

Sermon for Zion, August 25, 2019

Hymns: 23 – I Waited For The Lord My God; 575 – Lead Me, Lord;

689 – Simply Trusting Every Day; 675- Precious Lord, Take My Hand

Scripture: Psalm 40:1-3; Matthew 14:25-33

Sermon Title: Precious Lord, Take My Hand

Psalm 40:1-3 (NLT)

*I waited patiently for the Lord to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.*

*He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.*

*He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.*

*He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.*

*Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the Lord.*

Matthew 14:25-33 (NIV)

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. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Over the last couple of weeks, we've looked at this story of Peter walking on the water. Peter and the others 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. Unfortunately, then three things happen, all in quick succession: it says that Peter noticed the strong wind, became frightened, and began to sink. One minute faithful; the next minute, fearful. Peter fell victim to fear.

John Ortberg, author of "If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat," sums up the problem in this way: *Peter's response to the wind and the storm was to give in to fear. He lost the sense of confidence that Jesus was master of the situation. He did not just sink in the water, but sank in his own anxiety and worry. I believe the reason God says "fear not" so often - there are 366 "fear not" verses in the Bible, more than any other command - is that fear will sink us faster than anything else. Fear disrupts faith and becomes the biggest obstacle to trusting and obeying God... Trust and fear have been battling each other for the human heart - your heart - a long time now. Eventually one or the other will win.*

We concluded that the key to overcoming fear is to grow closer to the source of Peace: God. God wants more than anything else to be in relationship with us, the loving relationship of a parent to a child, a brother to a sister, a saviour to a friend. The closer we grow in relationship to God, the farther we grow from fear. The closer we grow in relationship to God (hearing Jesus through reading the Gospels; spending time with Jesus, through participation in worship; deepening relationship with Jesus through prayer) the closer we grow in relationship with the reality of the power and love and hope of God; the closer we grow to becoming the people we most want to be, the people God would have us be, the people of joy, the walkers of water, the risers above.

After all, it is God who said: *Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you...For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, "Do not fear, I will help you."*

Now, this is encouraging stuff, but I want you to notice something important here. God doesn't tell us in this wonderful passage that we will never get into a fearful situation; God doesn't tell us that we will never fear because we'll never face difficulty or trauma, doesn't tell us that there won't be anything in our lives that would give us every good reason to cry out in panic, to wonder which way to turn. Instead, God promises something else altogether: *"I am with you. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will hold your hand."* That's different than, "You will never be in a difficult or traumatic situation."

Back to our story. Listen: *Peter said, "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. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

Note that when Peter says, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,"* all Jesus says in response is, *"Come."* He doesn't say, "Come, and by the way, it'll be like a walk in the park, the most fun you ever had, I promise nothing negative will happen to you; you won't even get wet." No, all he says is, "Come." And Peter

comes, and starts walking, and everything is wonderful, until he notices the strong wind, the waves, the very dangerous nature of what he's got himself into, and at that point, he's scared out of his wits. And begins to sink. Which scares him, if possible, even more.

He begins to sink. Bad things happen. Life takes a turn for the worse. Things don't go the way he'd hoped. His worst fisherman fears begin to come true. He begins to sink. As he sinks, as the water laps at his ankles, his calves, his knees, he begins to have whizzing through his mind the sorts of questions we hear ourselves asking at certain times in our lives, when, to our great and unwelcome surprise, things go bad:

How could something like this happen?
How could God do this to me?
What have I done wrong?
It's not fair!

All of us have thought these thoughts at some time or another. All of us have voiced these complaints to ourselves, to others, to God. I'm constantly amazed at how these questions, and the sense of self-preservatory justice behind them, manifest themselves in small children. "It's not fair!" is perhaps the most common childhood complaint, right after "I'm hungry," and, "I want some too," and the ever popular, "Mine!" As we grow older, we contain the outburst and the tears, but the thought is still there. "It's not fair!" How could something like this happen? How could God do this to me? What have I done wrong? This isn't fair! These thoughts are central to our human condition.

There are lots of things which bring these questions bubbling up to the surface of our lives. A broken heart; a broken promise; a broken dream; a broken marriage; a broken home; a broken body; a broken future; a broken life. And in the face of such tragedy, the questions inevitably come: How could something like this happen? How could God do this to me? What have I done wrong? This isn't fair! Add these ones, too: "Where are you, God?" "Don't you care?" My life is broken, and where are you now? Don't you care?

Well, I could veer off at this point to a hundred different sermons, many of which I've preached before, some of which I'll preach again, for if the answer to this question isn't central to our life, our faith, I don't know what is.

But I want to hang onto our story; I want to finish our story; I want to get back to Peter, waist-deep now, and sinking fast. What is there for us to learn from our story about life in the midst of struggle? Listen again: *...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

Perfectly natural response, you might think. *"Beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"* Anyone would do the same in the same situation. But is it? I'm not so sure. I don't know whether or not it is all that perfectly natural. Here are some alternate endings that I think might also be perfectly natural, and all too common, responses. Maybe you can find yourself in one of these; more likely, maybe you can find your spouse in one of these:

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Woe is me!" and, giving up, sank without a trace.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "I knew this would happen. I've not had an easy life...and on top of it all, my back is killing me..." and, complaining, sank slowly out of sight.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "This is all your fault!" and shaking his fist, was overcome by the waves.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "To heck with you, if this is what happens," and turning his back on Jesus, and crossing his arms, plunged beneath the surface.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "If you want to do something, you have to do it for yourself," and thrashing about, tried to swim for shore, and managed to get almost half-way there. Before sinking.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "this isn't really happening to me," and humming, closing his eyes, vanished without a ripple.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "I've changed my mind!" and scrabbled madly against the side of the boat before being overcome.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Tell you what, Jesus, let's make a deal," and, promising to lead a good and decent life, give generously to widows and orphans, and never miss another Sunday, drowned with his fingers crossed behind his back.

All perfectly natural responses. Giving up, surrendering to complaint, placing blame, anger, hopeless self-reliance, denial, behavioural changes after it is too late, bargaining: these are all perfectly natural responses in the face of devastating news or a desperate situation. They are all responses familiar to us. We've seen them. We've lived them. Peter's response? *...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

Why this response? Why not all the others? "Well, that's easy," you say, "Jesus is standing right there, Peter knows Jesus is going to help him out. What else would he say?"

But don't we believe the same thing? Don't we believe that Jesus is here? Don't we believe that God is with us, that his love surrounds us, that his Holy Spirit is actually within us, bringing us life? Well, we may believe that theologically, perhaps even

intellectually, but often times, in times of trouble, heartache or distress, we work our way through the list of giving up, or surrendering to complaint, or placing blame, or anger, or hopeless self-reliance, or denial, or behavioural changes after it's too late, or bargaining, or a combination thereof, before we work our way down to what I would call the "faith" response. And once again, it's endemic to us; it's all part of the human condition.

Ever since the Garden of Eden, we've made a career out of denial, placing the blame elsewhere, anger at everybody and everything, the rest of it. And ever since the garden, God has been working hard to restore that basic relationship of trust that once existed between God and us. And maybe this story of Jesus walking on the water - and more importantly, Peter walking on the water - is part of that process.

For what happens? This: *...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"* Why did you doubt? You of little faith, why did you doubt? Again, is Jesus asking this question of Peter? Or is he asking it of the rest of us as well?

Peter realised that in the midst of his desperate situation, Jesus was there, right there with him; and he called upon Jesus, and Jesus was there for him, and caught him by the hand. How can we have this certainty? How can we think to call upon God for help in the midst of our struggle? How can we know, like Peter, that God is there, that we are not alone?

Back to the story, and the conclusions we reached in the previous weeks:

God wants more than anything else to be in relationship with us, the loving relationship of a parent to a child, a brother to a sister, a saviour to a friend. The closer we grow in relationship to God, the farther we grow from fear, and the closer we grow to trust. The closer we grow in relationship to God (hearing Jesus through reading the Gospels; spending time with Jesus, through participation in worship; deepening relationship with Jesus through prayer) the closer we grow in relationship with the reality of the power and love and hope of God; the closer we grow to becoming the people we most want to be, the people God would have us be, the people of joy, the walkers of water, the risers above.

Growing close to God doesn't mean we'll never find ourselves in the midst of brokenness, tragedy, trouble. But it does mean we won't be there alone. It does mean that we're never without help, without hope, without a hand to grasp. The finest people I know are not the people who've never had a problem, but are people who have come through the fire, who have come through the waves, who know what it is to reach out a

hand, to cry out to God in the midst of their struggle, and to find that God is with them, beside them, within them, and in his love, will not let them go.

Peter found that out. I won't say he never forgot it, for it seems as though at one time or another he did; that too is part and parcel of our human condition. I will say, though, that he was forever changed. You too can be changed; you too can be ready to step from the boat, to live life as it was meant to be lived; and when the wind and the waves threaten your very soul, you too can know what it is to call out to God, to reach out in faith, to know the touch of his hand. You too can live in faith. You too can learn what it is to trust God again.

Maybe you're there now, water up to your ankles, sinking fast. Maybe you're the one facing a storm: A broken heart; a broken promise; a broken dream; a broken marriage; a broken home; a broken body; a broken future; a broken life. Maybe you're the one asking the question: "How could something like this happen? How could God do this to me? What have I done wrong? This isn't fair! Where are you, God? Don't you care? My life is broken, and where are you now? Don't you care?" Maybe you've asked those questions in the past; maybe you'll be asking them tomorrow. If you are, when you are, I hope you'll remember Peter, and the water, and the waves. And I pray you will call out to the only one who can truly help; that you will reach out to the Lord, even as the Lord reaches out to you; that you will put your hope and trust, that you will put your heart and soul, in the hands of Jesus. And find peace.

...beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Amen.

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To dig even deeper into this story of Peter walking on water, I encourage you to read John Ortberg's "If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat." This sermon series has incorporated many of Ortberg's insights. All of his books come highly recommended!

- Rev. Douglas Rollwage