**Stepping Out, Staying With, Looking To**

Matthew 14:22-33

2/1/15

Thought for Meditation

Faith (is) a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that dexterity in faith is not acquired in a few days or weeks. *Kierkegaard, Fear & Trembling p23*

Faith is the word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved. Faith is stepping out into the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp. *Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat p99*

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Our New Testament passage this morning is a familiar story – Jesus walking on the water. This story follows immediately after the feeding of the 5000. Because this passage is so familiar I’d like to do something a little bit different. Usually I like to encourage people to follow along as I read the passage, either in your own Bible or up on the screen. I’m going to invite you not to do that today. Instead, I’d like you to get a mental picture of the story. There is a picture on the screen that might help you. It is a picture of the Sea of Galilee. Or you could close your eyes and picture a lake. Either way, imagine yourself in the story, not as a neutral observer but as a participant.



Picture a grassy field on a warm spring day. There are mountains behind you and a big lake. It is a beautiful setting. There is a huge crowd there, at least 5000 people who have just been fed with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus and the disciples are in the midst of the crowd. Then he leads the disciples down to the shore of the lake.

**“Matthew 14:22-33” (The Message)**

Where were you in the story? Were you part of the crowds on the shore, enjoying a full stomach and the time with Jesus? Were you with the disciples on the boat, out in the middle of the storm? Were you Peter, climbing out of the boat and walking on the water? Remember where you were. We will come back to that.

This story is easy to understand. There is nothing complicated about it. Let me share with you three reflections from it.

First, the Christian life is filled with storms. The timing of this story is important. It starts in the evening, with the disciples getting into the boat. It was probably 6:00 or 7:00 pm. Jesus comes out to them early in the morning, about 4:00 am. They had been in the boat, fighting the storm, for 8 – 10 hours. They were exhausted.

Notice that the disciples were right where Jesus wanted them. Jesus made them get into the boat. He insisted that they get into the boat. I think that he knew that there was a storm coming.

The storms of life come to us sometimes because we are right where God wants us to be. That isn’t always true. Jonah got into a storm because he was running away and disobeying God. However, when you are going through a storm don’t assume that God is punishing you for some terrible sin. You may be right where God wants you to be.

What are the storms in your life? Maybe someone you love has died, or is dying. Maybe it’s the storm of conflict and a broken relationship, or financial struggles, or the loss of a job. Maybe it’s the storm of dealing with your children or your parents or your health. Whatever storm you are in, know that you may be right where God wants you. It may be that when the storm came on Sharon church over the past several years, this church was right where God wanted it to be. God wanted to do something in your own individual lives and in the life of this congregation, and only a storm could bring about the results God wanted. When you are in a storm, it may be the result of being faithful and obedient and God wants to use the storm to transform your life.

The second reflection has to do with faith, and the reality that all of us are a combination of faith and doubt. Peter is a fun character. He’s impulsive and bold. He acts without thinking. He leaps and then he looks. He speaks and then he thinks. Yet throughout the gospels Peter is lifted up as an example of what it means to be a Christian. He often speaks for the other disciples, giving voice to what they were thinking or feeling. Sometimes Peter has amazing successes and other times complete failures. Peter has great faith and great doubt.

Our story this morning shows both sides. Peter is the only disciple who got out of the boat. He is the only disciple who had enough faith in Jesus to walk on water. He is also the only one who sank in the water. He took his eyes off Jesus and let his fears get the best of him. Peter is a man of faith and doubt.

To be honest, I’m a lot like that too. Sometimes I’m good at faith. Sometimes I’m not. Sometimes I completely trust God. Other times I don’t trust anyone and I’m filled with fear and anxiety. Sometimes I’m bold and courageous. Sometimes I’m a coward and a wimp. I have a sense that describes all of us. We are like Peter, a mixture of faith and doubt, success and failure. That’s okay, because just as God used Peter God can and will use us. And because God is at work in our lives he will use the storms to strengthen our faith.

Our passage is an invitation to faith. We are called to a risky faith. Faith is not primarily mental agreement with certain ideas. Faith is getting out of the boat and stepping out onto the water. Faith is looking to Jesus and trusting in him.

The third reflection has to do with the boat. The sanctuary of my home church is very similar to this one. They were built at about the same time. I think this was a common style back then. The sanctuary in my home church has an even steeper roofline. It’s almost an A-frame. When I was a child one of my Sunday school teachers said that it was Noah’s Ark turned upside down. I remember sitting in the sanctuary thinking “I can see how this could be a boat. But how did they get it turned upside down?” I was still literal enough in my thinking that it caused me years of confusion.

Throughout history the boat has been used as a symbol of the church. However, the boat is not a cruise ship. It is not a luxury liner intended for the comfort of the passengers who are on vacation. The boat is an ark, a safe haven from the storms of the world. The boat is on a mission. It exists to carry the gospel of Jesus to people who have never heard of him. The passengers of the boat are expected to invite other people to get on board where they can meet the captain.

Matthew points to the idea of the boat as the church. Matthew was written at a time when Christians were persecuted. Followers of Jesus were being attacked, jailed, and tortured, even martyred. Note how Matthew says that the boat was being battered by the waves. The word battered is sometimes translated “tormented” or “tortured.” It was out in the middle of the lake, far from the safety of the land and was fighting against the wind. That is what the church was experiencing. At the end of the story, after Peter walks on the water and Jesus rescues him, they climb back into the boat. In verse 33 Matthew saws that “those in the boat worshipped Jesus.” He could have said “The disciples worshipped him.” Instead, he made it vague enough and broad enough that it includes all of us.

I hope the message is clear. We need to stay with the boat. Our salvation depends on being in the boat. We need the church. For some Christians the church is insignificant. They go to church – when it is convenient. They hop from church to church, looking for the one that will best meet their needs. And when the church they go to now doesn’t meet their needs they look for another one.

Others move from church to church to church. They stay at one church until they get unhappy. Then they look for a new church and stay there until they get unhappy. And the process repeats itself again and again. Sometimes they are unhappy with the pastor, or with the denomination that the church belongs to, or a change in the style of worship, or any number of other issues. Sometimes they just don’t want to be around the messiness of the conflict in a church. Let’s be honest, there are times when it would be easier to be a Christian if you didn’t have to deal with other Christians.

Let me be blunt with you. Sharon Community Presbyterian Church is not a perfect church. It never has been and never will be. None of your pastor’s has ever been perfect. None of them ever will be. I know this is going to be a shock to you, but the members of this church are a bunch of sinners.

We need each other as much as we need the grace of God. In fact, we experience God’s grace through the church. We need the church so that we can learn how to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need the church so we can learn how to forgive those who hurt us and how to work toward reconciliation. We need the church so that we can learn how to use the gifts that God has given to us and serve other people. We need the church because it is the body of Christ. It is here that we meet Jesus. It is in the church that Jesus comes to us and saves us. [16:00]

So, where were you in the story? Were you in the crowds that stayed on the shore, part of the 5000 who were well fed and happy? If you are on the shore you missed the action of Jesus walking on the water. Is Jesus inviting you into the boat?

Were you with the disciples in the boat? You watched Peter get out of the boat and walk on water. Is Jesus inviting you to get out of the boat and have a risky faith?

Were you Peter? You got out of the boat and walked on the water. But you took your eyes off Jesus and needed to be rescued. Is Jesus calling you to turn to him again and ask for help?

What is the storm in your life right now? What is it in your life that makes your knees shake and your heart tremble? In what way is the world battering against you? Jesus is walking to you, saying “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid (v27). I love you. I’m here to save you. Come, walk on the water. Come, join the others in my boat.”