

Matthew 14:22-33

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."

GOOD ADVICE NOT GOOD NEWS

Whenever I write a sermon on a familiar passage, I hear the voice of sermons past.

The sermons on this passage have always tended to be sermons about having courage and faith.

Peter had enough faith to get out of the boat in the middle of the storm. Even walking on water wouldn't have been too hard a thing for Peter, if only he had kept his eyes on Jesus.

But, no, Peter took his eyes off Jesus and looked instead at the wind and waves.

If only Peter had shown more faith, he wouldn't have begun to sink like a rock.

At this point the preacher tells us that when the wind and the waves are against us, we need to look toward Jesus.

If we have enough faith we can even get out of the boat and walk on water ... just like Jesus.

We can then close our service by singing Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.

That makes a nice neat sermon. I have even preached a version of that sermon.

But, there's a problem. Life is seldom as nice and neat as the sermons we preach.

When the wind and waves are against us, we often lose hope. When we're not making any headway in life and Jesus seems far away, it's not so easy to trust and obey.

How do we know that Jesus is near? How do we know that the stranger who approaches through the mist is really God incarnate?

I know that I should trust Jesus. I've known that for a long time.

The problem is that I don't do it. No matter how hard I try, the wind and the waves distract me.

I am overwhelmed when the stock market drops 500 points in one day, and I wonder if I'll ever get to retire.

I get worried when the leaders of our country don't seem to care about anything but getting reelected.

I tend to panic when the credit rating of our country goes down for the first time and the threat of high interest rates looms.

I am discouraged when leaders in the church fight about minor issues while neglecting the preaching of the gospel.

I know. I should turn away from these problems and turn my eyes upon Jesus.

But, to tell you the truth having one more cheerleader telling me from the pulpit what I "should" do doesn't help.

It makes things worse. It turns the good news into good advice.

So, maybe we should look at this story in a different way.

DON'T GET OUT OF THE BOAT!

Maybe this story is not about daring to walk on water with Jesus.

Like Peter we might want to walk on water. We might want to act like we can do it all with just "a teensy little" help from Jesus.

If that's what we think, it won't take long for reality to sink in. It won't be long before we will sink in despair and failure.

Before long it will become all too apparent that getting out of the boat in a middle of the storm was a big mistake!

And as I go down for the third time I learn what should have been obvious to me. I'm not Jesus. I can't control the wind and waves.

I can't walk on water!

But, as I (like Peter) cry out for help, as I cry "Lord save me" it dawns upon me.

I may not be able to fight the wind and the waves, but I know the One who made the wind and the waves. I know the Savior who promised to be with me always even until the end of the world.

I know that even when it seems like I am all alone I am not alone.

I know that often the Spirit of the risen Christ comes to me in a form that I cannot recognize.

But, that mysterious Spirit knows me and calls my name out loud in the dark night of my soul.

I believe in a marvelous grace that really is greater than all my sins and a grace that is greater than all my fears.

I believe that underneath the wind and the waves are everlasting arms that will lift me up and put me on higher ground.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the watery chaos that surrounds us will not have the final word in our lives.

The love and justice of God as revealed in Jesus will have the final word.

So let's look at this passage from the standpoint of that good news.

What does this passage teach us about the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus?

WIND AND THE WAVES ARE AGAINST US

It teaches us that God comes to meet us when we are far from shore and the wind and waves are against us.

Do you know what that feels like to have the wind and the waves against you? You struggle to do your best, but you can't make any headway.

Some of you do know.

Some of you are in the middle of that struggle right now.

The disciples had been struggling all night to get to the other shore. But, they couldn't make it. The forces arrayed against them were too strong.

Why do you think Jesus sent the disciples on ahead of him while he sent the crowd away and prayed?

I think it was to teach the disciples a lesson in faith. He wanted them to experience the frustration of the wind in waves. He wanted to put them in situation where they could not put their faith in their abilities as sailors.

He wanted to show them that they were not the masters of the sea. There are some winds and there are some waves that are too strong for even the most experienced sailor.

So, the wind and the waves and the frustration set the stage for faith.

Isn't that how it is with us?

We might talk about faith, but when we are stopped cold in our tracks by circumstances that we cannot control, faith is no longer a theoretical matter. It is a practical matter.

Are we going to trust in the power and goodness and love of God or are we going to focus on the problems?

Are you fighting the wind and the waves in your life? Have you come to a standstill in your journey?

Perhaps, God is trying to get your attention.
Perhaps Jesus wants you to trust in him alone.

WALKING ON WATER

The storm might be a test from God, but God does not leave us to fight the battle alone. The Scripture tells us that Jesus came to the disciples in the darkest part of the night, walking on water.

But, they don't recognize him. In fact the disciples are terrified of him. They think he might be some kind of ghost!

I think that God still comes to us in ways that we don't understand or even recognize at least at first. I think that the very presence of God's Spirit can seem like an unwelcome visitation, a source of terror instead of hope.

But, Jesus seeks to allay the fears of his disciples, and he seeks to allay our fears as well. Immediately he shouts to his disciples, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

What was the point of this miracle? Did you ever wonder why Jesus walked on water?

This is why Jesus walked on water: it provided an occasion for the disciples to see the power of God at work in Jesus. It was a demonstration of the incarnation.

God was in Christ, and this miracle proved it. In this miracle the disciples experienced the presence of God in Christ in a new way.

I can talk about the grace and love of God as revealed in Jesus until I am hoarse, and you might say, "Oh that's nice."

...and then promptly go on about your business.

But, if in the middle of the storm you experience the presence of the risen Lord then your life will be changed forever.

That's what I want for you my brothers and sisters.

Don't be satisfied with stories about Jesus. Don't be satisfied with a second hand faith.

Look for the Jesus who comes to you today in a demonstration of His awesome power and salvation.

Look for the Spirit of the risen Christ who seeks to bring you salvation even as the wind and waves buffet your life and bring things to a standstill.

The problem with Christianity today is that not that it claims too much. The problem with Christianity today is that it claims too little.

When we preach about Jesus, we aren't talking about some meek, mild mannered prophet who had some nice philosophical things to say.

Jesus walked on water. Jesus commanded the wind and the waves.

Jesus was and is the revelation of the Creator, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Jesus comes to save us from ourselves, to save us from our fears and to save us from forces that are beyond our control.

In a way, that should terrify us.

But, the terror does not linger. Jesus calls out to us and says,

"Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid."

OVERESTIMATING OUR FAITH

Peter heard the voice of Jesus, but he did not trust it. Instead, Peter decides to test that voice. He says, “If it’s you Lord, have me come to you on the water.”

And Jesus says, “Come.”

Now the power of Jesus was certainly enough to keep Peter afloat. But, the wind and the waves exposed Peter’s weakness.

Peter’s faith wasn’t nearly as strong as he thought it was and once he was on the water, he began to sink.

We too often overestimate our faith in Jesus.

We think that others may desert Jesus but not us. In fact Peter spoke those very words.

But, the one who had the courage to walk on the water was also the one who sank.

The one who spoke bold words ended up denying his Lord.

I think that we should be careful not to trust in our own courage and faithfulness.

There will be many occasions when we will begin to sink under the strain. There will be many occasions when our faith will fail us.

LOVE LIFTED ME

But, it’s not about our faith and us. It’s about God and His love.

The Scripture teaches us “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.”

And so when a fearful doubting Peter cries out in distress, the Bible tells us that “immediately” the hand of Jesus was there pulling him to safety.

This is the second time that Matthew used that word, “immediately”.

The first time was when the disciples cried out in terror when they saw Jesus walking on water. “Immediately” Jesus reassured them saying “It is I. Do not be afraid.”

And when Jesus hears Peter cry “Lord save me” immediately Jesus catches him.

There is no hesitation in the salvation of God. In Jesus we see a powerful God who acts quickly out of love, lifting his servant from the waves of despair and sin.

“Immediately” this same God gives us a word of assurance. “Immediately” He comes to us in our hour of need. Immediately He catches us when the storms of life sink us.

How did that song put it?

“When nothing else could help, love lifted me.

Love lifted me.”

That’s what today’s lesson is all about.
It is about the eternal love that lifts us up.

Peter should have kept his eyes on Jesus. But, when he didn’t Jesus was there to catch him.

We should keep our eyes on Jesus too. But, when we don’t, Jesus is there to catch us too.

Jesus isn’t just our guide or life coach.

Too much of modern Christianity reduces the gospel to one more self-help recipe ... not all that different from what you might hear on a talk show.

But, Jesus is not that.

Jesus is our Savior.

Jesus is the one who grabs hold of us in our despair. He is the One who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Jesus wants to do more than command our attention. He wants to save our lives.

And he has promised to do just that.

Amen.