

Walking on Water

Matthew 14:22-33

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, February 10, 2002

Real Audio (3 MB)

Continuing in the yearlong theme of "Walking with God," we come today to the invitation to walk on water. Of course, no one can walk on water. And that is exactly why Jesus calls us to do it.

The story of Peter's walk across the water, or his attempt to do that, is one of the most cherished stories of the Bible. But this is not just about Peter. It is also about Jesus' call for you to get out of the boat to which you are clinging. So this morning as I tell the great story again, I encourage you to ask, "Where do I find myself in this sacred drama?" Are you still in the boat? Are you walking across the sea against a strong wind? Or having begun to sink, are you being lifted out of the water by your Savior?

First then, let us look at the twelve disciples in the boat. Jesus had just finished feeding the 5,000 on the banks of Galilee, when he told the disciples to get in a boat and head across the sea. Meanwhile, Jesus went up a mountain to pray. According to Matthew, this was the first time Jesus sent the disciples out alone. But as we will soon see, they were not as alone as they thought.

When evening came, a great storm developed at sea. The waves began to batter against the disciples' boat, and the torrential wind pushed it far from land. Interestingly, we are not told that the disciples were afraid -- at least not yet. These fishermen had spent their lives at sea and apparently believed they would be okay as long their boat held together. So they continued through the dark night trying to outlast the storm.

Sooner or later every life passes through a great storm. Perhaps one day the doctors will find a terrible disease in your body, or worse, in the body of one you love more than yourself. Or you may lose your job, and feel like you're too old to start over again. Or your child gets in trouble -- big trouble. Or a relationship that means the world to you hits stormy waters. Since last September, it has felt like the storm of terrorism has swept over the whole world. When these storms hit, the sky grows dark, the winds begin to blow, and the waves of adversity crash over the little boat called your life.

Perhaps, like these disciples, you pride yourself on being pretty tough. You've been through rough water before, and you've got yourself a pretty sturdy boat. So you think you'll be okay, just as long as you cling to the boat. But as this story reveals, salvation is not found in the boat.

In the early hours of the morning, the disciples saw Jesus walking toward them -- walking on the water. Now they became afraid. It isn't the predictable storm, but the unpredictable Savior, who scares them. At first the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost. That is what fear does to us. It makes us think that we are seeing ghosts who are coming to get us when it is actually the Savior coming to get us.

Jesus said, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." Take heart! Jesus is out there in the storm nearer than you thought. Notice he is not in the boat. Not this time. He is not in the place of safety, but out in the midst of the threatening sea. Jesus is never in the places of safety and always in the midst of the thing you want to avoid.

The ancient Hebrews were not exactly water people, and avoided it whenever possible. When they fished, they preferred never to lose sight of land because the sea was a place of volatility and chaos. When we read about Jesus walking on water, we think of it as a miracle against gravity. But when these ancient men saw him, they thought of it as a miracle against chaos.

Where is the Savior found? In the midst of the chaos out there. And that is what makes you afraid,

because if Jesus is out there, then that is where you have to go as well. You are his follower, and salvation is only found with him. So you are going to have to get out of the boat.

Peter said, "Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Note that Peter doesn't ask if he can walk on water. He asks for a command, a calling to come to Jesus. Jesus tells him, "Come." That is at the essence of every call. You aren't called to calm the raging sea at home, or get rid of the disease in your body or the chaos at work. You are only called to come to Jesus, across the water.

This means that to fulfill your calling you are inevitably going to be doing some amazing things. But in the words of John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. That's the title of a fabulous book in which Ortberg calls his readers to step out of comfort and security, despair and hurt, and whatever it is to which you have been clinging for so long. Your boat, he claims, is whatever it is that you are most afraid of losing. That is what you have to leave behind to respond to Jesus' call, because you can only have one Savior.

Focused on his Savior, Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk on the water. We don't know how far he got. Apparently that is not important. We do know that he had enough faith in Jesus at least to give it a try. As a pastor who has the wonderfully calling to watch people closely, I can tell you one of the most decisive moments in a disciple's life is when he or she takes a chance on Jesus and gets out of the boat.

Maybe you have been in a lousy job for too long, and the time has come to step out of the security it offers to do something you are gifted at doing, something you were created to do. You know, there are a lot of people who really love their work, but none of them are in it for the security.

Some of us have avoided taking leadership because we would rather not be responsible. Maybe you've even avoided taking responsibility for your own life because it is more comfortable being the victim. So you have lived your life, avoiding life, huddled in a corner of the boat.

It could be that the redemptive benefit of the disease you have contracted is to realize that life is short and volatile. Rather than fleeing this illness, your call is to step into it and find a new life. In another wonderful book called, *Battling the Inner Dummy*, David Weiner claims that transformation in a life always comes through "controlled trauma." It is the hard experiences, the storms and pain of life that create a boot camp of the soul that invites us to change.

If you keep trying to avoid this storm by staying inside your boat, you will continue to be victimized by temptations, addictions, and other lousy coping devices that help numb your yearning to be different. This means that if you have been struggling with a reoccurring temptation in your life, eventually you have to face the pain that makes this temptation so attractive. The way you do that is to walk toward Jesus who is there in the places of pain.

As soon as you begin this risky journey, however, like Peter you will soon notice a strong wind against you. There is so much resistance waiting for anyone who tries to make changes in life. A torrent of doubt will rail against your resolve to live differently. Soon you'll be asking yourself: "Who do you think you are to live differently? What were you thinking to ever leave the old life behind? Are you nuts? You can't walk on water!" Which, of course, is true. But that is exactly what it means to walk on water. It means that you are doing what only God is able to do through you, with you, in you.

Do you know how you can tell if you are a water walker? By identifying what you are doing today, that you cannot do apart from the power of God. Think about that. If you cannot identify anything in your life for which God is required, then you really don't need God. If that's the case, then you're still in the boat and not moving toward salvation. You are not even in the drama of life.

At the point that Peter discovers he couldn't do what he was doing, he became frightened and began to sink. That is what fear does to us. It makes us sink into a sea of doubt and self-incrimination. This is why the most frequent command in the New Testament is "Fear not." Fear is the greatest enemy of your faith in Christ because it takes your eyes off the Savior and focuses them on the strong wind that is against you.

As Peter began to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Then we are told, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him." When you have responded to the call of Jesus and begin to walk on water, doing what you cannot do, and the fear overwhelms you along the way, all you have to do is cry out to the Savior who "immediately" reaches out to you. You were never in the danger you thought you were. Not when the Savior is closer than the strong wind against you. Sooner or later all of us fail in water walking, but that is not really failure as long as Jesus is near. Failure is being too afraid to try.

After Jesus rescues Peter, they have an intimate little conversation out there on the waves. Jesus says to him, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" Now I have always wondered why Jesus is scolding Peter? Why doesn't he yell at the other disciples who never got out of the boat? After examining the New Testament carefully, however, I have become convinced of the answer: Jesus is always harder on those who have a little faith, than those who have no faith at all.

Once you've gotten your feet wet, Jesus expects you to learn something along the way. He expects that you'll never be satisfied with just a little faith. My hunch is that there isn't a thoroughgoing atheist in the room today. All of us here today have at least a little belief in God, but we would say that it is mixed with unbelief and fear. You can never settle for that! The point of walking with God is to discover more faith along the way. The way you do that is not by trying to muster up the faith, but by keeping your eyes on the faithful Savior who is nearby.

If you want more than a little faith, then you'll have to focus on the great faithfulness of God. And to do that, first, you have to get out of the boat.

Almighty God, when the strong wind is raging against the little boat of life, give us the vision to see the Savior who is near, that we may forget our inability and fear, beholding his faithfulness. Amen.