

“If It’s Really You, Jesus”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #5

Matthew 14:22-33

How many of you have ever walked on water? That’s a real question. We live in the splendor of Northern Michigan, and every winter, I’m guessing quite a few of you walk on water – or ice, or snow, or some other frozen form of it.

Actually, I learned to walk on water when I was quite young, in the summer: my parents taught me to water ski.

If you stop and think about, we can do some pretty amazing things when we try, but often they are not easy. Things like water skiing and ice skating are very difficult the first time. Besides the daunting physical nature of the task, there is anxiety and intimidation. You simply have to work up the nerve to try.

When my son Jonah was eight, he wanted to learn to water ski. We figured, “What’s the harm in letting him try?” So I stood with him in the water while my dad drove the boat out a short distance. I got Jonah to straighten his skis, and then I yelled, “Hit it!” Amazingly, Jonah took off for about 100 feet. Unfortunately, his skis did not. The crazy thing was, Jonah was so convinced he could water ski, he never let go of the rope, even when he went under water! It was scary for a moment, but afterwards we thought, “Wow, that’s one confident kid!”

There is something amazing about watching your child try something for the first time while you stand near and watch. I helped Lucas go deer hunting for the first time this weekend. Yeah, he missed, but I was right next to him, encouraging him during his first shot. And, ironically, my daughter, Emily, has

been an encouragement to me. A few years ago, I had given up on roller coasters, but she convinced me to try them again by riding one with her.

When it comes to facing your fears, it helps a lot to have a person next to you, encouraging you. And the beauty of this story in Matthew 14 is, we all have a Savior who speaks encouragement to us daily.

Verse 22 starts, "Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd." If you back up a few verses, we find that Jesus has just pulled off an incredible miracle, feeding over 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish. Despite the disciples' reluctance to try to help find food, Jesus is able to provide for all. That miracle would have been exhausting, and Jesus spends some time alone in prayer.

At this point, the anxiety starts to build in the story. The disciple's little fishing boat gets caught in a storm. Here's the thing: the Lake of Galilee isn't very big to most of us in Bellaire. It's only about 13 miles long and 8 miles across, roughly the same size as Houghton Lake. It's not like the disciples were trying to cross Lake Michigan! In our simple little motor boats, we can jet from one end of Lake Bellaire to the other in ten minutes, if we're not in a hurry.

But imagine trying to cross the lake, at night, in a row boat. Now you can see why this might have frightened these fishermen, who, by the way, didn't have GPS or lights. To put this in some perspective, it is a daunting task for me simply to try to windsurf across Torch Lake in broad daylight in the summer. True story: one time, I had to flag a passing speed boat for assistance. And that was only about ½ a mile out.

So at the coldest, darkest part of the night, just before dawn, the disciples, exhausted from fighting this wind, look out, and they see a form walking on the

water to them. This is no windsurfer, water skier, or ice skater. They look at one another and scream, "It's a ghost." Great. Not only do they have the storm to deal with, but the walking dead are now coming for them.

In this moment, something significant happens. Jesus identifies himself, telling them, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." (v. 27)

Jesus tells them that He is the answer to their fear. My advice to my children pales in comparison. Sure, I can say, "Don't be afraid." But then I have to give a reason for it. "Take deep breaths. Relax. Go slow. Wait for the right shot. Keep your skis straight, knees bent. This roller coaster is equipped with an ejection seat." OK, I'm kidding on the last one. But how many times do we say, "Don't be afraid," and then try to rationally talk someone out of their fears? And how many times does that even work?

Jesus doesn't have to explain that the storm will end soon or discuss the buoyancy of the boat. He simply says, "It is I." "I am here." Remember, God told Moses that God's name was simply "I Am." The All-Sufficient One. Only Jesus can command our peace with his own presence. That's amazing.

And what's more amazing is Peter's request. "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water." (v.28) It takes some guts to confront a ghost. It takes some guts to call out your master.

Here's the thing: disciples are meant to follow their teacher. Teachers expect that their students will learn to do the things they do. My piano teacher expected me to play piano like she did. I expect my sons to hunt like I can. If your rabbi is a great speaker, you would expect to learn rhetoric from them. If your teacher is generous, you expect to learn generosity. If a mentor is good at underwater basket weaving, well, their disciples should be, too!

Peter isn't being rude. He is saying what Jesus taught him. Jesus told his disciples in John 14:12, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these..." If Jesus can walk on water, his disciples should be able to, as well. Peter's words are in fact a brave request and an amazing statement of faith.

Jesus simply answers, "Come," and Peter gets out of the boat. For about six steps, he is doing fine. And then his anxiety gets the best of him again. You can tell Matthew was really jealous of Peter by the way he recorded this story. (Matt 14:30) "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Look at verse 31. "Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'" Now, some of us would say, "Duh, Peter, you had Jesus right next to you. Why did you doubt Jesus?" But I don't think Peter doubted Jesus. I think Peter doubted himself. Peter wasn't afraid Jesus would drown. Peter lost sight of his master as his anxiety overwhelmed him. Jesus, when he reached out his hand, was reassuring Peter, "You got this. You can do this. Don't doubt yourself."

You just know that the moment Peter got back into the boat, he was bragging to the other disciples. "Did you see that? Walking on water! Me! That was amazing! You all should try it sometime!" I know that's why Matthew tried to paint Peter in a slightly negative light. But the fact remains: only Peter was brave enough to get out of the boat.

Are we brave enough to get out of the boat when fears assail us? There are always times when we will feel overwhelmed. The forces of nature, the forces of evil in the world, anything that is out of our control that threatens our peace and

security, these will all come to all of us. It is inevitable. It is part of life. The question is, when those calamities hit, whose voice will we listen to?

There are two main takeaways from this scripture that we all need to remember. In the storms of life, do these two things: #1 Do not take your focus off of Jesus. And #2, Believe in yourself.

Now, when I say believe in yourself, I do not mean, believe in your own power to rescue yourself. Although Jesus’ disciples are expected to do the things the Master does, there is one thing none of us can do, not even Peter. Not one of us can save the world from sin. Only Jesus can do that, by freely laying down his life on the cross. The point of this scripture is not to say, “Now, fix your own problems, every one you!” No, this is a miracle that points us to Christ, the one with power of Almighty God. The only way to be saved is by trusting in Jesus. Period. That’s why we need to keep our focus on him.

However, if you simply focus on Jesus without actually doing anything else, you’ve missed half of the lesson. Jesus expects us to walk with him, even though it may seem impossible. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do great things. This church can do great things. But we have to stay focused on Jesus and believe in ourselves and each other. Think of the greatest challenge this world faces. Pick one: fear, anxiety, oppression, hunger, anger, or any of a dozen other issues we face daily. Is it overwhelming? Only if you have taken your focus off your Teacher and Savior. Only if you have stopped believing in the power Christ has given you.

The power that allowed Peter to walk on water is available to us all. The voice that speaks encouragement and love and forgiveness is shouting to every one of us. We must listen! We must obey. If it means getting out of the boat –

our comfort zones – then so be it. I, for one, want to see how Jesus does the impossible through the faithful prayers and actions of those who love him in this very church. And I am hoping that you do, too. Let’s pray.

Memory Verse: Matthew 14:27 (NLT)

“But Jesus spoke to them at once. ‘Don't be afraid,’ he said. ‘Take courage. I am here!’”