

Don't Be Afraid

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Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. [23] And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, [24] but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. [25] And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. [26] But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. [27] But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

[28] 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, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. [30] But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" [31] Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" [32] 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."

WHY ARE WE AFRAID?

Don't be afraid. That's easy advice to give to someone else. When someone else is in the middle of a storm, I give this spiritual counsel all the time.

Don't be afraid. No storm is too big for God. God is with you.

That's all true of course. But, the question I can't answer is why can't I take my own advice?

When the storm comes my way, when my little lifeboat that is being swamped, when I am overwhelmed by the problems of life, fear is my first response. I am afraid, and I begin to have doubts. Like Peter I concentrate on the wind and the waves instead of the Savior.

And I begin to sink under the weight of my own doubts. Jesus' words to Peter ring in my own ears, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

How would you answer that question? Why did Peter doubt? And why do we doubt? Why are we so afraid? I think that this is the key question in this passage, and we need to answer it thoughtfully.

JUST SAY NO TO FEAR?

Some people say that we are afraid and have doubts because we just don't have enough faith. We need to believe more and be willing to take chances for the kingdom. If you have doubts and fears, just believe harder.

And indeed that seems to be suggested by this passage. Jesus said that the reason Peter, the Rock was sinking like a rock was because he was a person of little faith. He needed to believe instead of doubt.

But, is that possible? Can we eliminate fear by pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps of faith? Can we really walk on water if we only believe?

If faith is related to trying harder and taking chances, Peter was a person of great faith. After all, it was the impetuous Peter who trusted Jesus enough to get out of the boat in the middle of the storm.

How many of us are willing to do that?

I don't know about you, but I do just the opposite. When the storm comes I batten down the hatches. When the storm comes I make sure that I have enough gasoline for my generator and an ample supply of canned food in my closet. I "hunker down" when the storm comes.

But, Peter didn't do that. Peter didn't "hunker down" in the storm. Peter stood up and walked on the water.

And yet even that kind of faith was not enough to conquer the storm. Even bold Peter began to sink, and not too long from now in a different kind of storm bold Peter will be so afraid that he will deny even knowing Jesus not once but three times.

Fear takes away faith. Fear makes us say things and do things that we don't want to do. Even the bravest among us are often controlled by fear. And yet throughout the Bible we hear the same command, "Don't be afraid."

These are usually the first words out of an angel's mouths. Abraham, Moses, Mary, Joseph, shepherds tending their flocks, Paul sitting in a jail cell, the women looking for Christ's body at Easter and in today's lesson disciples rowing a boat in the strong wind all hear these words.

Don't be afraid. In all, these words occur almost 100 times in the scriptures. But, like so many commands in the Bible it is easier said than done.

DEEP AND SUDDEN FEAR

We cannot escape fear by trying harder. The disciples had struggled against the storm all night, but to no avail. The wind was against them. Jesus was not with them. He was on the mountain top praying while they were paddling.

It was the fourth watch of the night, and the storm had not abated in the least. And so in this dark, lonely and deserted place, the disciples fearfully faced their own mortality.

If you've ever known the fury of the storm, if you've ever known a night so dark that you thought you would never see the light of day, if you've every known what it's like to always have the wind against you, then you understand what the disciples were facing.

It is a fear as deep and wide as the ocean itself. It is a fear of being overwhelmed by forces beyond our control.

Storms can strike suddenly on the Sea of Galilee. The cool winds from the mountains collide with the warm air of the water creating an unexpected and overwhelming storm.

And storms can strike suddenly in our life as well. One day things are going so well, and the next day we're just trying to keep our heads above water. One day we know that God is with us, and then the darkness comes, and it seems like were paddling on our own.

None of us have enough faith or strength to row against the prevailing wind and the storm that comes at night. There is good reason to be afraid of the storm that comes. In recent years we have seen very graphically that the forces of nature can bring a city to its knees and the unexpected problems of life can bring all of us to the brink of absolute terror.

THE MIRACLE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

And that's precisely when Jesus came to his disciples. In the darkness of an overwhelming storm, Jesus came to his disciples. The Scripture tells us that he walked on the water.

This is reminiscent of how God had miraculously saved his people in the past, parting the waters of the Red Sea in order to allow his people to escape the Egyptian army. Now Jesus walked on the deep stormy waters as a sign that in Him God was present.

But, the disciples did not take it as a sign of hope. In fact their reaction was quite the opposite. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water they cried out in fear. They thought he might be some kind of ghost.

And it was then that Jesus sought to comfort them by saying, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid."

The real miracle in this story is not that Jesus can walk on water. The real miracle is that Jesus is present with them in the storm. Jesus can calm their fears and give them hope despite the desperate circumstances.

The disciples thought that they were going to die, but it is the storm that dies. Jesus once again proves that he is Lord of the wind and waves. Jesus once again proves that in an insecure world, they can feel secure in his power and presence.

SHIPS ARE MADE FOR SAILING

Don't misunderstand. Jesus isn't saying that they will never face a storm again, far from it. Ships are made for sailing the deep and sometimes stormy waters.

And if we take this boatload of disciples to be a prototype of the church, then this means that sometimes Jesus will suddenly and unexpectedly call us to sail on dangerous waters as well.

Do you remember how the gospel of Matthew ends? It ends with the Great Commission. Jesus tells his disciples that it is their job to go to the whole world and make disciples.

In order to follow Jesus, sometimes our boat has to leave the safety of port in order to cross over to the other side. Sometimes the church is called to sail on rough and dangerous waters. Sometimes God's disciples must challenge the wind and the waves.

There is good reason to fear such a voyage. There are some in the world who do not want to hear the message. There are some in the world who will be threatened by what we have to say. Resistance to the gospel will always be present for those who dare to take that message to the "other side."

But, Jesus reminded his disciples and he reminds us as well of the second half of the Great Commission. You do not travel alone. I am with you always ... even until the end of the world. (See Matthew 28:19-20)

NO SMOOTH SAILING

I'm not sure it's possible to be totally without fear as we cross over to the other side. Fear is a natural reaction to storms of life. When all is dark, and we feel all alone we will be afraid. The question is this, how will we handle that fear? What will we do with our fear?

Will the threat of a storm paralyze us completely? Will fear keep us from even leaving port? Will we be so afraid that we never attempt anything for the kingdom?

Many people live in a self made prison because they are so afraid of what might happen. And they have even turned the message of Christianity into something that promises safety first, last and always.

Just follow Jesus and your life will be smooth sailing. Your gray skies will turn blue. Jesus wants you to succeed. Become a Christian and all your problems will be solved.

I don't think so. The Bible says something quite different. Follow Jesus and your problems are just beginning. If you climb into the boat with the disciples of Jesus, there will be rough waters ahead.

Jesus is the one who calls us to love and pray for our enemies. Jesus is the one who calls us to take up a cross and follow him. That doesn't sound like smooth sailing to me.

Jesus tells us, "Now is the time to cross over to the other side. Now is the time to set sail with my disciples and go where I lead. This will not be a cruise to a pleasant tropical isle. This will be a battle with demons from without and within."

Sometimes God calls us "softly and tenderly" with that still, small voice. But, more often than not I think that Jesus shouts to us over the noise of the storm. The storms of life prepare us for salvation. The storms of life remind us that nothing in life is secure except for the promise of salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Trusting in Jesus allows us to face the storm without fear. Trusting in Jesus allows us to embrace both the joys and struggles of life.

GET OUT OF THE BOAT!

And in some cases, as it happened with Peter the voice of Jesus may even allow us to get out of the boat in the middle of the storm and walk in a way that we thought was impossible.

Peter did get out of the boat. In that regard Peter was an example of what we should do. He wanted to be like Jesus more than anything else.

But, as is usually the case Peter is also an example of what we shouldn't do as well. Peter thinks that he sees Jesus in the storm. He steps out of the boat in faith, walks a few feet and then he looks around.

The wind is howling. The whitecaps are breaking at his feet. The other disciples are shouting for him to turn around and come back. He begins to have doubts, and he starts to sink.

Peter once again turns his attention toward Jesus. He cries, "Lord, save me." And the Lord does just that, but Jesus also scolds him. Your faith is so small. Why did you doubt?

Did Peter doubt Jesus? Not really. He turns to Jesus immediately when he begins to sink. Peter doubted himself.

Peter didn't believe that an ordinary person like himself could walk on water. Peter didn't believe that an ordinary person like himself could be called to do something so extraordinary.

THE SMALLEST HERO

I watched the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games this past week. The giant center from the NBA carried the Chinese flag. But, he was accompanied by a very small nine year old boy who waved a miniature Chinese flag and Olympic flag with gusto.

It was amusing to watch the gentle giant as he tried not to step on the little fellow and at the same time keep his country's flag unfurled in the stiff wind.

The announcers told us that the little boy earned this privilege because he had done something heroic earlier that year. The great earthquake had toppled his school, and twenty of his thirty classmates were killed.

Fortunately, this little boy managed to survive and free himself from the rubble. But, he didn't stay where it was safe. He went back into the rubble and managed to save two of his classmates. When asked about his heroic actions he said, "I was the hall monitor. It was my responsibility to help my classmates."

In a country that is still grieving the loss of so many young people, the actions of this one survivor became a symbol of hope and courage.

The Chinese government went all out to make the opening ceremonies something to remember. It was filled with fireworks and special effects costing millions of dollars.

But, as a former gold medalist was hoisted to the sky and appeared to run around the top of the stadium before lighting a gigantic torch, the cameras kept coming back to that tiny little nine year old boy. The cameramen seemed to know what most of us were thinking. We were thinking how one so young and small could somehow find the courage to get out of the boat when the storm was raging and reach out to those who needed to be saved.

Who could have believed that in a stadium filled with the strongest athletes, the most powerful leaders and the most spectacular special effects ever seen that the most memorable person in the crowd was one little nine year old boy? His actions had become a symbol of hope for the largest nation on earth, and his presence captivated the imagination of the world.

SMALL FAITH, GREAT SALVATION

When storms come into our life, people often ask, "Where is God? Why doesn't God save us? If God can control the wind and the waves why doesn't He make it stop?"

We know that one day the wind and the waves will be calmed forever. We know that one day a kingdom will come in which there will be no more suffering or pain. But, until that glorious day when we make it to the other side of the deep, the storms will rage. We will struggle to have faith.

And just when we think that our little lifeboat is bound to be swamped, Jesus comes to us with a sign of hope. We are reminded once again that we never row alone. Jesus will not allow hope to be drowned by the storms of life.

Jesus comes to us in a surprising way. Jesus calls a frightened little disciple to walk on water. And whole boatloads of people are reminded of the power of a God who saves.

I suspect most of us are like Peter. We are a mixture of faith and doubt. We want to step out on faith, but we often find our hopes sinking in the midst of the storm. We doubt that God can call a person like us to do great things for the kingdom.

But, today's lesson teaches us that even a small amount of faith can be used by God to do great things. The Lord of the wind and the waves reaches out to save us as the storm rages. But, we doubt that such a mighty God could call a person as small and weak as us.

Jesus tells us,

“Don't listen to the sound of the wind and the waves.

Listen to the gentle voice that calls you forward. Look for the Savior who lifts you up.

Have a little faith. Believe that God can use you in mighty ways. Don't be afraid.”

Amen.

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