

9<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Catch of The Day

Bible Reading: Matthew 14:22-36

We have all heard quite a few sermons on this text from Matthew 14 that basically come down to a commendation of Peter's faith for getting out of the boat and walking on the water. The problem, as it is usually put, is that he takes his eye off Jesus, and his faith falters, but Jesus is there to save him. So, the sermon concludes, be courageous, get out of the boat, but keep your focus on Jesus.

Okay, that may be good encouragement for some people to put their faith into action, but it kind of misses the point of the story. After all, when they get back in the boat, the other disciples don't congratulate Peter for doing pretty well and wish him better luck next time! The real hero in the story is Jesus whom the disciples worship (for the first time in Matthew) as the Son of God.

Matthew 14:22-36 needs to be read in parallel with the Stilling of the Storm account in 8:23-27, but we want to keep the two stories straight. In the first story, there is a great storm, waves swamp the boat, and the disciples fear for their lives while Jesus sleeps. Waking him up with the plea, "*Lord, save us!*" Jesus calls them cowardly "*ones of little faith,*" rebukes the winds and sea, and brings about the calm. In response, the disciples are amazed and can only wonder what sort of person Jesus is that "*even the winds and sea obey him.*"

In contrast; there is again wind and waves, but no storm, and the disciples are not fearing for their lives. What does cause them to be afraid is seeing someone walking on the water and thinking it's a ghost. Jesus reassures them without scolding as before, and then Peter poses his challenge to Jesus. He starts to sink because he "*sees the wind,*" becomes afraid, and cries out "*Lord, save me!*" (Similar wording to the previous time.) Jesus grabs hold of him ("Catch of the day"), and this time only Peter is called "*one of little faith,*" and questioned for doubting. The wind simply ceases once Jesus gets into the boat, and this time the disciples worship him as the Son of God.

I believe this reading is for everyone who's known a season when their life is like rowing into the wind. And for everyone who will ever have such a season. Which means all of us. This passage will help us trust Jesus in the seasons we most need to. It will help us think through what that trust looks like in practice.

But we must acknowledge that this passage is not first and foremost a story about your life or mine. It's a story about Jesus. It does invite us to trust him. And parts of this story are symbolic of some of life's pressures. But the invitation to trust Jesus flows from who we see him to be. So, we need to look at Jesus. We need to ask what this story shows us about him.

### 1. Jesus: In Isolation with Father. V22-23

Let's see what Jesus did. Look at v22 & 23. After the people had eaten and experienced miracles and healings. Jesus sends them away. You see, Jesus had come to that region to spend time alone with the Father. Yet, He took time out of His schedule because of His deep compassion for the people, but now it's time to do what He came to do.

So, Jesus sends the crowds away and He sends the disciples away on a boat. His plan is to catch up with them later after He spends isolated time alone with Father. Jesus went up on the mountain to pray and we see that He was there, "Well into the night." Jesus yearned for time alone with God, His Father. He didn't do this just to check a box (ok, I prayed today). He did it because He longed for it.

He wanted isolated, one on one, time with God the Father. Brothers and sisters, I want to yearn for isolated time alone with God the Father. Don't you?

We need to spend time alone with God in prayer. We need to communicate with Him; we need to feel His presence; we need to be filled with His grace, love, mercy, goodness, faithfulness, joy, and more; we need to say to Him, *"I need thee, oh I need thee, every hour I need thee!"*

Jesus made sure that He had this time with God and He spent time well into the night with His Father. You see, Jesus had some pretty important stuff going on in His life. He knew that the more important the stuff that laid ahead of Him, the more He needed to spend time in prayer with God.

Martin Luther is quoted as saying, *"I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."* You might think, "I could never do that!" Well, the point isn't that there's some rule that you have to pray three hours each day. The point is that we understand the necessity of going to God in isolated prayer whenever, wherever, and however we can.

We should be people of prayer all the time, and sometimes we may want to spend prolonged time in prayer. Jesus knew what was coming up for Him. He knew He needed strength from the Father, so He spent time in prayer. Many of us long to see great works of God in our lives, many which Jesus himself promised would come. Well, we might see more of the miracles that Jesus promised if we learned to pray like Jesus prayed. Isolation with the Father is what Jesus needed, and now during our pandemic isolation we have the opportunity to isolate with the Father for a very special time, for a very special need.

## **2. Jesus: The God of Chaos**

We see Jesus to be a human being with a unique relationship to God. He needed time to pray to God his Father. So, he sent his disciples across the lake on their own. They had a terrible night. Think how tired they must have been. They've just served lunch to some 15,000 people. Yes, Jesus made the bread, but they still had to hand it out. And gather up the leftovers, one heavy wicker basket each.

Then when night came it wasn't time for a sleep. It was a time to row. But they found themselves battling a ferocious headwind. We've had some windy days the past few weeks. Have you ever been out walking on a windy day, and found yourself walking straight into the wind? It's exhausting. Now try rowing instead of walking! They were at it all night, because the final scene of this story began sometime after 3am, the fourth watch of the night.

Then out of the gloomy light just before dawn. They weren't expecting to see a figure walking towards them on the surface of the lake. They had heard rumours of ghosts on the lake, fishermen who had drowned come to haunt those who now sail its waters. A bad night had just got worse. Now they've not only got a vicious headwind to contend with; they've got ghosts!

Until the ghostly figure speaks to them, in a voice that is strangely familiar. In v27, he tells them to do two things. First, *"Take courage!"* Second, *"Don't be afraid."* And the reason why they can do these things comes in the short sentence sandwiched in the middle. *"It is I!"*

That may be all it means. "It's me, Jesus!". But the exact words used are actually just the two simple words, *"I am"*. *"Take courage! Don't be afraid!"* Why? *"I am"*

In the Old Testament, God gives us a number of names to call him by. But a big one is simply *"I am"*. God sends Moses to the Israelites to tell them that he'll rescue them from their slavery

in Egypt. *“Suppose they ask who sent me to them. What shall I say?”* God’s answer: *“Tell them ‘I am’ has sent me to you.”* That name for God comes back a number of times. And then we find Jesus on the lake. *“Take courage! I am. Don’t be afraid.”*

Turn with me to Job chapter 9:4-8, Job is describing God.

*“His wisdom is profound; his power is vast. Who has resisted him and come out unscathed? He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble. He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.”*

So, Jesus comes to his disciples, treading the waves. There’s only one conclusion. Here is God on earth. Here is one who can walk over the top of the chaos. Here is the God of chaos, the one who controls the storms, who sets boundaries for even the most violent storms of life. Here is Jesus. The great “I am”. The wave-walker. The God of chaos.

And so, the climax of the story comes in v32-33: *“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”*

### **3. Jesus: The God who Protects**

This story is a massive reassurance. It shows us a Jesus who is in control of anything we might face. No matter how chaotic or out of control life feels, he is more powerful than the storms. (The pandemics). Why doesn’t he stop the storms before they hit us? Why is he not with us in the boat at those times when we most need him there?

Many of you are familiar with the poem called “Footprints”. It pictures someone looking back on their life as a Christian. They see two pairs of footprints behind them on the beach. Theirs, and Jesus’. But then they see that during the hardest times of life, there was only one set of footprints. So, the person asks Jesus where he went during those tough times. And the answer comes back that this was when he carried them.

It’s a lovely thought, and there is some truth in it. It may be what’s going on behind the scenes, but for some people the comfort it offers feels hollow. Because it’s not how life felt in those times. Ask the disciples. Two sets of footprints through the Galilee region. Theirs and Jesus’. And then they hit the waves and the wind on the lake, and there was only one set of prints. Why? Jesus had vanished! He was on the hillside praying while they were straining at the oars.

Jesus let the disciples go across the lake by themselves. He knew what they would face. They had no need to be afraid. “It is I!” I am. He would walk to them across the sea, across the top of the waves, and bring order to the chaos. He had the situation all the time. But before he did that, they went through a period of being alone and frightened. He does not tell us why he did that. Just as he does not always tell us why some impossibly difficult times come our way. He does tell us that he is fully in control, that he will reign in the chaos in his own time. He does tell us that we can trust him, rely on him. That we can take courage. That we don’t need to be afraid. Because he is the great “I am”.

Jesus doesn’t only take care of his people in this life. The biggest enemy will all face is death. That is the big wave that threatens to completely engulf us and take us down.

There are two moments in Matthew’s gospel when a human being says what the disciples say in v 33. One of those moments is here: *“Truly you are the Son of God.”* Their understanding was still developing. There was much they didn’t understand. Maybe they

meant little more than: “We can see you’re no ordinary human being.” But they still said it. *“You are the Son of God”*.

The other comes as Jesus takes his last breath on the cross. The Roman centurion overseeing things had seen many people die. It was his job. But there was something different about this man. And so, he exclaims: *“Surely he was the Son of God”*. Again, we don’t know how much he understood. Possibly nothing more than “I can see he was no ordinary human being.” But still he said it: *“He was the Son of God.”*

By recording these two speeches, Matthew draws these stories together. We go through many storms in life. The decisive moment when Jesus comes to us in the storm is the moment he hung in darkness on the cross. That was when he allowed the waters of our own sin and darkness to engulf him. And yet that was the moment when actually he conquered death, rather than death conquering him. It turns out he was walking on top of the waves once again. Which is why he came out of the tomb three days later, triumphant over sin and death.

Jesus is able to see us through the biggest storms we will ever face in our lives. Including the biggest storm of all, our own death, and the judgement day beyond. But for the time being we have to trust him. Those storms may feel all-consuming, and He may feel absent, but he speaks to us: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Our take away challenges to consider are:

a) Schedule some time alone with God:

Jesus spent time alone with the Father because He wanted to be close to God and He knew that He needed that intimacy with the Father to fulfill what lay ahead. We must understand our deep need to spend time alone with God. Take some time this week to spend time alone with God. Be intentional and schedule that time.

b) Ask God to increase your faith to overcome doubt and fear:

The disciples were in such a state of fear and anxiety that they could not recognize Jesus. They were blinded by it. They were paralysed by it! We don’t need to be led by fear, we need to be led by faith! We must have faith that God can use us for His purposes. We must have faith to be obedient. We must have faith to be led by God’s Holy Spirit.

c) Keep your focus on Jesus:

One of the greatest ways to keep your faith strong is to keep your focus on Jesus. Don’t focus on the wind and the waves. Don’t focus on problems, circumstances, temptations, or distractions. Focus on Jesus! This week, be intentional about keeping your focus on Jesus.

Prayer.