

Matthew 14:22-33 ²² Immediately he made the disciples get into a 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."

Matthew 14:22-33

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"On Stepping Out In Faith"

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Remember back with me to the very beginning of our scriptures, after God has created all there is, and rests on the 7th day, God then goes to take a stroll in the cool of the evening through the Garden of Eden. By this time, Eve has met a snake, and she and Adam have eaten forbidden fruit, having succumbed to the temptation that they would be like God if they ate. So as God walks, his children hide, as children do when they know they've done wrong. "Where are you?" the Father wants to know. And do you remember the man's response: "I hid, because I was afraid." My purpose this morning is not provide an extensive exegesis on the early chapters of Genesis, but to note that scripture is clear from the start that fear follows sin into the human experience. Fear is a normal human emotion. But theologically, the arguments goes that fear is a normal human emotion because we're all sinners. In his first letter, John reminds us that perfect love casts out fear. John Wesley spoke of striving for perfection in love – a way of living secured for us in the death and resurrection of Christ – on that frees us from sins power, and enables us, by grace, to see beyond the fears that bind us.

Fear can be incapacitating. It can become self-fulfilling, as in the case of one woman so afraid of having a heart attack that her anxiety eventually caused one! It happens.

On the other hand, fear can help us make smart choices, and even remember our priorities, as with the young mom texting on her phone while driving one afternoon. After narrowly missing a collision with another vehicle, she tucks the phone away, and never pulls it out while driving again. The fear of what almost happened is enough to make her wise up.

Our lesson from scripture this morning is about fear, but it's not always immediately obvious, so let's take a closer look. In the verses of Matthew 14 just before today's lesson, Jesus has learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. He's grieving, he's facing rising opposition, and he can't seem to catch a break. He and the disciples set off across the Sea of Galilee for a little R&R, but the crowds follow him. And Jesus, whose compassion does not seem to know the same limits that mine does, feeds them all – 5000 men and their families – with five loaves of bread and two fish.

Our lesson today picks up right where that leaves off. It reads, "Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while Jesus dismissed the crowds. And after

he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.” He makes the disciples get in the boat and leave, either because he’s had enough of life or because he’s had enough of them. That’s not real clear. But what is clear is that Jesus needs some time to himself. He heads up the mountain to pray, and they head back across the sea of Galilee. All night long, Jesus prays. But while Jesus is up there praying, the disciples are out on the lake rowing.

And a storm comes up. The rain is coming down, and the waves are swelling like a hurricane, and water’s pouring over the side, and half the guys are rowing, and half the guys are baling water, and everyone’s freaking out, and along towards morning but before the sunrise, here comes Jesus, walking across the water. Now how does that work? Is he like a Jedi Knight, dodging in and out of the waves, leaping breakers, doing flips in the air? Or is this just a casual stroll? Does he go up one side of swell and down the other, or does he just walk through them? Does he get wet? I don’t know. The scripture says he’s walking. You’ll have to use your imaginations on that.

What I do know is that the more important question isn’t “how?” but “why?” At least, that’s according to Bill Ritter, who writes, “The point is this. Only God can walk on the waves. That’s what the Bible says. In Job. In Isaiah. In Habakkuk. In the Psalms. In Bible-speak, it is God who walks the sea....calms the sea....tames the sea....parts the sea. Why? To show a miracle? To say: "Hey, lookie here, I'm walking on water"?

“Don't be shallow. In ancient times, the sea was the place of evil. The evil monster was there. The Leviathan (Job 41) was there. The enemy of everything right and good was there in the water. In the Bible, the water is the dwelling place of all the forces that are against us. And here (in this story), God, in the person of Jesus Christ, walks on the sea....walks over the sea....strides through....steps on.... making his way across the sea....putting everything that is oppositional to God and oppositional to us literally under his feet. [from “Two if by Sea” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com]

Which is good news for those of us struggling in the storms of life. God comes to us in those moments. God is present to us in the worst times. And Peter is duly impressed. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” says Peter, which is a loaded sentence if ever I saw one.

“Lord, IF it’s you...” If??? Seriously, Peter? Like he hasn’t just healed people, and fed crowds, and shed light on scripture. IF it’s you? Do you all know who else says that to Jesus? The devil – back in Matthew 4 – when tempting Jesus. “IF...you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread. IF...you’re the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. IF...you worship me, I’ll give you everything.” That’s what Satan says. So Peter says, “Lord, if it’s you, prove it.” It’s really an arrogant, presumptuous, devilish, foot-in-the-mouth, Peter kind of thing to say. What a bumbling idiot!

And yet, Jesus says “come on!” Because I think Jesus knows what’s already deep inside Peter – that he has the spirit and the will and the courage to lead the church beyond the resurrection. He’ll be the one who experiences the full power of fear when he denies his Lord. But he’ll also be the one that finally experiences how love overcomes it.

So when we turn back to the lesson, we find Peter’s friends and companions watching with wide-eyed astonishment as he climbs over the side of the boat and begins to inch cautiously across the water. But as Peter heads towards Christ, he starts to notice that wind and the waves, and he begins to sink. “Lord, save me!” he cries. And Jesus does. Yet as Jesus grips Peter’s arm and pulls him back to the surface of the sea, Jesus says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Little faith? Peter’s the only one with the guts to get out of the boat in the first place, for heaven’s sake! The rest of them are just sitting there on their duffs, clutching desperately to the gunwales of the boat. Shouldn’t Jesus be wagging a finger at the other eleven? I mean, really!

“Mike Yaconelli, who used to edit the theological satire magazine called "The Wittenberg Door," wrote an insightful editorial a few years ago. Listen:

“One of the most interesting things about kids’ sporting events is the parents’ reaction to their children. Recently, I attended my daughter’s track meet. On the fourth and final lap of the boys’ mile run, everyone was clumped together except for the two front-runners who were leading the pack by several yards. As the runners came toward the finish line, the crowd began to cheer wildly. Just then, I happened to look about three quarters of a lap back, and there, hopelessly last, was a small, stubby kid. His entire body was trembling, and his bright red face was twisted in the kind of pain that made me wonder if death was near. Suddenly, I was brushed by a frantic parent who was leaping down the bleachers to the rail surrounding the track. It was obviously the boy’s mother. She yelled at the top of her lungs, ‘Johnny, run faster!!!’

“I will never forget the look of hopelessness on Johnny’s face. He had to be thinking, “Run faster? Run faster? What am I? An idiot? What do you think is the problem here, mom – that I just *forgot* to run faster???

 I’m running as fast as I can!”

“Have you ever felt like Johnny? Here you are at worship on Sunday, weary from a week of contending with the storms of life, and what does the sermon say? Run faster! Keep focused! Get out of the boat! Try harder! [4 ¶s posted to Ecunet by Howard Chapman, “Sermonshop 1996 08 11,” #24, 8/7/96; as used in “Stay in the Boat!” by David Leininger, www.Sermons.com.] The ever-present danger in this text is that we will listen to Christ’s words to Peter—“O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?”—and conclude that if Peter had just had enough faith, he wouldn’t have sunk. The lesson is then transferred to our lives, suggesting that if we just had enough faith, if we would just try harder, run faster, stay focused, we wouldn’t sink either. Leaving the hurting parishioner sitting there thinking: what am I? An idiot? What do you think is the problem here, preacher. That I just *forgot* to have faith???

 Of course not.

This line of thought is faulty for two reasons. First, it suggests that faith and problems are mutually exclusive. We all know that’s not true. In fact, sometimes being true to Christ can cause more troubles, not less. And sometimes life is just plain hard. Ask anyone who has ever tried to go on functioning while undergoing chemotherapy. Ask someone struggling with grief and loss in the aftermath of losing one they love to death. Ask anyone working two or three jobs just to pay the bills. They’ll tell you all about storms and waves and rowing into the wind. Sometimes it takes enormous faith simply get through the day. And sometimes, getting through the day is stepping up and stepping out in faith.

Second, that line of thought is faulty because it suggests that we can somehow achieve the power of God. Yes, we do need to stay focused. Yes, we do need to give it our all. Yes, we do need to step out of the boat in faith sometimes. But I got news for you, folks. Even if we were some kind of bionic people with super strength, and amazing courage and incredible mind-power, we still wouldn’t be able to walk on water by ourselves. We cannot achieve the power of God—we have to receive it. When the storms around us are raging, it’s not enough to run faster, try harder, stay focused. We’ve got to reach out our arms and cry out ‘Lord, save me!’ So let me say this again: The main point of this lesson is about Jesus’ willingness to overcome any obstacle to reach out to those in need of him.

In the 1970s, when the gasoline shortage was at its height, any possible proposal for increasing the miles per gallon ratio was taken up with enthusiasm. One popular but not terribly effective scheme was to tuck your own car right up behind any large truck barreling down the highway. The conventional wisdom was that the tremendous draft created by the truck would help drag your own vehicle along thereby reducing the air friction on it and thus increasing your own gas mileage. Following in the wake of the truck took some of the effort to move forward off of your own car.

For many Christians, following in Jesus’ steps has become its own kind of spiritual coasting, riding in the wake of Jesus’ own first-century actions and reactions in order to relieve some of the

responsibility for making our own twenty-first century responses. Friends, to imitate Christ is not to follow in his wake. The Risen Christ who lives today wants to make through us new waves with our faith. Jesus was not simply a good man and an outstanding moral teacher whose past actions we may continue to follow blindly. Jesus is God-made-flesh, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a living presence. If you want to follow Jesus – to walk in his steps – it’s not merely about doing what he did long ago. It’s about opening ourselves to the same indwelling Spirit that God may work in and through our faith now. [adapted from Leonard Sweet, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com.]

In the next few weeks, we’re going to be talking about vision. We’re going to be talking about God’s call on us as a congregation. We’re going to be talking about Saginaw, and how we respond to the needs around us. We live in a city still wrestling with racial segregation embodied in an east/west divide on either side of the river. There’s economic hardship, disparity, homelessness, hunger, and illness. But we also live in a place where two high schools have come together to forge a new way forward. Where investment downtown from Central Michigan University as well as several businesses is offering Saginaw new opportunities for growth and development. There are a lot of challenges, but there’s also a lot of hope. And I have to commend you all, because you’ve made a decision to be part of the solution and not close off and circle the wagons. The storms are real. But so is the Spirit that leads us; that lives within us. The truth is that we need water-walkers and oar-pullers, and the same Spirit fuels us both. We need risk-takers and care-takers. We need those called to step out and step up in faith in a variety of ways. It’s a risk to care. Be we in the boat or out of it, we are battered by the waves of life and time. And be we in the boat or out of it, we all need to hear the two most crucial words in this passage. They belong to Jesus, who says: ‘it’s me,’ which some of dared to suggest could be translated “I am.” (Talk about a loaded statement!) I am right here with you—in the storm, in the fear, in the brokenness, in the loneliness, in the water, in the boat. We can’t leave Jesus back on the beach or back in the dim recesses of history. Since there is nothing that can keep Him from coming to us, we know, as we look to him striding across the churning chaos of the sea, that his water-walking does not defy nature, it reveals the very nature of God. It’s me. I am right here with you. I’m calling you to the next thing. And I’m taking you there. That’s how it works. Thanks be to God. Amen.