

Sermon for Zion, August 4, 2019

Hymns: 411 – Stand Up and Bless the Lord; 646 – Lead Me, Jesus;
575 – Lead Me, Lord; 744 – Will Your Anchor Hold

Scriptures: Matthew 14:22-32

Sermon Title: If you want to walk on water... Part 1

Matthew 14:22-32 NIV

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

(For the central insights of this sermon, I am indebted to John Ortberg’s book, “If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat.” Highly recommended! And a great summer read!)

Before leaving on vacation, a parishioner came into my office asking if I had a book I could recommend for some summer reading. After speaking with them for a bit, I thought John Ortberg would be an author they would enjoy, and of the Ortberg books I had on my shelf, I chose **“If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat.”** They went away happy, and it reminded me that it had been some time since I had reread it, which I quickly did. Despite the goofy title (Ortberg likes goofy titles, which long caused me to underestimate him – another of his books is called, “Everybody’s Normal Till You Get To Know Them”) there are some great insights on living the life of faith. It led me back to a sermon series I preached back in 2008, where I cheerfully stole many of Ortberg’s

best ideas. After all, Ortberg stole the story from the Bible. I was just following in his footsteps. Plus, I'm giving him credit. And, eleven years later, doing it again.

Besides, this story of Jesus – and Peter - walking on the water is a long-time favourite of mine. I've walked *in* the water of the Sea of Galilee many times, and I've swum in it too, and can report that it is regular old fresh water, far less buoyant than our Gulf, and far, far less than the Dead Sea, 4 hours to the south of Galilee. I can also report that I've sailed on the Sea of Galilee, and most of the time, the water was as placid as after Jesus had calmed it some thousands of years ago. But even these days, as I experienced one memorable night, the wind can come in all of a sudden from the Mediterranean, rush whistling over the Galilean highlands, and surprise the sailors upon and fish within with quite a nasty, sudden squall. I was staying on the south end of the lake. I was awakened in the middle of the night, thinking a tornado had hit. In the morning, the shoreline was in complete disarray; palm leaves and branches were everywhere; there was a chair on my balcony that hadn't been there before. And I was on the second floor! In a crowded 12 man boat, a storm like that has to be scary. Especially at night. Which is where our story comes in.

The disciples are on their own, sailing the Sea of Galilee; Jesus told them to go on ahead, and he would meet them on the other side, after some much needed peace and quiet. But soon it is night; the lake is afoam with a violent squall; the boat is being buffeted; *the "wind is against it."* It is not an easy time, and it is pitch dark, save the occasional crack of lightning and the effervescence of the waves. The disciples feel very far from home, very far from shore, very far from safety, very far from Jesus. The thought of everything coming to a very wet and unhappy end is first and foremost on all their minds.

Things get worse, even when it seems they can't; after a long night of this, just when the sky is beginning to lighten in promise of the day, Jesus comes out to them. You would think this is good news, but it isn't. The disciples don't recognise Jesus; they're far from shore, in water fathoms deep, and here comes someone a-strolling along, feet on the waves, so logically enough they think it is a ghost, and so now, piled on top of their natural fear of drowning, they're scared out of their wits to boot. The disciples cling to the boat, to each other, to whatever's nailed down. And then they, and we, hear this:

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

You'd think this would solve the problem, and if the Gospels had been invented by someone making up stories from scratch, it *would* have solved the problem; everybody would have been confident and assured and happy and fine, now that Jesus is here. But this story is all too true, so these fellows aren't confident and assured and happy and fine, now that Jesus is here. There is no sign whatsoever that anyone of them felt any better as a result of Jesus showing up. They're still exhausted, still soaked to the skin, still rowing nowhere fast in the teeth of the waves, Jesus or no Jesus. Perhaps there was some astonishment added to their fear, but it doesn't say, "*And then their hearts were at rest.*" Instead, the camera turns to Peter. And this is where things get amazing.

*"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."
"Come," Jesus said.*

Not a line you would have expected, if you hadn't heard the story before. If this story were brand-spanking new to you, you might have expected, "Lord, for goodness sake, what on earth are you doing out there?" Or maybe, "Jesus, get in the boat!" Or better: "Lord, get us out of here! Or calm the water! Or do something! Anything!" But that's not what we get. Instead, what happens is that Peter realises, in the midst of all this chaos, in the red haze of all this fear, in the teeth of this storm; in the midst of all this, Peter realises that the place to be is with Jesus. Not in the boat; not on shore; not in a warm, dry bed. No, in the midst of all this, Peter realises that the place to be is with Jesus.

Now think about this: It is a dreadful night. The waves are crashing. The boat is tossing. The wind is against them. But Peter is a fisherman. He grew up in boats, lived in boats, on this very lake, every day of his life but Saturday. No way was this the first storm Peter ever encountered. No way was this the first time the wind was against him. It might have been the worst, but it wasn't the first. No matter how bad things were, any fisherman knew it was better in the boat than out of the boat. Particularly when that boat – your boat – is filled with your fishermen friends and brother.

But Peter, in a moment of divine insight, realises that **it is better to be with Jesus than to be with all he knows**. Peter, in a moment of divine insight, realises that it is better to be with Jesus than to be with all the familiar friends, family and support structures in the world. Peter, in a moment of divine insight, realises that **life was to be found outside of the boat**.

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

“Come,” Jesus said.

And so Peter did. And so began the great adventure. And so Peter - for a few moments, but in other ways, for the rest of his life – and so Peter walks on water. He takes a chance, he walks away from the familiar, the safe, the way it has always been done, and he walks on water.

Over and over again, Jesus tells people to do just that. To take a chance. To walk away from the familiar, the safe, the way it has always been done.

It makes you wonder why churches – churches like ours – churches supposedly full of people called to take the chance of following Jesus - have clung so tightly to the old familiar boat called “we’ve always done it this way.” It’s like the old jokes about how many Presbyterians it takes to change a lightbulb. Answer: “Ten: one to change the bulb, and nine to talk about how much better they liked the old bulb.” Or, “None – there’s no money for new bulbs.” Or my personal favourite: “Change???” No, I think when we hear this story of Peter walking on the water, our hearts are not with him; our hearts are with the eleven who stayed in the boat.

The story forgets them, but there they – there we - are. Eleven others stayed in the boat. Eleven others stuck with what they knew. Eleven others watched the great adventure pass them by. Eleven others would never know - never - what it was to walk on water. They stayed in the boat. They could – they did - tell stories about seeing Peter walk on water – we are reading one of those stories right now - but they would never know the feeling of waves under their feet. He walked. They watched.

Which would you rather be? The walker? Or the watcher?

To be the walker means to be the one willing to step outside of your comfort zone, and take a chance on the unfamiliar, on the unknown, all on a bit of a risk. To be the watcher, though, means to stick with what you know. To not try anything new. To never, ever, take a chance. To never, ever, be willing to consider that this unfamiliar thing, this uncomfortable choice, this risk, is worth the taking.

I wonder if we’ll ever know what we’re missing when we cling to the familiar, and reject the chance to change. Was there a time, a moment in your life, when it seemed as though there was an opportunity to live, really live, to step out in faith, to experience the great adventure, to experience life to the full, and you stayed in the boat? A time at which you look back and say, “If only...” A time

when what was required was taking a chance, taking a risk, stepping outside of the path of 100 percent certainty, into a bit of the unknown? A time when, in the life of this church, there was a chance to do something new, and we, collectively, said, “No way. I’m a more ‘in the boat’ kind of guy.” But remember the story: the boat was sinking. What was the point of clinging to it so very tightly?

So why don’t we join Peter on the waves? There are lots of good reasons, sound reasons, sensible reasons, for staying in the boat. After all, look what might happen:

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

There are risks to taking a chance, as Peter found out. But then this **(Ortberg’s amazing thing number 2):**

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

Now it’s time for the question again: **Who would you rather be?** One of the eleven spectators? Or the one holding Jesus’ hand? Listen again: *Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.* Who would you rather be? One of the spectators? **Or the one holding Jesus’ hand?**

If you want to know what it is to hold Jesus’ hand, maybe you have to take a chance. Maybe then - only then - separated from the familiar, separated from the support structures, separated from all we normally rely on - maybe only then do we rely know what it is to understand being caught by Jesus’ hand.

Here’s **Ortberg Insight 3**, which we’ll finish with. The story ends this way: *“You of little faith,” Jesus said, “why did you doubt?”*

Who’s he talking to? Peter? Or the eleven in the boat? *“You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”* To leave the boat is to step out in faith. To walk on water is to walk in faith. To reach out and feel the hand of Jesus is to reach out in faith. I don’t think it was necessarily Peter he was talking to there. I think he was talking to the eleven, all of whom were still clinging like flypaper to the mast. I think he was talking to us. *“You of little faith,” Jesus said, “why did you doubt?”*

Back to Ortberg: *“I believe there is something - Someone - inside us who tells us there is more to life than sitting in the boat. You were made for something more than merely avoiding failure. There is something inside you that wants to walk on the water—to leave the comfort of routine existence and abandon yourself to the high adventure of following God.”*

Don't live a life of looking back, only wishing you had stepped, walked, reached out in faith; don't live life watching the great adventure, a spectator, from the safety of the boat. Live in faith. Walk on water. As individuals and as a church, we can choose, “They played it safe.” Or we can choose: “They walked on water.” Look for Jesus. Search for Jesus. Reach out and take the hand of Jesus. Serve in ways you've never served before. Invite someone you've never invited before. Reach out in ways you've never reached out before. Live the adventure of faith he would have you live. Take that chance. And truly, truly live.

Life is to be found with Jesus, outside the boat.

Would you rather be a spectator, or the one holding Jesus' hand?

“You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” Amen.