

“If It’s Really You, Jesus”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #5

Matthew 14:22-33

[title slide] Welcome, prayer

[Frozen canal] 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.

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.

[Water skiing] When my son Jonah was eight, he wanted to learn to water ski. 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!”

It’s amazing to watch your child try something for the first time. My dad and I taught my sons how to deer hunt. I was sitting next to Lucas when he missed his first shot, but I kept on encouraging him. Ironically, my daughter, Emily, encouraged a few years ago. I had given up on roller coasters, but she convinced me to try them again by riding with her.

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

[Disciples in boat] 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 was able to provide for all. That miracle would have been exhausting, so, afterward, Jesus spent time alone in prayer.

[Disciples in storm] At this point, the anxiety starts to build in the story. The disciple's little fishing boat gets caught in a storm. The Sea of Galilee isn't very big to most of us in Michigan. It's only 13 miles long and 8 miles across, roughly the same size as Keweenaw Bay. It's not like the disciples were trying to cross Lake Superior! On a calm day in a motor boat, we could troll across the whole sea in an hour or less. For perspective, Justin Miller once windsurfed across Keweenaw Bay, although after a couple of hours, his wife Michelle, started to get a little worried.

[Jesus walking on water] Now imagine trying to cross that sea, at night, in a row boat, without GPS. You can see why this frightens these fishermen. They are rowing at the coldest, darkest part of the night, exhausted from fighting the wind. And suddenly they see a person 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!" Not only are they dealing with the storm, but apparently the walking dead are also coming.

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. When I try to reassure my own children, it's nothing like Jesus. Sure, I can say, "Don't be afraid," but then I have to add, "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? Does that ever work? Not usually.

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." An echo of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush, when God said, "I Am." God, the All-Sufficient One. The words are no coincidence. Only Jesus can give us peace with his own presence. That's amazing.

[Peter calls out] What’s also 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 also 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 children to hunt, ski and play like I can, maybe even better. If your rabbi were a great speaker, you would expect to learn rhetoric from them. If your teacher were generous, you expect to learn generosity. If a mentor is good at under-water 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 a brave request and an amazing statement of faith.

[Peter walks] 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. You can tell Matthew was really jealous of Peter by the way he recorded this story. (Matthew 14:30) “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

[hands] Look again 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, reassured Peter, “You got this. You can do this. Don’t doubt yourself.”

[Disciples’ boat] 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.

What about us? Are we brave enough to get out of the boat when fears assail us? There are always times when we feel overwhelmed. The forces of nature, the forces of evil in the world, anything out of our control that threatens our peace and security, these all come at all of us. It is inevitable. It is part of life. The question is, when those calamities hit, whose voice do we listen to?

[Jesus] Matthew ends this story with these remarkable lines (vv. 32-33). “And when they had climbed back into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, ‘Truly You are the Son of God!’” The implication, backed up by other gospel passages, is Jesus calmed the storm, and in awe and wonder of what they had just seen, the disciples fell to their knees before Jesus. That seems like a proper response, assuming they didn’t just faint from exhaustion and shock.

[Two things] Let me boil it down to the essence of this passage. In the storms of life, we need to remember two things: #1: Do not take your focus off of Jesus. #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, if we stay focused on Jesus and believe in ourselves and each other. Think of our greatest challenge. Pick one: anxiety, oppression, hunger, anger, or any of a dozen other issues we face daily. Is it overwhelming? Only if you take your focus off your Teacher and Savior. Only if you stop 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, 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.

[title slide] Let’s pray. (Then sing “Voice of Truth.”)

Memory Verse: Matthew 14:27 (NLT)

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

Reflection Questions

1. Recall a time when you were terrified. Who tried to comfort you? Did it work?
2. Who has given you encouragement and mentoring? Whose steps have you followed?
3. Why do you think Jesus came to the boat during the storm, instead of getting into the boat from shore? Why was his presence in the middle of the storm important for his disciples?
4. Why do you think Peter doubted? Do you think he doubted in Christ, in himself, or a little of both?
5. How do you think the disciples felt after Jesus calmed the storm? Were they perhaps even more afraid?