

## **“The Courage to Sink”**

Matthew 14:22-33

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How many of you have heard this Bible story before? If you would, raise your hand if you've heard this story of Jesus walking on the water. Everyone has heard this story. I won't ask you to raise your hands, but I will ask you if you've ever heard jokes about this story. You know, those jokes about the rocks just right under the surface of the water. As a minister, I've probably forgotten more stories or jokes about this scripture than you have heard. Interestingly enough, many of these walking on the water stories have to do with golf. You come to a water hazard out on the golf course - there's a great story about Jesus and Arnold Palmer playing golf that I won't tell you right now, but there are lots of jokes about this scripture. It's one way we deal with the scripture because we're a little uncomfortable, if we're honest.

Let me ask you this. Have any of you ever walked on water? I'm not talking about waterskiing or walking on a frozen pond. Have you ever seen anyone walk on water? What do you think Matthew is trying to say to us in this scripture? No matter where you come down, if you accept this literally, "You bet I believe. Jesus walked on the water. Peter walked on the water." If you think Matthew was trying to say something else, Biblical scholars say it could be a pre-historical criticism approach to the scripture or a post-historical approach to the scripture. I read an article one time about William Barclay, that old biblical commentator. He was talking about this scripture. He said "I know good Christians who come down on both sides of this issue. Some accept it literally, some think Matthew was trying to teach us something else." We need to keep that in mind, good Christians, on both sides of this issue. Whatever you believe, try to leave a little room for the belief of others in your faith journey.

I believe as much as anything Matthew is trying to say to us in this scripture, "Jesus is Lord." In those days, the sea was a symbol of evil, chaos, all kinds of sea monsters and other things under the surface of the water. For Jesus to be able to walk on the water and calm the storm meant that he was Lord; the Lord of nature, the Lord of all that is.

In addition to this, I think that Matthew is teaching us these important lessons. The first lesson is this; there will be storms in life. If you've lived very long, you know that. We hear people say, "Just follow Jesus and it will

be smooth sailing.” We know that is not true. All the disciples followed Jesus and it was anything but smooth sailing for them. In Oklahoma, especially, we understand about storms, don't we? Sometimes I watch national meteorologists on the Weather Channel and when they are talking about violent weather in this part of the country, I can tell it's stuff they've learned in a book. They've never lived through a storm the way we have in this part of the country. Because of that, in addition to watchings and warnings and all of that other good stuff, we know the difference in this part of the country between the wind blowing and a tornado.

Do you hear weather reports from other parts of the country? The meteorologists are all upset because the wind is going to be blowing 40 or 50 mph. In Oklahoma, that is just a gentle breeze, isn't it? We know the difference between the wind and a tornado. I see some people who face gentle breezes in their lives and they act as if they have been struck by a tornado. There will be storms in life, but they are not all devastating. They are storms that we can deal with God's help. So, first lesson; there will be storms in life.

The second lesson is this, in the midst of those storms, God comes to us. Did you notice in the scripture when the disciples were most afraid, Jesus came to them. God comes to us in Jesus. God comes to us in the Holy Spirit. Occasionally, and maybe even more than that, most of the time, God comes to us through other people. Think about the people in your life who have taught you about God. Because of them you have experienced God's presence. Think about this also, if it's true that most of the time God comes to us through people, not just in Bible stories, but in stories from our lives today, how can God use YOU to go to someone else? There will be storms and God comes to us through the midst of the storms. Most of the time, God comes to us through other people.

Another lesson from this story is this, and this is kind of complicated theological language, so bear with me. “You gonna sink.” We're all going to sink. I'm not saying sin, I'm saying sink. That's kind of how life is. We sink, we fall, we fail, we disappoint. That's a part of what it is to be human. How many times have you seen a Christian who acted as if they could walk on water and sure enough, they sink. You could probably go to John and Elizabeth Edwards this week and ask them what it means to sink. We all sink. The only thing worse than a Christian who believes that he or she can walk on water is a Christian who believes that no one

can walk on water. We believe in a God who says to us, "With God, all things are possible."

I believe as much as anything Matthew is trying to teach us something important about the living of our faith by examining what happens with Simon Peter. Simon Peter makes several mistakes in this story. He makes a huge mistake when he gets out of the boat. Think about that. The boat is compared by most biblical scholars to the church. It is called the ark of salvation, harkening back to Noah and the ark. Peter gets out of the boat. That's a mistake on his part. We're in this thing together. Peter left the others behind him. That was a mistake.

He tested God. Did you notice? Does that language sound familiar to some of the prayers you pray? "If you're really God, do this . . ." It's reminiscent of when Jesus was tempted by Satan, and Satan said, "If you're really God, do this." That was a mistake Peter made.

Peter also doubted. It's unsettling to me to realize what Peter just attempted and even though he doubted, Jesus called him a man of little faith. If Peter is a man of little faith, what does that say about the rest of us? Peter made a mistake because he let his fear guide him instead of his faith. We read in the scripture that he "noticed the wind." That meant he became distracted; he lost his focus. In our "We Would Be Building" campaign, the main focus is not the goal of \$600,000. The main focus of the campaign is, what is God's Will for us? What does God want us to do? Will we have the faith to do what God wants us to do, or will we be so afraid that we will make some kind of mistake that we do nothing at all?

One of my favorite theologians is a man by the name of John Wooden. Some of you recognize that name. For years he was the basketball coach at UCLA. He is a man of deep faith. We can learn an important lesson from Wooden. He coached for several years without ever winning a championship. He evaluated everything they were doing in the program and decided this, his players were afraid to make a turnover. He had taught them the importance of fundamentals—so much so that they were afraid to make a mistake. He learned that unless his team was making some mistakes, some turnovers, they weren't loose enough to play to win.

One time Suzanne and I were asked to serve as sponsors at one of those high school graduation night activities for graduating seniors. There were several games to be played, and interestingly enough, I was asked to be the dealer at a Blackjack table. The kids all had play money.

With this play money they could play Blackjack. If they won more money than they were given, they could buy some nice prizes—CD players, a couple of televisions. I had decided that as long as I was dealing Blackjack, no one was going to lose.

The kids who played Blackjack realized that. I would just keep dealing myself cards until I busted. They would put out all the money they had because they knew they were going to win—except for one poor boy. I'll call him Ned, as in Nervous Ned. Nervous Ned was so timid and afraid, he'd put just a couple of play dollars out. He was so afraid he was going to lose. I dealt him four or five hands, and still he would just put out a couple more dollars. How often do we live our faith as though we are going to lose? Then Christ says to us, "I've dealt you a winning hand. You've already won. There's no way you can lose."

I don't know if you noticed the sermon title this morning—"The Courage to Sink." As I prepared for the sermon, I couldn't help but remember the title of a famous book that shaped theology as much as any book, by a theologian who shaped theology as much as any theologian. Paul Tillich wrote a book called "Courage to Be." I studied that book some and came across this. There's some good stuff in it but as much as anything, I want you to understand this; sometimes we ministers are a little strange. We are just different. Truth be known, sometimes we ministers are just flat out weird, aren't we? I want you to hear this, and after you hear it, maybe you will understand that after you study stuff like this for three or four years in seminary, you might be weird, too. Tillich writes:

"Absolute faith, or the state of being grasped by the God beyond God, (the power of being), is not a state which appears beside other states of the mind. It never is something separated and definite, an event which could be isolated and described, it is always a movement in, which, and under other states of the mind. It is the situation on the boundary of man's possibilities. It is this boundary. Therefore it is both the courage of despair and the courage in and above every courage, it is not a place where one can live. It is without the safety of words and concepts. It is without a name, a church, a cult, a theology. But it is moving in the depth of all of them. It is the power of being, in which they participate and of which they are fragmentary expressions." From The Courage to Be.

Now do you understand why we are so weird? Tillock is saying something very important here. The courage above every courage is absolute faith, which means being grasped by God even as Simon Peter was being grasped by Jesus as Peter started to sink.

There's another man whose name you might not recognize. His name is James Rowe. He has written words that you all know.

"I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore.  
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.  
Then the master of the sea heard my despairing cry,  
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.  
Love lifted me."

Do you know what Peter's biggest mistake was? It wasn't testing God. It wasn't doubting. It wasn't leaving the others in the boat, it wasn't being afraid. Peter's biggest mistake was living with courage. He would do it again later in his life. He got out of the boat, so to speak, to witness his faith. Because of the witness of his own faith, he was martyred for his faith. The last time anyone saw Simon Peter, he was hanging upside down on a cross, dead. Simon Peter's biggest mistake was living with courage. Might God grant each of us the courage and faith to make such a mistake. Amen.