

Sermon for Zion, August 11, 2019

Hymns: 78 – This is the day; 553 – May the Lord bless you; 680 – Christ, of all my hopes the ground; 671 – I heard the voice of Jesus say

Scripture: Matthew 14:25-29; John 10:14-16

Sermon Title: Lord, If It's You...

*Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. (Matthew 14:25-29)*

*"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know my voice, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:14-16)*

Last week we looked at this story of Peter walking on the water. Peter and the others, sailing on the Sea of Galilee, are floundering in the teeth of a storm. Jesus walks out to them on the water, terrifying the disciples, who think it's a ghost. Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter's response is to call out to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus replies, "Come." And Peter leaves the boat and walks on water, an experience that would transform him for the rest of his life.

Using John Ortberg's "[If You Want To Walk On Water, You Have To Get Out Of The Boat](#)" as a guide, we talked about how we miss much of what life has to offer because we're afraid to "get out of the boat" - afraid to take a chance, to risk, to step away from our familiar support structures and step out in faith - to "walk on water" - to live in the fullness of life God offers to us. In Ortberg's words:

*"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."*

Was there a time, a moment in your life, when it seemed as though Jesus was walking by, when it seemed as though there was an opportunity to live, really live, to step out in faith, to experience the great adventure, and you stayed in the boat? A time at which you look back and say, “If only...”

I love seeing people find the courage to step out of the boat, and have their lives enriched as a result. In a small way, I experience this with people on pilgrimage. Time and again, people tell me they would love to go and walk the paths of the Holy Land, to follow the footsteps of Jesus. But they’re afraid. They’re afraid of flying such a long way, they’re afraid to be in the Middle East, when all they seem to hear on the news about the region is trouble and strife, they’re afraid of being so very far from home. But some work up the courage to come nonetheless, and find their faith enriched and deepened in ways they never thought possible.

In a larger way, I admire my colleagues who respond to a call to serve in troubled or distant situations. I have many ministry friends who have served around the world, many in places with only the most rudimentary health care, or social supports, or with downright dangerous political systems. Again and again, these friends report to me how God has blessed their lives in ways they never imagined.

Closer to home, I admire those families who decide on a complete change of life, situation, location; those who take a chance on a new career, a new way of living, a new environment in which to raise the kids. It isn’t easy to do. It calls on all a family’s patience, love and support to make such a move together. It involves stepping out of the boat.

Stepping out of the boat, though, doesn’t necessarily mean roaring off to Israel or Central Africa or parts unknown. Stepping out of the boat sometimes means making changes in your life, changes in the way in which you live day-to-day, changes in your basic relationships which have long needed changing. Stepping out of the boat could mean something as simple (but nonetheless risky) as phoning that brother or sister, mother or father, son or daughter from whom you have become estranged due to a conflict as fresh as yesterday or as old as years ago. Stepping out of the boat might very well mean taking the risk of opening your heart to the possibility of rejection or pain, of trying to do the important work to rebuild that relationship, of taking the risk of initiating the bringing of healing to an old wound.

Stepping out of the boat might mean taking a hard look at your marriage, and risking the waves of saying to your spouse, “You know, this just isn’t good enough. We were both made for so much more. Our marriage needs help. We need to do something, even if it seems easier to do nothing at all. We need to remember why we got married in the first place; we need to remember what it is to be in love.”

Stepping out of the boat might mean taking a hard look at the job that is slowly killing you, of emptying you of any enthusiasm for life, day by day wearing you down, reducing you to going through the motions, of “putting in time;” stepping out of the boat may mean seriously considering a major employment or career change, assuming the many risks and uncertainties that entails.

Stepping out of the boat might mean restructuring your priorities in all kinds of different ways, no matter how much easier it might be to live on cruise control, because perhaps the way in which your life is going right now, you’ll someday look back and wonder why - or if - you’ve lived at all. Jesus was famous for calling people out of their day-to-day priorities, and focussing their attention on so much more that awaited them.

OK, so how do we know what to do? How do we know when, or why, or how to do it? How do we know when we should stay in the boat because it is the smart thing to do, and when to get out of the boat because it is the right thing to do? After all, jumping out of a perfectly good boat in the midst of a storm is, most times, a pretty reckless move. As my father – a pilot and test-pilot during the Second World War - used to say to my sky-diving friends: “Only an idiot would jump out of a perfectly good airplane.” With that in mind, not every boat is a boat we should be jumping out of either. So how can we tell the difference? How can we tell we’re in the boat we should be in, or if we’re in the boat out of which God is calling us to step out and walk? Or to put it in straightforward language, when we are faced with a big decision, how can we know which way God is leading us?

We could toss a coin. We could use the Magic 8-Ball. We could read countless self help books, most of which say, “Honey, you have to do what’s best for you.” That’s what author Mark Sutton said in his book, part of a questionable series entitled “Spirit Science.” But it isn’t what Jesus would say. Not at all. Life, according to Jesus, is not all about what is best for you and only you. Life, according to Jesus, is something else altogether. He didn’t preach, “Honey, you have to do what’s best for you.” No, he preached, “Honey, you have to do what’s best.” The difference is, doing what’s best for you involves only your own concerns. Doing what’s best, however, involves the impact that your choices will make not only on you, but on the others around you.

But you know, doing what’s best will ultimately lead you to the goal of ending up with what’s best for you too, far more reliably than starting out with your own personal satisfaction in mind. This is what Jesus is getting at when he says, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me*

*will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26 NIV).*

In other words, if you approach life selfishly, you're following yourself, and not Jesus, and you'll lose your life in the process. But when you approach life "*taking up your cross;*" that is, with a spirit of selflessness and service, with a spirit of doing what's best, you'll find life - and your soul - in the bargain. And sometimes doing what's best requires stepping out of the boat. But how do we know if, and when, and in which direction to step? This is important, because what you get when you step out of the boat in response to Jesus' call, is life as it was meant to be lived. But what you get when you step out of the boat otherwise is wet.

For help, let's look back to our story:

*Early in the morning Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.*

So, given the nautical, meteorological and psychological conditions, they didn't recognise Jesus at first. They didn't know who or what it was coming to them on the water. Then, even after Jesus speaks ("*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid*"), Peter says, "*Lord, if it is you...*" But then, Jesus says "*Come,*" and for Peter, that seals it. It is Jesus. Peter recognises him, recognises Jesus' voice. Peter's out of the boat. He could step out in faith, because he recognised Jesus' voice. And how did Peter recognise Jesus? Three ways: He listened to him. He spent time with him. He came to know him, entered into relationship with him. And we can do the same.

First of all, Peter recognised the call of Jesus, because Peter had spent a great deal of time listening to Jesus. I wish we could travel back in time and follow in Jesus' footsteps, eavesdropping on the Sermon on the Mount, catching a glimpse of a miracle, hearing him laugh. Well, the good news is, in many ways, we can do just that. We can do it through the use of a time machine known as the Four Gospels. To steal a catch-phrase, "it's the next best thing to being there."

Through the Gospels, through the words of Matthew the former tax collector; Mark the faithful secretary of Peter; Luke the historian, the physician of Paul; John, the disciple perhaps closest to Jesus; through their words, through their memories, through their eyes, we can eavesdrop on the Sermon on the Mount, we can catch a glimpse of many a miracle, we can hear Jesus laugh, as well as hear him cry. If you

want to know Jesus, you've got to know his words, his story, and there is no better - and I believe no other way - than to read them for yourself. Don't trust what I or anyone else says about Jesus, without going back to the source yourself. Jesus has been endlessly misrepresented, misquoted, and his words manipulated by the unscrupulous and self-interested. Don't settle for second-hand. Read the Gospels. Have a look at - have a listen to - the real Jesus. You'll come to know his voice.

That's what Jesus is getting at in our reading earlier from the Gospel of John. Using the familiar example of a shepherd, Jesus says, "*...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:3-4).*" And then the big reveal: "*... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know my voice.*" Peter got out of the boat because, as one of the flock, he recognised the familiar voice of his shepherd Jesus, to which he had listened so many times – a voice with which we, through reading the Gospels, can become familiar too.

The second way Peter recognised Jesus' voice was, spending time with Jesus. Once again, I refer you to a time machine - the remainder of the New Testament, from the Book of Acts to the Letters of Paul and others. Once you've gone through the four Gospels, the rest of the New Testament is a record of those who hung around with Jesus, who spent time with him. The New Testament, from Acts to Revelation, is the record of the impact Jesus had on their lives, on their loves, on their decisions. And the good news is, those very people – well, the spiritual descendants of those very people, anyway – are sitting around you right now.

The Church is nothing other than the continuation of that community of the Early Church, the extended family throughout time of those who spent time with Jesus, and with those who spent time with those who spent time with him - people for whom Jesus still has an impact on their lives, on their loves, on their decisions. Church is where we come to continue hanging around with Jesus, by hanging around with those who hang around with him, with those who know and listen for his voice, and with those - like you, like me - who aren't entirely sure why we're here other than this is the only place we know where we sense a hope of finding the life, the love, the joy which God would give. When we are faced with a big decision, we can seek the wise counsel of our fellow travellers, and learn from their example and their advice.

Peter listened to Jesus. He spent time with Jesus, and with others who knew him. Thirdly, he entered into relationship with Jesus. It is one thing to listen to someone. It is something else to spend time with them. It is something else entirely to enter into relationship with them. That's when we truly begin to know someone. And

when you know someone, you begin to know what they want in life - their preferences, their goals, their moral stand - and what they want for you. And what they want for you (if they truly love you) is not simply what you want, but what's best.

Jesus came to bring us into relationship with God. We enter that relationship through Jesus, for Jesus is none other than God presenting himself to us in a way that we can grasp, can appreciate, can understand. Opening our hearts to God's love through Christ, accepting the great gift that God offers, is how we enter that relationship, is how we live the new life. Coming to know God through coming to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and worshipping and serving together with the brothers and sisters of Jesus, listening for the voice of Jesus in prayer, is how we strengthen and grow that relationship. That's how we recognise the voice in the midst of the storm.

Down to a personal level. Let's presume a decision is before us. We're in a storm. We're trapped in a rut. We're faced with an opportunity. We're wondering if it is time to get out of the boat. We can ask ourselves, "based upon what I know of God through the teaching and example of Jesus, based upon what I know of how God works through his people by knowing those who hang around with him, is this move I'm going to make in line with what God would have me do?" Secondly, "Is what I'm considering doing best only for me, or for the others around me as well?" When we can answer that our plan for change is consistent with the teaching and example of Jesus, is affirmed by the counsel of others who know his voice, and is further affirmed through prayer, by drawing on that personal relationship we have with Jesus, then can we step out of the boat confident that when we hit the water, Jesus will be there to lift us up and to take us by the hand.

If it seems as though that kind of certainty is an unattainable dream, if it seems as though you don't know what the heck I'm talking about, well, let me encourage you to follow the example of Peter. Listen to Jesus, by reading his words, his life. Spend time with him, by participation in the life of the church. Enter into relationship with him, by opening your heart to his love, by listening for his voice in prayer. Then you, too, can be confident that when you make your big decision, when your feet hit the water, Jesus will be there to lift you up and to take you by the hand.

*Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. Amen.*