

If You Want to Walk on Water . . .

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 14:22-33

Stories about storms at sea have never been a favorite of mine. I'm the person sitting next to you in the theater watching "The Perfect Storm" with her eyes closed! When I was about eight years old, my mother and sister and I got orders to go to Tokyo, where my father had already been stationed for the past couple of years. In those days, in the early fifties, military families headed overseas most often traveled by ship, so after inoculations for everything from typhoid to yellow fever to cholera, we set off for Seattle to board the USS Frederick Funston, which would be our home base for the next two weeks, as we crossed the Pacific bound for Yokohama.

It was a rough crossing. In fact, it was a very rough crossing. And it wasn't a very big ship. Not too long ago, I ran across the picture of the ship that we had been given when we disembarked. Like so many things in my childhood, and I'm sure in yours, it seemed a lot bigger then.

Anyway, small boat, big ocean, rough crossing, and you might know that it wasn't long before many of the families and some of the crew were green most of the time. But not us! Someone told my mother that if you always kept a little something, a little food, in your stomach, you wouldn't be seasick – and she believed it. Now you have to know that my mother was from Tucumcari, New Mexico, and had never seen any body of water bigger than the lake in the Denver City Park, so that was understandable. And because she believed it, my sister and I believed it. So while people staggered back to their cabins looking miserable, we snacked on saltine crackers and cookies and fruit, watched movies, played ping-pong, did jigsaw puzzles, and were just fine. Many days we would go down to the dining room – walking down the halls swaying from side to side – and we would be the only people there.

When I look back, I often wonder why we weren't more afraid, especially since we had just seen the first movie version of "Titanic," which was much more grim than the most recent one with Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet! But the only time I can remember being scared was when we had the lifeboat drill and had to put on life jackets and stand next to the lifeboat to which we had been assigned. Perhaps it is true that ignorance is bliss, because when all was said and done, and we docked at Yokohama, we'd had a wonderful time.

Put in the same situation today, I probably wouldn't fare as well in a storm at sea, and certainly not in a storm like the one described in our scripture lesson this morning. The Gospel lesson from Matthew is, of course, about a lot more than a storm at sea. I like

to use the image of a kaleidoscope to describe how the Gospels can be turned to reveal a whole range of patterns and colors that we don't expect.

But let's begin with those seasoned fishermen turned disciples, who have put down their nets to follow Jesus. As this particular story unfolds, they have just fed more than 5,000 people – not counting women and children – with five barley loaves and two fish; and now, as darkness falls, they have set out across the Sea of Galilee, from the east side to the west, having been told by Jesus to go on ahead while he went to the mountain by himself to pray.

The disciples had rowed all night, badly battered by the storm, and it was early in the morning, or literally in Greek, “in the fourth watch of the night,” which would have been between 3:00 and 6:00 in the morning, when Jesus walked toward them on the water.

One of the most interesting things about this story – at least to me, being the landlubber that I am – is that there is no mention of the disciples being the least bit afraid up to this point. They've spent their lives on this sea, and probably figured that they'd be okay as long as the boat held together. They were just riding out the storm, unafraid, until they saw Jesus coming across the water toward them. I, on the other hand, would have been the wild-eyed, white-knuckled one, clutching the side of the boat, who would have looked up to see Jesus coming and said, “Hallelujah! What took you so long?”

Now staying in the boat to ride out the storm wasn't such a bad idea. In fact, one of the first places that the early church might have looked for understanding this amazing story was to the boat itself. Remember Matthew's audience. They would have understood the boat to be symbolic of the church, a church that was under persecution, and staying the boat meant safety.

Sooner or later, every one of us passes through a great storm. One preacher put it this way: “It may be a storm that batters your marriage and you can't seem to make any progress against it. Or it may be a storm that blows one of your kids far away from where you want him or her to be. It may be a storm of some terrible disease in your body or in the body of someone you love. Or the storm of depression that threatens to drown you in its depths. More and more, just opening the morning paper or turning on the evening news makes us hunker down as the skies grow dark and the winds start blowing . . .”¹

Our instinct is to stay in the boat, whatever the boat is for us. If you want to know what your boat is, ask yourself what you are most afraid of. Someone has suggested that your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God. It's whatever you're tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little scary. It's whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up to step out in faith.² So it may be your job or your financial portfolio, your health or home, your family or your friends, whatever or wherever you go for that sense of security before you finally fall down on your knees.

We do it in the church as well. Many older, historic churches are built in a Romanesque or Gothic style of architecture, with a central open space with a high vaulted

¹ Rev. Bob Sanders, “Walking on Water,” Lake Grove Presbyterian Church, May 9, 2004.

² “Peter Swims with Fishes,” www.christchurch-virginiawater.co.uk/sermons

ceiling, called the nave. It comes from the Latin word *navis*, which means ship, possibly with some reference to the “ship of St. Peter,” or Noah’s Ark.³ If you’ve been in a church like that, you can imagine that if the sanctuary were turned upside-down, you might feel like you were in a very large boat, or an ark.

When it looks like there may be rough waters ahead, the corporate instinct of most congregations is to stay in the boat, even if we’re white-knuckled and seasick by the end of the storm. Being an interim pastor, I can tell you that congregations most often exhibit that white-knuckled, hunkering down behavior when they’re convinced that the interim pastor has been hired to turn the church upside-down.

Last year at this time, your long-time pastor retired and Rally Day was a celebration of his ministry with you here at Oak Grove and in the Bloomington community. We’ve come quite a ways since that retirement party, and since my first Sunday in the pulpit in early November. This morning we begin a new program year, and, in many ways, the church is not the same as it was a year ago. For some of you, the changes might seem so subtle as not to matter very much. For others, this has been a year of significant change, not all of it very comfortable or easy.

This Sunday always feels like a new beginning. So if you’ve been thinking about getting more involved, there are enough new mission projects and Christian education opportunities, enough places to volunteer your time and talents to keep all of us busy. If you’ve been hanging back, waiting to see what the future holds – and for some that means waiting to see who the next pastor is going to be – this is a good time to test the water. The Pastor Nominating Committee is working diligently and thoughtfully and prayerfully to find the person that God is calling to Oak Grove. There are new adult education programs starting up, and new mission efforts. Homework Connection will begin again in October, and the stewardship drive will be underway shortly, and if you didn’t make it down to the Chapel earlier, you will definitely want to stop by before you leave the building. In the next few weeks, we will hear from a variety of committees during a Minute for Mission, to learn more about their hopes and dreams for the upcoming future.

If you’re still upset or angry about something that happened years ago, or something that happened weeks ago, this is a good time to come back and let yourself be healed, to immerse yourself in the community of God’s beloved children and open yourself to the love that’s in this place.

If you think you’ve done it all, and have no more time or energy to give, remember what I’ve always said. If you can’t do anything else, come to worship. It’s the most important thing we do together as the Body of Christ.

On this Rally Sunday, as we gather for a new beginning and welcome each other back or welcome each other for the first time, the future is wide open. There are possibilities for mission and ministry in the community waiting to be discovered, and ways to nurture and encourage our children and each other, but we have to be willing to step into it. In other words, if you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.

³ Catholic Encyclopedia online/Nave

I wish I could tell you that that's an original piece of advice, but it's not. It's actually the title of a book written by John Ortberg, who was, at one time, one of the teaching ministers at Willow Creek, the mega-church in South Barrington, Illinois.

Listen to what Ortberg says about walking on water. He reminds his readers that walking on water means facing our fears and choosing not to let fear have the last word; it means discovering and embracing the unique calling of God on your life – both individually and as a congregation. It means experiencing the presence of God in your life that allows you to do something you wouldn't be capable of doing on your own or perhaps apart from this community.⁴

But first you have to get out of the boat.

I'm reminded of that movie "March of the Penguins" that came out a couple of years ago. If you don't remember, it's the French documentary about Emperor Penguins in Antarctica, and their annual seventy-mile walk across the continent to the breeding ground. If you haven't seen it, it's a lovely movie, beautifully filmed, and, honestly, exhausting to watch! I can remember practically being on the floor by the time winter was over. And then, after watching these chicks try to survive the most horrific winter imaginable, I wasn't prepared for the adults to go off and leave them standing on the ice by themselves when summer finally comes. But they do.

But after a few more months, the half-grown chicks somehow know that it's time to jump off the ice floe that's been their boat, their safety and security all these months; that it's time to jump into the water and go home.

Here's the thing about trying to walk on water: unlike the penguins, you will undoubtedly sink, especially if you focus on the storm. So that alone may keep you from ever wanting to jump in. But we face our fears in order to grow. And we learn to manage failure. One commentator noted that failure is not an event, but rather a judgment about an event. It's not something that happens to us, or a label we attach to things, but rather the way we think about outcomes. This writer went on to remind the reader that when Thomas Edison was branded a failure in his attempts to create a light bulb, he said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."⁵

This is the Sunday morning that we jump in again, to test the waters. There may be rough waters ahead, but we've weathered storms before. And there's always a choice. You can either stay in the boat, and hang on until your knuckles turn blue, trying to resist the changes that have already happened and will continue to happen, as you live into the future that God has for you. Or you can get out of the boat and see what it's like to walk on water.

You can stay in the boat with your eyes tightly closed, and say that you like things the way they used to be, wishing that Oak Grove could be the church it was twenty, thirty or fifty years ago. Or you can get out of the boat and realize that Oak Grove is still all of those things, it just looks different; and then you might be able to see what it's like to walk on water.

⁴ John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, Zondervan, 2001.

⁵ "Peter Swims with Fishes"

You can stay in the boat, batten down the hatches and ignore God's invitation to a deeper relationship; you can refuse to explore your faith, much less share it with someone who desperately needs to hear some good news, or you can get out of the boat and see what it's like to walk on water. I know what I would do, if I were you.

Here's my best advice as we dive into the program year – and I'll bet you saw it coming: get out of the boat. Once you've tried walking on water, you will never be the same. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.