owners and teachers – among other professionals – left town in droves. <sup>[1]</sup> It was a perfect storm.

Today, Helena is one of the poorest communities in the country with a median annual household income of just \$19,896. The once-thriving Cherry Street corridor is lined not with bustling blues joints and jazz clubs, but with abandoned buildings with sunken roofs and broken glass display windows... Collateral damage of the progress that blew through town. Helena isn't the only town with this story, it has happened all over the country as jobs have vanished from farming communities and mill towns.

Like many other southern cities, Helena was segregated and separated by railroad tracks that defined the boundaries between white and black neighborhoods. Helena was home to one of the worst race riots in American History (1919) and it welcomed the Freedom Riders during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. It is also important to remember that ever since the 1830s, when enslaved Africans came into the Delta region to clear land and build those early plantations for white landowners, Helena has been a predominantly black town. It remained so through the Civil War and during reconstruction. It remained so throughout the 20th century as African Americans provided paid labor on the farms and the creative genius behind the blues movement. And it remains so now.

Because of these dynamics...

Helena is like a small vignette of so many of the larger storms that are brewing across our country. Storms of racial and economic disparity, storms of uncertain futures, storms of mental illness, storms of addiction, storms of violence, storms of grief and loss, storms of isolation, storms of division, and storms of despair... Storms of all shapes and sizes brewing, gaining steam, and stirring up the waters around us. No matter which storm (or combination of storms) is ours, when the wind begins to pick up, we feel like the disciples on the boat between Tiberias and Capernaum, we find ourselves in our own proverbial

boats sailing the seas of our lives, worried about everything and desperately searching for Jesus.

But in times like these, it feels like we're way out from shore and Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Maybe because we're looking back at the land we left behind, back to the last place we saw Jesus before the winds picked up. Maybe we're still looking for Jesus in all the usual places. Meanwhile, Jesus is just up ahead, waiting for us, walking towards us, bearing the winds, and standing atop the waves. Maybe Jesus is not back there, where he used to be because Jesus is right here *with us*, in the middle of the storm, offering glimpses of love – *Jesus sightings* – in all of our stormiest places.

You know, if we read closely we see that Jesus doesn't calm this storm. In response to the disciples' fears and worries, despite the real and present danger they were facing as they paddled their way across the sea, Jesus did not speak and command the wind and waves to slow their rage, Jesus simply showed up, right there in the middle of it saying, *I'm right here with you, do not be afraid.*

There is a real heaviness right now – or at least there seems to be. As we struggle to emerge from a pandemic, as inflation rises and economic concerns grow, as our politics continue to divide, and as the church struggles to find its way in a new world, we are all looking for Jesus.

It is tempting to look back, to retreat to the places where we last saw him, where we felt close to God and safe from the high winds and raging seas. But if I have just one word of hope, one testimony to offer from a place like Helena – a place where all the storms seem to hover and beat down their relentless rains – then may it be this: Jesus is there, I saw him with my own eyes. Jesus is in the park when the lunch runs out and the children share their food. Christ's table is there, being set, and even though it seems impossible... there's plenty to go around.

And y'all I have to tell you if Jesus is in Helena... then I have to believe, Jesus is right here too. He may not calm the storm... Heck, he may even be calling us deeper into it!

But one thing we can know for sure, is we do not go alone. Amen.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Delta Dreams, [https://web.archive.org/web/20080317012446/http://www.aetn.org/production/programs/deltadreams/full\\_synopsis](https://web.archive.org/web/20080317012446/http://www.aetn.org/production/programs/deltadreams/full_synopsis)