

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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WATER-WALKING FAITH

Matthew 14: 22-33

Without a doubt this is one of the most amazing stories in the New Testament. What Matthew describes in this passage is not the sort of thing you see or hear about or read about or experience in your own life every day! But what happened to the disciples of Jesus out on the Sea of Galilee, and to Peter in particular, has some important life lessons to teach us.

If you look at the context of this passage in Matthew 14, you see that Jesus and His disciples had just learned about the arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, who governed part of Palestine as a representative of Rome. Herod had arrested John and put him in prison because he didn't like the things John was saying about him. In particular, John the Baptist was on Herod's case for taking the wife of his brother Philip. John boldly told Herod that what he and Herodias (Philip's wife) were doing was wrong. And he got into big trouble for saying it.

That happens sometimes, doesn't it? Sometimes you can get into trouble for standing up for God and His truth, even when you do it as winsomely as you know how and speak the truth in love. No matter how it is communicated, some people do not want to hear or know the truth. Especially when it challenges the way they are living.

So John ended up in prison. Then, trapped in a corner of his own making, Herod granted the request of the daughter of Herodias and ordered the execution of John.

When Jesus heard the news of John's death, the Bible says (Matthew 14:13), He and His disciples decided to get away from the crowds for some R and R. But the crowds followed and found them. Rather than send them away, Jesus "had compassion on them and healed their sick" (14:14). He didn't tell them to go away. He didn't try to get rid of them. He didn't tell them to leave Him alone. No, he responded with love and compassion, and healed the sick who came to Him. Then, because it was getting late and the people had not brought food with them, Jesus used a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish to miraculously feed a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children (14:15-21).

Afterward, it says in verse 22, where we began our Scripture reading, Jesus had His disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the lake while He stayed behind to dismiss the people. I'm not sure it ever occurred to the disciples to ask how Jesus was going to get there. Did He have another boat available for His use? If the question did occur to the disciples, the Bible doesn't say.

Why did Jesus send the disciples on ahead? Here are two reasons: First, as it says in verse 23, Jesus wanted to be alone to pray. Jesus understood the importance of solitude in a way that too few of us appreciate in our noise and distraction-saturated world. Jesus made time in a busy and demanding life to be alone with the Father in prayer. In doing so, He gave us an

example, that we should follow in His steps. Like Jesus, you and I need to carve out time in the busyness of life to devote ourselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2). Jesus sent the disciples ahead because He wanted some alone time with the Father.

A second reason Jesus sent the disciples ahead without Him was to put down what D. A. Carson calls a “messianic uproar.” Matthew doesn’t mention it, but John 6:15 says that after feeding the 5,000, the crowd was so revved up, so full of excitement and enthusiasm about Jesus and His miracle-working power that they wanted to take Him by force right then and there, and make Him their king. They wanted Jesus, not Herod as Caesar’s representative or Caesar himself, to be their ruler. Jesus sent the disciples away, in part, so they wouldn’t get caught up in all the misguided fervor. So He sent them off, and then He dispersed the crowd.

The disciples were out on the lake, following Jesus’ orders, when a whopper of a storm came up. This was not just a minor disturbance. The boat was being buffeted and rocked by the whipping winds and powerful waves. The water was rough, the waves were high, the winds were strong. Not a good time, from a human perspective, to be out on the lake. For hours, they struggled against the storm. They put all their expertise to work. But they were just holding on for dear life, trying to keep from going under.

I wonder: Have you ever felt like that in your life? Like you’re just holding on, desperately trying to keep from going under? Do you ever find yourself feeling overwhelmed by some storm you’re facing in life?

The first lesson to learn from the experience of the disciples here is that storms happen.

Storms are a fact of life. It is as simple as that. Sometimes we experience storms when we are in the center of God’s will, when we are actively doing what God wants us to do. Just like the disciples were doing in this case. And sometimes storms come when we resist or reject God’s will, when we try to run from His will.

Warren Wiersbe describes the two kinds of storms as storms of correction, which God uses to discipline or correct us when we have strayed from His ways, and storms of perfection, which God uses to make us stronger in our faith or more like Christ.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah found himself in a storm because he had disobeyed God. He was running away from God, and needed to be corrected. God used the storm in his life to teach Jonah a life-changing truth – that you cannot run away from God – and to bring Jonah to repentance. God sometimes uses storms of suffering or hardship or loss to correct us. To bring us back to Himself. To remind us that He is God. And that He is good, even when we experience storms in life.

The storm in which John the Baptist found himself was not a storm of correction but a storm of perfection. He experienced suffering and even death as a result of standing up and speaking out for God. He got into trouble for doing God’s will.

So did Daniel in the Old Testament. He got thrown into a lion’s den for the crime of praying in private to the Lord at a time when praying to anyone other than King Darius was prohibited

(Daniel 6). But the Lord protected Daniel, just as He protected Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, when Nebuchadnezzar threw them into a blazing furnace because they refused to bow down to the golden image he had made of himself. They got into trouble for being faithful and obedient to God. They said to Nebuchadnezzar: "If you throw us into the furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." God did save them. He did rescue them. The storm came not to correct them, but to perfect them, and to confirm to them God's trustworthiness (Daniel 3).

What do we learn from this? We learn that obedience to God and storms in life are not mutually exclusive. Both may be God's plan for our lives. Faithfulness to God and hardships in life may both be a part of God's will. They usually are.

The storms of life come wrapped in different packages. The storm you face may be different from mine. Maybe you have come to church today seeking refuge and relief from some storm in your life. Could it be:

- The recent or impending death of a loved one?
- A "thorn in the flesh" that just won't go away?
- A distressing diagnosis you've just received?
- A relationship you desperately want to fix but don't know how?
- A financial problem weighing heavily on you?
- A sin that seems to have you in its grip?

Maybe it is a different kind of storm, I don't know. Whatever it is, the first thing I want you to see today is that you are not unique. You are not alone. Storms are a fact of life. They happen to everybody.

That may not be of much comfort or encouragement to you. But I trust *this* will be. The second life lesson from God's Word today is that Jesus comes to us in the storms, just as He came to the disciples in the storm out on the lake.

One of the most magnificent promises in the Bible is found in Isaiah 43:2-3. There the Lord says to His people:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
The flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Is that an incredibly good promise?

“I will be with you,” the Lord says. “I will watch over you.” Even a violent storm on the lake couldn’t keep Jesus from coming to His disciples and bringing them safely through the storm.

The Lord Jesus always has His eyes on us. Always. He is aware of our needs at every moment. His eye is on the sparrow, as the song goes, and I know He’s watching me. And you. It is true that Jesus does not prevent us from facing storms in life. You know it is true in your own life. If there is a God-ordained purpose in a storm, He waits until the storm has done its work and fulfilled its purpose. He does it, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, so that we will learn not to rely on ourselves, but on God. Paul talks about the hardships he and his mission team suffered in the province of Asia. “We were under great pressure,” he says, “far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

I don’t know if you have ever felt that way, but I hope, like Paul, you have learned to rely not on yourself but on God.

Jesus came to His disciples in the midst of the storm. He didn’t leave them defenseless. He didn’t abandon them to drown in the raging storm. And He comes to us in our storms, too. He can reach you wherever you are, and no matter what you may be going through. Even if it feels like you’re in a den with ferocious lions, or in a blazing furnace.

In the middle of the night, Jesus came to His disciples, walking on the water. He did it in part, I think, to demonstrate to the disciples that He was and is the Son of God who is sovereign over the winds and the waves and all the storms of life. He did it to teach the disciples that the storms we encounter in life will not and cannot keep Him from us. And the storms can actually bring us closer to Him and cause us to grow in our faith and understanding.

The disciples didn’t recognize Jesus at first. They thought they were seeing a ghost. And their reaction was one of terror. They were overcome with fear. But then they heard His voice, and His words cut through their fear. “Take courage,” He said. “It is I. Don’t be afraid” (14:27).

Do you know what the most-often repeated command in the whole Bible is? It is not the command to love God or to love one another. It is not the command to repent or to believe. It is this one: “Fear not. Don’t be afraid.” This command is found 366 times in the Bible, which is once for every day of the year including leap day! It doesn’t mean this command is more important than all these others. What it means is that God knows the prevalence of our propensity to fear. And if it is not overcome, fear will keep us from trusting and obeying God.

Fear is a normal, natural reaction when troubles and trials invade our lives. We wonder how we will get through it. Or if we will get through it. We wonder how it will turn out. We fear the uncertainty of the unknown. Just like storms, fear is a fact of life.

But Jesus says to you and me, just as He said to His disciples that night: “You don’t have to be afraid. I’m here. I’m with you.” Are you going through a stormy time right now? Dealing with fear of some kind? The Lord Jesus is with you. He is! And He will walk with you through the storm.

Fear is a fact of life. But you can overcome fear with faith. This is where Peter comes into the story. Until now, our focus has been on the disciples as a group in their struggle against the storm. Now Peter pipes up, and he says to Jesus: “Lord, if it’s you – if it’s really you and not some apparition – tell me to come to you on the water. Let me walk on the water just like you” (14:29).

What did Jesus say? “All right. Come on” (14:29).

Peter was a man of remarkable faith. His faith was not perfect by any means. But it was real. As Wiersbe points out, anybody can sit in a boat and watch. It takes real faith and courage to get out of the boat and walk on water. Which is exactly what Peter did. Really!

Here is the thing about Peter’s faith: It was strong enough to get him out of the boat. It was strong enough to enable him to actually walk on the water toward Jesus. But it wasn’t strong enough to withstand the storm. He actually walked on the water (though the Scripture doesn’t say how far he walked or how many steps he took). In defiance of the law of gravity, he walked on the water toward Jesus. But then he got into trouble.

What happened?

First, he shifted his focus from Jesus to the storm itself. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, Peter was just fine. But when he focused on the wind and the waves, he began to sink.

Second, when he turned his attention from Jesus to the storm, his faith gave way to panic and fear. The fear of going under gripped his heart. Fear can suck the life out of faith. If we focus all our time and attention and energy on our fears, our faith will wither up and die. But faith – faith in the God of the universe who created and sustains and governs the world in wisdom, power and grace; faith in the God who loved us so much that He sent His Son into the world to die for us and to save us from our sin; faith in the God who proved He is more powerful than death by raising His Son Jesus Christ from the dead; faith in the God who has promised to be with us and to watch over us in all of the seasons and circumstances of life – this kind of faith trumps fear.

The third thing we see is that when Peter began to sink, he did the only reasonable thing: He cried out to Jesus for help. That is always the right thing to do. When you’re afraid and you’re beginning to sink, cry out to the Lord Jesus for help. Cry out to Jesus to save you. Look for His out-stretched hand. And take hold of it. Just like Peter did.

If you want to have a water-walking faith, your faith has to have the right object. It won’t do to have faith in just anyone or anything. The object of your faith must be worthy of your trust. Peter’s faith was in Jesus. Neither Peter nor the rest of the disciples in the boat had a

full understanding yet. But their response to what they saw was one of amazement and worship. They were in awe of Jesus and said: “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33). Which He is.

Let me ask you: How is it with you today? Is your faith in the Son of God? He is the only worthy object of your faith. He is the One who can give you the courage to get out of the boat (whatever kind of boat you may be stuck in today) and the power to walk on the water in faith. You’ve got to fix your eyes and keep your eyes on Jesus. That is the only way you can do it.

But beware of this: Oswald Chambers, best known for his devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, gives the warning to beware of worshipping Jesus as the Son of God, and professing your faith in Him as the Savior of the world, while at the same time you live your life as though He is completely powerless to do anything in you or through you.

Instead, cultivate and exercise a water-walking faith, just like Peter. Like Peter, your faith doesn’t have to be perfect. But it has to be real. Real enough to step out in faith. Real enough to take a risk in response to the invitation and call of Jesus. Real enough to let Jesus do something in you or through you that you could never, ever do on your own.

Will you take this step of faith this week?

Lord, let it be so in us, to the praise and glory of Your name. Amen? Amen.