

Matthew 14-22-33
Fourth Watch
Rev Jonathan P. Cornell
3-29-20

Well we are now in our third week of Virtual Reality, social distancing, and self-quarantining, how is everybody doing? We have virtual church, virtual work, virtual get-togethers with friends and family—this week our kids learned to draw with Mo Willems, the Disney cartoonists, had a Zoom scavenger hunt, and countless other really great ideas on how to be connected with others in creative wonderful ways.

If only there could be virtual housework, housework that only exists on a screen in front of you, and when you close your laptop it all just goes away. Seriously though, we are getting pretty good at using the tools of technology at our disposal to stay connected with one another, and those of you who work remotely are like: “Yeah, welcome to my world, I do this every single day. And I only have to dress from the waist up.”

One of the downsides to the ubiquity of connectivity is that media and information never stops—there is always more. More content, more commentary, more to consume, more, more, more. Hopefully you are also using this time to simplify and take time to appreciate things that are otherwise easy to overlook or take for granted. This is also a time to turn over stones.

Early this week I was awake around 3am, unable to sleep, I found myself thinking about gardening. So, Wednesday the kids and I headed to Builders Mart, picked up lumber, and that afternoon we spent cutting 2x10s and assembling frames, collecting mulch for hügelkultur (a word I just learned this week), I even ventured out with the kids to the Frank Farm to collect horse manure.

All because of an idea that came to me in the 4th watch of the night.

I don't know about you, but I have become well acquainted with the 4th watch. By way of introduction, in the first century Jewish society had adopted the Roman practice of dividing the nighttime into 4 watches, and 3-6am, the dimness of predawn light, was the 4th watch. For me, it's actually the time of the day when more ideas come to me, my mind is open and uncluttered with lists of the day. I actually really cherish those hours alone, before the world wakes up. It feels like I have more space to myself.

This morning we are going to look at an encounter Jesus' disciples had in the fourth watch of the night...

Wherever you are tuning in today I want to invite you to stand with me for the reading of God's word to us. Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way^[a] from the land,^[b] beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night^[c] he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But

when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

²⁸ And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind,^[d] he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

As a result of following Jesus, the disciples find themselves in a situation that is beyond their control. They were far from where they want to be, and were being beaten and battered about by their situation, and their circumstances are against them.

Now sometimes we end up in places like these because of our own doing. The decisions we make have the potential to turn our circumstance against us. But if you look at this story the very first line tells us something important, it says 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.

So let’s look at where *here* is. Matthew’s gospel will give us three statements describing the circumstance and then it will give us Jesus’ three part response to the situation. For the next few moments I just want to unpack these individually in some detail.

The first descriptor tells us that they are **a long way from the land.** The Sea of Galilee is actually a very large lake. A few years ago I had a chance to visit the Holy Land, and actually swam in it a few times during our time there—one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been. But the Sea itself is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide at its widest point. This was a long way for the disciples to be from shore without a motor, and it is now the middle of the night. They’re on the lake, late at night, with no other boats around, you can imagine it feeling very isolated.

I wonder if anyone has ever been in this situation, alone, on a lake, long past dark. I have not been in this situation exactly, but a similar experience. Amy and I had just begun in our first call to the small country church in southern Illinois and one night around 9 I went for a run. It was a cloud covered, moonless night and there was not a single street lamp on our country road. I’m not exaggerating when I say that I couldn’t see the hand in front of my face. And when you’re unable to see the sound of wind and animal movement gives you the overwhelming feeling of how small and vulnerable you are in this big world. I turned around after about a half mile and sprinted home to safety.

Next it says that **they were beaten by the waves.** The vessel they were in, their home on the water was under attack by the environment around them. Even though the disciples are on the lake at Jesus’ will and command, they are not spared from adversity. Commentator Matthew Henry says this: *“It is no new thing for Christ’s disciples to meet with storms in the way of their duty.”*

Finally, **the wind was against it**. Not only are the waves beating against the bow of the ship, but the wind is pushing the disciples further and further from where they want to be. Do you know this feeling? Finding yourself in a circumstance where you are fully aware of the challenge you are facing, and yet you continue to be pushed further and further from where you want to be?

If we are following Jesus it will inevitably lead us, at times, into places that are far from where we want to be.

Now fortunately for you this isn't the end of the story of this sermon. If it were, I wouldn't blame you if you walked out or turned it off. 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[c] he came to them, walking on the sea.**

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 the elders 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 he is still as stingy as ever. The ferry only costs 25 cents!

At about 3am, in the fourth watch of the night Jesus comes to them on the water. ***In other words, in the smallest, most remote of moments, when you feel as isolated as you possibly could be and without a place to turn, Jesus comes to you.*** The promise for you today from this passage is that if you will follow Jesus into the difficult places, he promises that he will come to you on the waves!

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 this 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 ***ego eimi, I am***. 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, we call this a Theophany—a moment where God divinely reveals himself to humans in real time. 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 Christ is at the middle of the storm you that we are in. *Ego eimi*, is right here with us, 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 few thin planks 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 he did what so many of us do every day, and maybe you're doing it right now, he began to be distracted. Peter turned on cable news or picked up the New York Times, and immediately his mind was filled with all manner of message telling him about the gravity of his situation. And immediately Peter began to think, maybe it is an impossible situation that I'm in, and maybe Jesus isn't leading me even on the waves.

The other thing that Peter may have been doing, and as this message grows in length maybe you are doing this very thing, Peter began to daydream.

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 in closing. 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.**

If we are following Jesus we will invariably Far from safety
Isolated

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!

Today we read about followers of Jesus who find themselves in a circumstance

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!

I have become quite familiar with the 4th watch, I know it well. It's the time of the night when sleeplessness

Intro – The places Jesus sends us/places us he promises that he will give us the

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 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 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 who 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 seen 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. Where 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. 8 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 come.

The disciples were far from where they want to be, they were being beaten and battered about by their situation, and their circumstances are against them. Matthew puts it this way: **the boat by this time was a long way[a] from the land,[b] 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 ally 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[c] 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.***

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