

## SERMON NOTES

Third Sunday After Christmas  
(Eve of the Fast of Catechumens)

Synaxis Gospel  
John 6:15-21

### THE PRESENCE OF OUR SAVIOR

#### INTRODUCTION

This Sunday precedes a five day fast period, observed only in the Armenian Church. It was originally intended to facilitate the evangelization of the Armenian people.

“The fifth day of the fast, that is, Friday, is assigned to Jonah’s preaching and Nineveh’s repentance, not as Prophet Jonah’s feast, but simply as an example of a great act of repentance. Shnorhali explains the designation *Arachavork* as the initial fast, a commemoration the fast initiated by St Gregory the Illuminator, who after his release from Khor Virap began to evangelize, first by making the Armenian people observe five days of continuous fasting, so as to receive a similar healing grace and enlightenment, as in Nineveh’s repentance.”<sup>1</sup>

The people of Nineveh were under condemnation for their sins and were doomed to destruction in forty days. God had sent his prophet Jonah to inform them of their impending doom. Although they were pagans, the people of Nineveh, believed the prophet and as commanded by their king, repented in sackcloth and ashes, not eating or drinking or allowing even the animals to do so. They called “on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.”<sup>2</sup> “Who knows, said the king, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?”<sup>3</sup> The king was right and the city was saved. St. Gregory believed the Armenian people would be saved, like the Ninevites, if they too seriously repented with fasting and prayer.

In the notes for the Feast of the Naming of our LORD, “The Eighth Day After Christmas,” we noticed: “God, Himself, had chosen the name Jesus for His Son Jesus. Ἰησοῦς. is the Greek form of the Hebrew name יהושע, or Joshua, The Hebrew name is associated with the verb meaning “to save” and could be translated “the LORD is salvation.” In the Old Testament there was but one Savior, God Himself.<sup>4</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> Malachia Ormanian, *A Dictionary of the Armenian Church*, translated by Bedros Norehad, (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1984) p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 3:7

<sup>3</sup> Jonah 3:8

<sup>4</sup> 2 Samuel 22:3; 2 Kings 13:5; Psalm 106:21; Isaiah 19:20; 43:4, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; Jeremiah 14:8; Hosea 13:4. Even those times that God used a human deliverer (as in the book of Judges) it was recognized that it was God Who was the actual Savior.

alone would save. Mary herself recognized this when she proclaimed to her cousin Elizabeth, “My soul has rejoiced in God my Savior.”<sup>5</sup>”

Many times in their history, the Jews had needed salvation from their oppressors. When they cried out to God to forgive them their sins, He had always sent a savior as His representative, whom He filled with His Holy Spirit. The first was Moses, who led them in the exodus from the slavery of Egypt. The book of Judges records multiple instances of men sent by God to rescue His people who fell repeatedly into sin and then under the discipline of God—oppression by other nations.

But God promised that one day a savior would come Who would be more and do more than save from physical oppression. He would be their sin bearer. This One has “His goings forth from long ago, from eternity.”<sup>6</sup> That description only fits God Himself. The prophecy was fulfilled at the birth of Jesus.

Old and devout Simeon, full of the Holy Spirit, took the infant Jesus in his arms at His dedication and blessed God, saying:

“Now LORD let thy bond-servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for my eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES and the glory of Thy people, Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

Our Synaxis reading moves us some thirty or more years ahead in time. His ethnic people, the Jews, are groaning under the iron yoke of Rome. They long for a savior from their physical hardships.

Jesus is well into His ministry of teaching and healing; His identity is being revealed through the miracles that He performs. Five thousand men (plus women and children) gathered in a remote place have just been fed from a few loaves and fishes. The excitement is high and the people have begun to think what such a man could mean for them and their country, oppressed by the seemingly invincible Romans.

## SYNAXIS READING

John 6:15-21

*Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone. Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum. And it had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.*

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:47.

<sup>6</sup> Micah 5:2. This is the prophecy that the great king would be born in Bethlehem, but also indicates Who that One is.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:29-32

*And the sea began to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. When therefore they had rowed about three or four miles, they beheld Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened.*

*But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."*

*They were willing therefore to receive Him into the boat; and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.*

## NOTES

**Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king,**

The mood of the huge crowd of people was no doubt fairly obvious; but for Jesus, Who knows the hearts of all men, it was particularly evident what they had in mind. It was also clear to Him that they were motivated by the desire for more free meals.<sup>8</sup>

The crowd planned to forcefully take Him to Jerusalem and compel Him to be their King—the kind of King *they* wanted, a political and economic savior. However, as Jesus later told Pilot at His trial, His kingdom was not a political one.<sup>9</sup> Jesus would not be forced into that role! He had a far greater mission: to save the people, not from the Romans, but from their sins.

**withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.**

Jesus had been with His disciples on this mountain when He saw the crowd approaching, prior to the miracle. Now He slipped away from the crowd and went back up the mountain alone. He must have instructed His disciples to take the boat in which they had arrived and go across the sea to Capernaum without Him.

**Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum.**

We are not told that Jesus instructed the disciples to do this, but it is hard to imagine they would have left Jesus on their own. However, the day was ending and the sun was going down when they started off.

**And it had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.**

The story is being told from the point of view of one who knew that Jesus eventually came to the disciples. This statement does not mean that the disciples expected Jesus to come to them out on the water.

The situation started to become complicated. Ordinarily, the darkness would not be much of a problem; these men were experienced fishermen who fished sometimes all night long. But this darkness was not that of a clear night.

**And the sea began to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing.**

A storm was brewing, and the strong winds made the sea choppy which would make it difficult to row the boat.

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<sup>8</sup> Later, He accused them of this.

<sup>9</sup> John 18:36.

When therefore they had rowed about three or four miles,

The distance given is twenty five or thirty *stadia* and was approximately three or four miles. They had probably reached the middle of the sea. This rowing in the storm must have been exhausting work. Trying to keep their bearings in the darkness must have been very difficult as well. It was a very stressful if not a dangerous, even deadly, situation.

they beheld Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat;

Suddenly they saw what must have appeared to them as a specter or ghost: a man walking on the sea in the midst of the dark and stormy sea. They did not realize that the figure approaching was Jesus—the LORD is salvation.

and they were frightened.

They were terrified!

But He said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

What He literally said was: *εγώ εἰμι Ἰ ΑΜ*. This is the way God identified Himself to Moses at the burning bush.<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew *יהוה* was rendered in Greek in the LXX translation of the Old Testament: *εγώ εἰμι*.

Jesus called out to His frightened disciples His identity, the same identity He had given 1500 years before at the burning bush. Then He told them “Do not be terrified!”

They were willing therefore to receive Him into the boat;

John’s account of this episode does not include Peter’s dramatic request to come to Jesus on the water.<sup>11</sup> Here we are simply given that the disciples were willing for Him to come into the boat with them.

and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Once Jesus was in the boat, their struggles were over, and they were immediately “at the land to which they were going.”

## APPLICATION

There are televangelists who give the impression that if we truly love, obey, and follow Jesus, we will have happy and prosperous lives. All our troubles will be in the past and the future will be filled with whatever material blessings our hearts desire. This was the idea that possessed the crowd of our reading. That is the life they expected Jesus to provide them as their King. They were intent on forcing Jesus into that role.

However, Jesus is not that kind of king and Christians are as subject to adversity as the people we live among. Christians are not carried to Heaven on a bed of roses. In fact many of us, because we are Christians, suffer persecution and cruel forms of death in lands that are dominated by other religions. Armenians can testify to that!

Jesus’ name was given to Him because He already was—before His birth in Bethlehem—what His name indicates, “the LORD IS SALVATION.”

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus 3:14.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 14:28-31.

It is important to note here that LORD is a reverent way to write the four Hebrew letters that stand for the Name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. It was at that meeting with Moses that God declared His identity: “I AM.”

Jesus, at His human birth, was already the great “I AM” Who existed before Abraham and Who appeared to Moses in the burning bush; Who brought the Israelites out of slavery with a mighty Arm. The same great “I AM” Who saved Noah and all the occupants of the Ark from the Flood that destroyed the world of their day. The very same great “I AM” Who twirled into being the uncountable galaxies that fill the endless reaches of the Universe; Who sequenced the DNA of life and created the tiniest components of Matter.

Jesus already was the great “I AM” Who lovingly created mankind in His image, and then, when we had plunged ourselves into the eternal death of doubting His goodness, bound Himself with promises of our salvation. These promises found their fulfillment in the Child named Jesus, The LORD IS SALVATION.

The meaning of Jesus’ name was fully revealed when He took our place on the Cross. He is our Salvation from our sins when we accept Him as such. In the most important issue of life, He is our Salvation. Knowing this, we can fully trust Him with all the other concerns we face. Whether we are like the Ninevites, or our pagan ancestors, we need God, Who will save if we confess our sins and earnestly repent.

Whether we are like the disciples of old, or like our Armenian relatives of the last century, and find ourselves struggling against overwhelming and terrifying situations, we need our Savior. Or if we are like our children today, and are inundated by the equally deadly dark winds and tempestuous waves of modern culture, we need our Savior. The good news is: He is here. We need only lift our eyes and hear Him say, “I AM, do not be afraid!” He will bring us safely to shore.

May this week of fasting and repentance find us constantly aware of His Presence and love for us. This Presence is worth infinitely more than all the economic bliss sought by those who intended to make Jesus their political king. It is worth infinitely more than all the prosperity hawked by those who misunderstand the mission of the great I AM in the person of Jesus—Who was and is forevermore, “THE LORD IS SALVATION.”