

“Navigating Storms”
Matthew 14:22-36
September 16, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Storms in life happen much like storms in nature. In both cases they are inevitable, unpredictable, frightening, chaotic and potentially destructive. As we learn in today’s text, Christians are not immune from storms. As a matter of fact, the disciples encounter the storm in this story expressly because they obeyed Jesus. The first verse of our text states clearly that Jesus **“made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.”** They were squarely in the will of God, and it was God’s will that took them into difficulty.

Drawing on passages like this, the early church likened itself to a ship at sea. This was so common that the word sometimes used for a church sanctuary, *nave*, comes from the Latin word for “ship.” So Jesus leads us into storms, while also leading us through them.

There are different kinds of storms we face today, just as there are different types of literal storms. There is another storm story in Matthew’s gospel, found back in chapter 8, and that storm was very different from this one. It was a storm in which the disciples feared for their lives. Several of them were experienced fishermen, accustomed to being on the water in a variety of weather conditions. For an experienced fisherman to think he’s going to die in a storm means that the storm was exceptionally fierce. That doesn’t seem to be the case with this storm. They started their crossing of the sea in the early evening, probably around 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. The waves were high and the wind was against them, forcing them to man the oars in order to get across. Matthew tells us that Jesus came to them in the **“fourth watch of the night”** (v. 25), which would have been between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. John’s Gospel adds that they had only covered 3-4 miles by this time. While Matthew tells us that they were terrified, he makes it clear that the source of their terror was Jesus walking on the water. They didn’t seem to be afraid of the sea, but of Jesus, thinking he was a ghost.

Some storms terrify us, while others make us weary and want to give up. This seems to be the latter type of storm. We’ve all experienced such storms, haven’t we? Perhaps it’s a wearying stage of life you’re in, with small children to care for. Or maybe it’s a frustrating job, where, like the disciples, you’ve been laboring hard with the oars but don’t seem to be making any headway. The need we have in such storms is to see Jesus and the decisive difference he makes. We navigate storms like the blind downhill skier navigates the ski slopes, listening carefully to his guide. Jesus is our guide, and he is the one who is decisive for us in our storms.

I. The Decisive Intercession of Jesus

Jesus sends away the disciples, dismisses the crowds and **“went up on the mountain by himself to pray.”** What did Jesus pray for? I would imagine that he prayed about his mission, asking his Father in heaven to keep him faithful to it. This would be all the more needful in light of the desire of the crowd. John tells us in his Gospel that after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds attempted to take Jesus by force and make him king. Jesus chose prayer over political popularity.

Jesus also prayed for his disciples. He knew that just as political popularity was not critical to his mission, the faith of his disciples was critical. He had sent them into the sea where there would be opposition in the form of waves and wind, preventing them from reaching the destination he had appointed for them. Whenever we experience opposition, it becomes a challenge to our faith. Jesus prayed for the very things he would speak to them when he came to them later. **“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”** (v. 27). In other words, in the midst of opposition, we tend to lose heart and want to give up. We tend to lose sight of Jesus and we tend to give way to fear. In short, we stop trusting God. Jesus is praying for the faith of his disciples.

Jesus is more concerned for the faith of his disciples than for their circumstances. He could have ended the waves and wind that were opposing them with a mere word. But he left this opposition in place, just as he does sometimes with us, and prayed for their faith.

Our situation is not unlike that of the disciples. Jesus is not physically present with us. But his heart is with us, and the Bible teaches that he is even now interceding for us. Paul taught that Jesus is now at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Romans 8:34). He is praying for our faith to be strong.

An important application from this is to give us hope in the midst of any opposition we may be experiencing. Are you facing a situation now that is similar to that of the disciples, as they rowed hard through the long hours of the night while accomplishing nothing other than tired muscles and blistered hands? Perhaps you have been scraping by on an insufficient income for a long time, with no relief in sight. Or maybe there has been a setback in your health and you have endured long pain and suffering with seemingly no prospect for improvement. Some of you have challenging marriages that so far have defied your best efforts to see improvement. Jesus wants you to know that you are not like Sisyphus, the Greek mythological character who was condemned because of his selfish ambition and deceitfulness. His sentence was to roll a large rock to the top of a hill. But each time he got close to the top, the rock would slip out of his grasp and roll back down to the bottom. He was doomed

to repeat this frustrating task for all eternity. There are times when our circumstances might lead us to think that we are like that tragic figure, but faith teaches us that there is always meaning in the opposition we face. This meaning is under the control of Jesus, and Jesus is ever praying for us that our faith might be strong.

II. The Decisive Word of Jesus

Jesus came to his disciples and spoke to them: **“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”** I think this is the reason Jesus comes to them in the manner he comes, walking on the water. He could have flown to them in the sky. Or he could simply have transported himself from the mountain to the boat. But he walks on the water, with its heaving whitecaps, in order to show his authority over it. Anyone can say, “Don’t be afraid.” Those words ring hollow when most of us say them. But when we realize that the one who is sovereign over all things says them, the words have much greater impact.

The words of Jesus, like all words from God, are performative. That means that they accomplish what they command. God created the heavens and the earth by the speaking of his powerful word. “And God said, ‘Let there be...’ and there was.” Jesus empowers what he commands. So when he says these words, the words themselves bring about what is said.

His first command is to “take heart.” It’s a word that means to have courage or confidence. Its opposite is to be discouraged or to lose heart. When you become discouraged and lose heart, you just want to give up. The disciples had been rowing all night and making no progress. They must have been worn out physically, mentally and emotionally. It would have been a natural thing for them to have concluded that things were hopeless. So Jesus comes to them and speaks courage and confidence into their hearts.

His next words give the reason they can take heart. “It is I.” In the original, those are the two simple words “I am,” which would have reminded his disciples of the name of God given to Moses. Jehovah is the great “I am.” He is the living God, and Jesus is laying claim to being equal with Jehovah.

He tells them next the phrase that is the most common command in the Bible: “Do not be afraid.” Wendy and I have a favorite movie called *Strictly Ballroom*. It’s an Australian movie about ballroom dancing competitions. You wouldn’t expect a movie about that subject to have such a profound theme as it does. The theme of the movie is this: “A life lived in fear is a life half-lived.” Fear robs us of the life God intends for us, a life of joy and fulfillment. Fear isolates us, keeps us on the sidelines of life, and, most tragically, separates us from Jesus. Fear makes Jesus small, and that is why he tells us time again not to fear. Jesus is bigger than anything else we might encounter.

III. The Decisive Look to Jesus

After hearing these words from Jesus, Peter says, **“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”** There is some debate about the appropriateness of Peter’s actions here. Some believe that this is an example of Peter’s proud impulsiveness. This view would then read the passage as a warning to us not to be rash and impulsive in our actions. Others see Peter’s actions here in a completely different way, viewing him as an example of faith to be emulated by us. I find myself with the latter view because of Jesus’ response to Peter. Jesus commands him to come and then enables him to walk on the water too. Jesus was not reluctant to rebuke unbelief when he sees it in Peter, as he will do in just a little while. But instead of rebuking him here, he commands and enables.

I think Peter is being presented here as the best example of faith in the church. By faith, he understood that Jesus had authority over the sea and was able to extend that to Peter. By faith, Peter was willing to take a risk. Imagine what that was like for Peter. It was dark, the wind was blowing, the waves were high and his very life was at stake in this. It is oftentimes the first step that is the most difficult step in any venture. It is not difficult to make plans and intend to do something, but the actual first step of doing is not so easy. It almost always involves some risk. Stepping outside the boat into the wild, chaotic sea would not have been easy.

Faith gives us the courage to take risks when Jesus calls us to do so. I think of Elizabeth Eliot, widow of Jim Eliot who was martyred by a remote group of Indians while trying to reach them with the gospel. After his death, Elizabeth went back to that same group, risking her life to bring the gospel. Or I think of C. T. Studd, born to a privileged family in England, but who followed Hudson Taylor to China to serve as a missionary there. Of his missionary life, he said, “Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.” Risk-taking is not limited to missionary service. Faithfulness to Jesus will always require some renouncing of comfort and predictability and embracing risk. Merely to love someone else involves risk. There is no virtue in taking risks just for the adventure of taking a risk. But there is great virtue in following Jesus even when it is risky. Is there some risk Jesus is calling you to take? Do you need to get out of your comfort zone a little? Listen to what C. S. Lewis wrote as his wife, Joy, was dying from cancer.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your

selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

IV. The Decisive Look of Jesus

Peter begins to walk on water toward Jesus. **“But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me’”** (v. 30). The disciple who was in one moment a picture of risk-taking faith becomes in the next moment a picture of unbelief and doubt. Even those among us with the strongest faith encounter times when our faith falters. And it falters in the same way Peter’s did. When he saw the wind, he was afraid. He took his eyes off Jesus. The wind and waves became bigger in his eyes than Jesus.

Thankfully, Jesus did not take his eyes off Peter. Peter had enough faith to call out to Jesus, and **“Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him.”** This brings up an important point that I have made before, but one that bears repeating. It’s not a matter of the quantity of our faith, but the object of our faith. Peter didn’t have a large amount of faith, but his faith was focused on Jesus enough to call out for help. So many today have faith in faith, saying, “If you have enough faith, then you will be okay.” Peter didn’t have great faith, but he was still okay because the little faith he had was in Jesus.

This would not be the last time the faith of the disciples faltered. They repeatedly didn’t believe Jesus when he spoke of his death. When the moment of his betrayal and crucifixion arrived, Peter denied him and the other disciples fled. But Jesus had promised that he would lose none of those given to him by the Father, and he kept that promise, preserving the faith of his disciples even when it burned low.

CONCLUSION:

The story ends the way all of our storm stories are intended to end: with Jesus in the boat being worshiped. Our storms are under the control of our sovereign Lord Jesus, used by him to bring us the joy of his presence. If you are in a storm right now, with the result that you are growing weary and don’t know how long you will be able to last, remember to look to Jesus. Look to him like the blind downhill skier listening to his guide. Jesus sees all, and he will keep you. Hear him as he tells you, “Take courage; It is I; don’t be afraid.”

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 14:22-36

1. What is the worst literal storm you have ever experienced?
2. What is the most challenging figurative storm you have ever experienced?
3. The point was made that the storm of Matthew 14 was different than the one back in Matthew 8:23-27. That storm was one that terrified even experienced fishermen to the point that they thought they were going to die. This storm, on the other hand, was less intense but more long-lasting. They had been rowing all night and not making any headway. Have you ever experienced, or are you experiencing presently, such a storm, one in which you are tempted to grow weary, lose heart and give up?
4. The disciples were facing the opposition of the wind and waves against them. What opposition is the Church in America facing today?
5. Jesus was on the mountain praying while the disciples were in the boat laboring. Jesus is interceding for his Church today, just as he was in this story. What do you think he is praying? (Note that he seems not to have been praying for the storm to subside, since he was able to do that in a moment once he got to the boat). What does it do inside of you to think of Jesus as interceding for you in prayer?
6. Jesus came to them saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." Where in your life right now do you need to hear those words?
7. Peter was willing to take a risk when he stepped out of the boat in response to Jesus' word, "Come." Is Jesus asking you to take any risks now?
8. Peter took his eyes off of Jesus, but Jesus didn't take his eyes off of Peter. As you look back on your life, what are some ways you see Jesus caring for you even when you may have taken your eyes off of him?