

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 19, 2008**

**IF YOU WANT TO WALK ON WATER:  
A FAITH FOR TROUBLED TIMES**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

The headlines these days sure are unsettling, aren't they? Daily we hear of things like the economic crisis, emergency bailout, financial rescue plan, fears of recession and depression, trouble on Wall Street and Main Street, sub-prime loans, home foreclosures, tightening credit. We hear of record budget deficits in Washington and huge budget shortfalls in state and local governments. Fairfax County, where many of us live, this past week announced a \$58 million budget shortfall and a projected shortfall of \$500 million next year. We hear names like AIG, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, Citigroup, WaMu, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. 401k's and other retirement funds, including yours and mine, have lost millions – probably billions – in value over the last few weeks.

We're not as rich – in terms of monetary value – as we thought we were a short time ago.

On top of all this, there is a growing world food crisis which has left 967 million people around the world malnourished, according to an estimate by the World Bank. Nearly one billion men, women and children don't have enough to eat. That is staggering, isn't it?

In addition, the news is full of wars and rumors of wars. We are fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the global war on terrorism. Countries like Iran and North Korea seek the ability to develop nuclear weapons. In the Middle East, there is perpetual unrest, and the smoldering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians threatens to explode at any moment.

Here at home, with Election Day only 16 days away, we have presidential campaigns each seeking to tear down the other, while allegations of voter fraud across the country shake our confidence in the veracity and reliability of our election results.

Heard enough bad news? There is no doubt about it: We certainly live in tough times. Challenging times. Stormy times, if you will – and I'm not talking about the weather.

Jesus and His disciples faced storms in their lives, too. If we were to look at the opening verses of Matthew 14, for example, we would read of the arrest and imprisonment of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, and of John's execution by Herod at the request of the daughter of his wife, Herodias (14:1-12). When Jesus heard the news of John's death, He and His disciples withdrew from the crowds of people which had been following Him. They went on a retreat to an out-of-the-way place to get some R and R. But word got out, and the crowds went out to where He was. When He saw them, do you know how Jesus responded? Matthew says in verse 14 that "He had compassion on them

and healed their sick.” Jesus was looking for a “time out” away from the crowds and all their needs. But He did not turn them away, did He? 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 in the day and the people had not brought food with them, Jesus used a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish and miraculously fed a crowd which numbered 5,000 men, plus women and children.

Afterwards, it says in verse 22, Jesus sent the disciples away. He insisted that they get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side of the lake. I’m not sure it ever occurred to the disciples to ask how Jesus was going to get there. If it did occur to them, the Bible doesn’t say. Why did Jesus send the disciples on ahead? There may be at least three reasons.

First, as it says in verse 23, He wanted to be alone to pray. Prayer was a priority in the life of Jesus, and He intentionally set apart time to pray. Dear friends, if you and I are too busy to pray, then we are too busy. And we need to eliminate from our lives what keeps us from communing with the Lord in prayer.

Second, as we have already seen, Jesus wanted to spend some “down” time with His disciples away from the clamor of the crowds. These times of retreat and rest were part of the rhythm of Jesus’ life and ministry. The model of Jesus’ life makes it clear that we cannot always be “doing” if we want to be faithful and fruitful servants of God. We must also take time for “being” – to be renewed and refreshed and recharged and reshaped in the presence of the Lord.

Third, Jesus sent the disciples away and went off by Himself, to put down what D. A. Carson describes as a “messianic uproar.” Matthew doesn’t mention it, but John 6:15 says that after the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd was so keyed up, so pumped up, so full of excitement and enthusiasm that they wanted to take Jesus by force then and there and make Him king. To make sure the disciples didn’t get caught up in the fervor, Jesus sent them away, and then He Himself got away from the crowd to be alone with the Father.

So, there the disciples of Jesus were – out in the middle of the lake (the Sea of Galilee) – when a whopper of a storm came up. It was not just a minor squall. Matthew says that the boat was tormented by the waves. It was buffeted and rocked with whipping winds and powerful waves. The water was rough, the waves were high, the winds were strong. Not the ideal time, from a human perspective, to be out in the middle of the lake. For hours they struggled against the storm, putting 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? Ever find yourself feeling overwhelmed by the storm you’re facing?

Life is full of storms – and I’m not talking about the weather here! There have been some storms in my life lately. (Mary Sue talked about some of those storms this

morning.) What kinds of storms have you had to weather in your life? When storms come into your life, no matter what form they take, when the winds of trouble blow on you or those you love, when the rains of hardship and heartache seem to pound on you relentlessly, when the waves of pain and suffering and grief and loss and economic uncertainty threaten to throw you overboard and capsize your faith, what do you do? Where do you turn?

It was the fourth watch of the night when Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water in the midst of the storm. The fourth watch was the period between 3 A.M. and 6 A.M. So it was sometime around 3 A.M. – or a bit later – when Jesus approached the boat. Do you remember all the talk about those political ads during the primary season, commercials which asked the question: “Who do you want to be there (in the White House) to answer the phone when there is a crisis at 3 A.M.?” The disciples of Jesus were having their own 3 A.M. crisis. And it was Jesus who came to the rescue.

Who are you going to call if you have a crisis at 3 A.M.? Whose help do you most need when you’re facing a storm of some kind? I know who I’m going to call on.

Maybe you’ve come to church today seeking refuge from some kind of storm that is raging in your life. It may be the death of someone you thought would always be there, or the painful awareness of how fragile and fleeting life is. Maybe you have a “thorn in the flesh” that just won’t go away. Maybe the storm in your life is a relationship that is strained or broken. Maybe it is the experience of being rejected by someone, or of being let down. Maybe it is nervousness or fear about the economy and what it all means for your job or your retirement. Maybe it is about moving from a place you loved to a place where you don’t know anyone. Maybe it is a particular sin that has you in its grip. Maybe it is a different kind of storm. Whatever it is, I want you to know that Jesus is more than able to see us through whatever storms may come our way in life. In Jesus, we have a Savior and Lord who has promised never to leave us or forsake us, but always to be present with us. In every circumstance and storm. In all kinds of weather. And you can trust Jesus to keep His promises.

Warren Wiersbe says there are two kinds of storms that God brings or allows to come into our lives. He says there are storms of *correction*, when God disciplines or corrects us when we have strayed from His ways. And there are storms of *perfection*, when God uses the storms of life to make us stronger in our faith, to help us grow to become more like Christ. The Old Testament prophet Jonah was in a storm because he had disobeyed God. He was running away from God, and needed to be corrected. God used the storm to teach Jonah a powerful lesson – that you cannot run away from God – and to bring him to repentance. The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, found themselves in a storm in spite of their obedience to the Master. They did what Jesus told them to do, and still ended up in a storm. I suspect there is a lesson for us in that. Obedience to God and suffering or storms are not mutually exclusive. Both may be God’s plan for our lives. Faithfulness to God and hardships may both be a part of God’s will. Jesus wanted to use the storm out on the lake to teach His disciples – and us – about who He really is and where to turn for help in the midst of the storm.

The disciples were out there, fighting for their lives, when Jesus came to them, walking on the water. I read that Mark Twain, the great American writer, made a visit to the Holy Land with his wife. They were staying in Tiberius on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was a moonlit night and the weather was perfect, which gave Twain the romantic idea of taking his wife for a boat ride on the lake. They walked down to the pier, and Twain asked a man sitting in a rowboat how much he would charge to give them a boat ride. Twain was dressed in his trademark white suit, white shoes and white Texas hat. The man in the boat looked him over and, taking him to be a wealthy rancher from America, said: “Well, I guess about \$25.” Keep in mind that \$25 back then would be something like \$1,000 today. Mark Twain thanked the man and, as he turned away with his wife on his arm, he said: “Now I know why Jesus walked!”

I don't think that is why Jesus did it. At one level, I think we can say Jesus walked on the water because He could! Because He was and is the Son of God. Because, as He demonstrated to the disciples on another occasion when they got caught in a storm on the lake and Jesus was with them, sound asleep when their lives (they thought) were in jeopardy, “even the wind and the waves obey Him” (Mark 4:41). He came out to the disciples to teach them that the storms we encounter in life cannot keep Him from us. And even the storms, even those difficult experiences we dread in life, can bring us closer to the Lord Jesus and cause us to grow in faith and understanding.

The disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first. They thought it was a ghost. And their reaction was one of terror. They were seized with fear. But then Jesus spoke to them, and His words cut through all their fear and anxiety. “Take courage,” He said. “It is I. Don't be afraid” (verse 27).

Did you know that the most often-repeated command in the whole Bible is the one that says: “Fear not. Don't be afraid.” It occurs more times than any other command – more than “repent,” more than “love God,” more than “love one another.” This doesn't mean it is more important than these others. When Jesus gave the Great Commandment, He made it clear what is most important. But this command to not fear is so prevalent in the Bible because of the prevalence of our propensity to fear. And if it is not overcome, fear will keep us from trusting and obeying God.

“You don't have to be afraid,” Jesus said to the disciples in the boat. “I am here. I am with you.” And He says the same thing to you and me. Are you going through a stormy time in your life right now? The Lord Jesus is with you. And He will walk through the storm with you. When the storm begins to overwhelm you, do not forget that Jesus will bring you safely through it.

When Peter heard the voice of Jesus, he wanted some reassurance. So, impulsively, he made a bold request. He said: “Lord, if it's you – if it's really you – tell me to come to you on the water. Let me walk on the water just like you” (verse 29).

And what did Jesus say? “All right. Come on” (verse 29).

Peter was quite a guy. We remember him for his dramatic failures in denying the Lord three times on the night before Jesus went to the cross to die for us. We remember him for his impulsive nature, often speaking before thinking. But we also remember him for his bold and clear confession when Jesus asked the disciples: “Who do you say I am?” Peter stepped right up to the plate and said: “You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16). We remember Peter, too, for his leadership in the church following the resurrection and ascension of Christ, for his bold preaching on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and for the letters he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which are part of the Bible.

Here in Matthew 14, we see Peter as a man of remarkable faith. It took faith to get Peter out of the boat. Warren Wiersbe points out that anybody can sit in a boat and watch. It takes a person of real faith and courage to get out of the boat and walk on water. Peter demonstrated that kind of faith, and the Bible says that “he walked on the water and came toward Jesus” (verse 29). Can you imagine that? Can you imagine walking on water the way Peter did? The way Jesus did? Doesn’t it boggle your mind?

Peter’s faith in Jesus was strong enough to get him out of the boat. It was strong enough to enable him to walk on the water toward Jesus. But it wasn’t strong enough to withstand the storm. Peter actually walked on the water. But then a number of things happened.

First, his focus shifted from Jesus to the storm itself. His trouble began when he saw the wind (verse 30). As long as his eyes were fixed on Jesus, Peter was just fine. It was when he began to focus on the storm instead that trouble came.

Second, when he shifted his attention from Jesus to the storm, his faith gave way to fear and panic. The fear of going under gripped his heart. Fear can suck the life out of faith. If we focus all our attention and all our energy on our fears, our faith will wither up and die. But faith – faith in the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, faith in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, faith in the presence and grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who is God with us today and God at work in the world to accomplish His redemptive purposes, a faith which holds on to the truth that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God that we know in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39) – this kind of faith trumps fear.

Third, in his fear, Peter began to sink, and then he did the only reasonable thing to do: He cried out to Jesus for help (verse 30). That is always the right thing to do, no matter what kind of storm you are facing. Cry out to the Lord Jesus for help. He is bigger and more powerful than any storm you will ever encounter.

We are living in stormy days. Where is your faith today? If your faith is in the U. S. economy or Wall Street, if your faith is in your investments or the power of money, if your faith is in the wisdom and expertise of any political leader(s) or economic experts, if your faith is in education, technology or the innate abilities of man to solve the problems of the world, if your faith is in any of these things – if it is in anything or anyone but the

one true God who came to us and redeemed us from our sin by the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross – your faith will eventually fail. It will prove to be like the man Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:26-27) who built his house – his life – on a foundation of sand. On the outside it may have looked really good. But when the storms came, the house could not withstand their force. And the house came crashing down. That is a description of what happens to a life built on the wrong foundation, a life not built on the foundation of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to God’s Word.

To have a faith that endures in troubled times, your faith has to have the right object. Peter’s faith was in Jesus. The disciples in the boat didn’t yet have a full understanding, but their response to what they saw was one of worship. They said: “Truly you are the Son of God” (verse 33). Is your faith in the Son of God today? Do you have a living faith in Him, not just a head knowledge but a faith that saturates every area of your life and everything you do? There is only one worthy object of our faith, and that is the God who has revealed Himself to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And to have a faith that endures in troubled times, your faith has to be expressed in obedience. In action. That is how Peter showed his faith. He got out of the boat. In response to the invitation of Jesus, he took a risk. And in the power of the Lord Jesus, he did something he never imagined he could do. He walked on water.

I don’t know what “impossible” thing God may want you to do. But there are a couple of things I know: I know that nothing God wants you to do is impossible, because nothing is impossible with God. And I know, as John Ortberg so beautifully put it, “If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat.” You’ll never “walk on water” if you don’t get out of whatever boat you’re stuck in. It may be a boat of doubt or unbelief, a boat of discouragement or disappointment, a boat of pessimism or pride, a boat of sadness or loss.

If you are in some kind of boat today that is keeping you from God’s best in your life...

If you are going through a storm of some kind and you desperately need God’s help...

If you have been trying to make it through life on your own merits, and you’ve come to the realization that it just doesn’t work...

If your faith is faltering and you want to rekindle its flame...

If you want to open your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ in honest repentance and genuine faith...

If you want to publicly recommit your life to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life...

If you would just like someone to pray with you or to pray for you...

I invite you to come down to the front as we sing our closing hymn, and I’m going to ask some of our elders and ministry leaders to come forward and be here to talk or pray with you.

Like Peter, I invite you to step out in faith this morning.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.