

Matthew 14:22-33
Get into the Boat
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There is an old story passed around in the church about a minister of a church near a large lake who decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on an island in the middle of the large lake. He told his session that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so as to grow closer to God. For six months, he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. But then one day, as two members of his congregation were standing near the shore soaking up some sunshine, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them. It was the minister, walking on water, and coming toward shore. After he passed by the two members and continued on to the church, one of the elders turned to the other and said, "All these months in prayer and the minister is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry costs only 25 cents!"

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to defy the laws of physics and gravity and actually walk upon the water? I wonder if Peter stuck his toe in the water to test the temperature before getting out of the boat? If you've ever wondered what pastors do while they're sitting in their study each day, this is it!

As I sat with this text this week, a few things occurred to me, and I want to give them to you at the very beginning and then spend a little time unpacking them. First is a promise, the other two, guidance. If you choose to take up following Jesus with your life, which is the very best thing you can do, you will still, inevitably, encounter challenges along the way. But the promise that accompanies this call is that when you follow Jesus into difficulty, he will always be with you.

Alongside that promise are two pieces of guidance: when you face challenges, what this story that we just read tells us is that we must keep our eyes on him, and when we face difficulty, we can ask Jesus for help. There it is, pretty simple, right? Let's unpack these a little more.

When we meet Jesus in Matthew's gospel, he has already gained a lot of popularity for his teaching and healing; he had a magnetic personality and power about him. Before we encounter him today, Jesus was pressed in upon by many people whom he healed and taught. But when the sun began to set and his disciples said, "Jesus, we should send everyone home for supper, it's getting late," Jesus said, "They need not go home, you give them something to eat."

And they did it. Jesus, using his divine power, works through his disciples to feed 5,000 people. Just imagine what it would be like to have your eyes opened and see a miracle like this take place and then look to the one who made it happen. It would have been amazing. The disciples would have thought, "Let's keep this train rolling."

But Jesus doesn't do this. When we pick up our text today, Jesus makes his friends get into a boat and shove off onto the Sea of Galilee, while he dismissed the crowds around him and went up on the mountain to pray. Now the Sea of Galilee is 8 miles wide east and west, and 11 miles north and south. Eight miles is a long way to go without a motor.

As the sun sets, the temperature changes and the wind begins to flow down off the mountains and gust upon the sea. And because of the sharp elevation change and the size of the lake, this can be a violent body of water during a storm. So now the sun has set, and the disciples are a long way from shore on the lake, and they are in the middle of a violent storm. And here's where we see Jesus' promise to us comes.

The disciples were far from where they want to be, they were being beaten and battered about by their situation, and their circumstances were against them. Matthew puts it this way: **The boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.** Have you ever felt like this? Far from where you want to be, in the midst of circumstances that feel as though they're pressing down on you, and you were being knocked around from all sides?

Now, sometimes, we end up in these places because of our own doing. But if you look at this story, the very first line tells us something important. It's that Jesus made them get in the boat. We don't always find ourselves in challenging circumstances because of what we do; **sometimes following Jesus will lead you into a storm.** The disciples were here not because they were disobedient, but precisely because they followed Jesus' command. We cannot have the wrong expectations about what discipleship will entail.

We can see how this can be the case if we simply look at some of the things Jesus commands us to do. Love your neighbor: you can see how this is a nice sentiment, but in reality, this has the potential to be very challenging.

This summer, I was with my younger brother at his home in Minneapolis. And I was out near the alley by his garage when I noticed that there was a tree limb from a tree growing in the neighbor's yard that was growing into and already damaging my brother's garage. Now, at the time, the neighbors, who were a collection of different people living in a sort of cooperative house, were having a little dinner party and one of the residents was out in the back yard. I politely asked him, "Hey, do you live here?" "Yep." "Did you notice that your tree is growing into my brother's garage and causing damage?" And his response, "So, what do you want me to do about it?" Now I was trying to be polite and his response caught me off guard. Then he said, "Well, if it's such a problem for you, you can trim the tree at your own expense." And it was at this very moment when I realized, this guy, unbeknownst to him, is teaching me a lesson about just how difficult it is sometimes to love the people we are randomly placed with... 'cause I wanted to punch his lights out.

Jesus told us to tell the truth. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Take care of the poor. Put the needs of others before your own. If you do these things

that Jesus taught, it will be difficult, right? These commands don't lead us away from difficulty, but rather right into the middle of it.

Now, this isn't the end of the story of this sermon. If it were, I wouldn't blame you if you walked out. But the promise that goes along with this is that Jesus will always be with you. Look at the text for the promise. **And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.** At about 3am, Jesus comes to them; in other words, in the smallest, most remote of moments, Jesus comes to you. If we follow Jesus into the difficult places, he promises that he will come to us on the waves! That is the promise for you.

Then he says to them, **Take heart.** You may be buffeted on every side, you may be in a situation that feels so overwhelming you don't know where to turn. Jesus comes to you and says take heart, don't fear, be courageous. **It is I.**

Now before I go any further, I want to point this out. I discovered it this week and thought it was so powerful. In this passage, there are 11 verses. In Greek, there are 90 words in the first half, and 90 words in the second half and right in the middle of this passage, intentionally, there are two words *I am, ego eimi*. Greek writers did this sometimes to make a point. This is an allusion to the divine name, the one Moses receives in Exodus from the burning bush, when he asks, "Who should I tell the people is sending me?" and the bush says, "I am." God himself sends him, and God alone is at the middle of this passage, and God alone is at the middle of the storm you are in. *Ego eimi* is right there with you, I am is with you ready to carry you in the storm.

That's the promise: God is with you in the storms of your life. Here are the instructions Jesus gives the disciples in this moment. Now you would think that Jesus, who is claiming his divine identity as God in this moment, would sweep them up or make the storm stop, saving them from calamity. We would think that that would be the way Jesus would respond, but he doesn't. In the middle of the storm in which the only thing separating the disciples from certain calamity and death is a thin plank of wood, Jesus, instead of making it easier, makes it harder.

In the middle of this storm in which Jesus is coming to them on the water, do you see how Peter responds? He tells Jesus to instruct him to do the hard thing. **Command me to come to you on the water.** But then when Peter stepped out of the boat and began to walk to Jesus on the water, he looked around at the wind and the waves around him and began to sink. Peter is such a zealous and passionate follower of Jesus that he is prepared in a difficult situation to follow Jesus, even if it means that his situation gets even more difficult. Peter is doing the impossible, he's doing the thing only God can do: he is walking on the water.

But as he approaches Jesus, his eyes begin to look down and to the side and he begins to sink. And here is where we get the two pieces of guidance, briefly.

Keep your eyes on Jesus. Peter's success is paired closely with his failure. Peter gets out of the boat. Peter does the thing that seems impossible, because he trusts in the trustworthiness of Jesus. But then, almost immediately, he also begins to doubt, and his feet begin to sink down. And the only difference between where he is when he is on top of the water and where he is when he begins to sink is where his eyes are fixed. When his eyes are fixed on Jesus, Peter remains atop the waves. But as soon as he begins to doubt and his eyes look to the left and right, thinking *what am I doing, this is nuts, I shouldn't be here*, then he begins to sink.

I think what happened to Peter in this climactic moment is what so many of us do every day, and maybe you're doing it right now: he began to daydream. His mind began to wander.

A study was conducted a few years ago that looked at what we're thinking about when we're not thinking about anything. And I'll spare you the details, but what the study found is that the human mind, when it is not fixed on anything in particular, is prone to anxiety. What we think about when we're not thinking of anything are the things that cause us to worry, feel anxious, dread. I think this is what's happening to Peter.

Keeping our eyes on Jesus means we take time every day to simply let our minds relax into the promise that God loves you, that Jesus died for you, that he isn't angry with you, and isn't out to get you. I want to challenge you to do that this week. Spend time meditating on those truths, and what you will find is that anxieties will be swept up in the overwhelming goodness of his promises to you. Will you do that with me?

The second bit of guidance: When the waves are crashing around you, or when you just feel like you're alone in facing something, do what Peter does: **ask Jesus for help**. You'll notice Peter doesn't use a fancy, carefully worded prayer, he does it in the most basic and unsophisticated of terms. He says: Lord save me.

The prayer of Peter is simply the prayer of a heart that is in over its head and doesn't know what to do, other than just to cry out "save me." I love how unpretentious this is. Peter doesn't lay out his spiritual resume to make an argument why he's deserving of the help. He doesn't ask Jesus to help him do it on his own. Peter simply says, Jesus save me. Anne Lamott has a wonderful quote from a book that I recommend to all of you called *Traveling Mercies* in which she says that you can boil all prayer down to three simple words: help, thanks, wow. Peter simply says "help" when he's in over his head. And you can, too.

If you will keep your eyes on Jesus, and ask him for his help when you are facing a difficulty, look at the text and see how Jesus responds. **Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him.**