JESUS WALKS ON WATER

Matthew 14:22–33

Key Verse: 14:27

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

It’s October: Halloween season. We see ghosts and goblins, scary cats and bats, and mummies and monsters. People love to decorate their homes, bake cookies and cupcakes, dress up in ghoulish costumes, and go to houses of horror. Halloween parties can get really dark. But in today’s passage we see Jesus who wants us to live not in fear but in faith. We want to think about where fear comes from, and why it’s not good to live in fear. We especially want to think about what it means to us that both Jesus and Peter walk on water. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

After Jesus performed the great miracle of multiplying the bread and fish, people must have been so happy. The disciples must have been happy, too. After distributing all the food, they got to eat their own basketfuls of bread and fish. Moreover, people were now looking at them as special guys, working closely with Jesus and doing great things. But this euphoric mood was not to last. Look at verse 22. Jesus put a quick end to it. In Greek it literally says he “forced” them. Before the feeding the disciples tried to get Jesus to hurry up and leave, but now they wanted to linger and enjoy the moment. Jesus was concerned that they were missing what he wanted them to learn and focusing on their newfound popularity. So he sent them on ahead and dismissed the crowd.

Look at verse 23. What Jesus really wanted at this moment was to be alone to pray. He still probably needed the time to process the news of the death of John the Baptist. He needed to prepare himself for what was about to happen to him as well. And he wanted to find God’s wisdom on how best to help his disciples. They needed to grasp who he really was and what their own mission would be after he was gone. With all kinds of demands and problems around him, with so much depending on him, Jesus made personal time to pray. If we want to grow spiritually, if we really want to serve God, even though we’re surrounded by problems and demands, we too need to carve out personal time alone with God. When we devote ourselves to prayer, we gain spiritual strength and discernment to see what God is doing and what he’s leading us to do.

Look at verse 24. While Jesus was alone praying, the disciples in the boat were having a hard time. The wind had blown them way out into the sea, and they were getting nowhere. The word “buffeted” in Greek literally means “tortured.” What should have been a short boat ride of about 30 minutes had turned into an all-night intense struggle going nowhere. The wind was constantly against them. It’s a metaphor for life. Have you ever had a day when everything seemed to be going wrong, all day long? Have you ever had problem upon problem come up against you, until you wondered how much more you could take? Jesus’ disciples here were being battered by the waves of the sea all night long until it started to seem like sheer torture. Even so, it seems as though it was all part of the plan, that Jesus wanted them to go through this difficulty so as to teach them something. When we’re suffering, it’s hard to accept that it’s all part of God’s plan, that he’s trying to help us learn and grow. But it’s true.

Look at verse 25. Through a night in prayer Jesus realized that this was what God the Father wanted him to do. God wanted him to go and reveal himself to his disciples in this way. He’d already shown them that he could calm the stormy sea (8:23–27). This time he was out to show them that all the problems of the world are actually under his feet. Jesus is above it all and can’t be dragged down by any of it. His walking on the water shows us that through faith he overcame the whole world, and so can we (Jn16:33; 1Jn5:4).

How did the disciples respond to this? Look at verse 26. This was not Jesus’ intention. He wasn’t trying to terrify them, but to encourage them. But in the early morning light they couldn’t recognize him. The real issue was that their fear blinded them to see that he’d come to help them. When we’re fearful, we too interpret harmless or even good things in a bad light. Jesus’ disciples were strong men. In ordinary situations they seemed just fine. But through struggling all night on the sea, they’d reached their human limitations, and now, the fear hiding within them came rising to the surface.

Often we’re not even aware of how inwardly fearful we are. It takes a crisis to bring it out. Sometimes, we wake up from a terrible dream and realize there were things we suppressed that we were afraid of. Where did the fear within us come from? The Bible tells us that fear came after Adam and Eve sinned against God. They hid themselves from God in the garden. Ever since, fear has been lurking in people’s souls. We’re fearful because our relationship with God is broken, or superficial, or weak. Without God, in one way or another we cannot but end up fearful. To many people, fear seems normal. It keeps us from danger. But fear is a terrible thing. Fear paralyzes us. Fear keeps us from doing the good things we should be doing. Fear makes us cowardly and overly cautious about everything. Fear leaves our lives tragic and useless. Most of all, when we live in fear, we can’t please God. Jesus was training his disciples to become spiritual leaders. But if they never dealt with their own inner fear, they certainly couldn’t lead others.

How did Jesus help them? Read verse 27. With these words he made it clear he wasn’t a ghost floating over the waters; he was Jesus himself. His words here are very powerful. He doesn’t make the wind stop yet. He only tells them to “take courage” or “take heart.” And he tells them not to be afraid. How could they overcome their fear? How can we? Some people try with their own willpower to confront their fears. They jump out of airplanes or force themselves to watch a scary movie. But these things don’t really get at the root of our fears. To help his disciples Jesus says here, very simply and quietly: “It is I.” It’s similar to Moses’ encounter with God in Exodus, where God revealed himself to him as the great “I AM” (Ex3:14). Courage or fearlessness come not from our own willpower or strength, or human preparations, but when we realize that, even in our terrible situation, God is with us. The Psalmist wrote, “The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (Ps118:6). He also wrote: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me…” (Ps23:4a). Finally, the psalmist said: “I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken” (Ps16:8).

One of the major themes of Matthew’s Gospel is that Jesus is God with us. At his birth the angel said he would be called “Immanuel—God with us” (1:23). Jesus’ followers may seem so vulnerable and weak in this world. But he later would say: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them” (18:20). And at the end of Matthew’s Gospel he says: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:20b). Jesus is God with us. If we believe in him, it’s still true now, and always will be. When we deeply realize that Jesus is God with us, it drives out all our fears. It gives us real courage—the courage to face even the worst circumstances, to go through anything, to overcome anything, to do anything for God. We can’t just know it in our heads; we actually have to experience it personally in real life.

How do the disciples respond? Look at verse 28. This part is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. What does Peter’s response here mean? We might see it negatively, that Peter is being presumptuous or again trying to be the center of attention. But if we look at this verse carefully we can see what’s going on. Partly it shows Peter isn’t sure it’s Jesus—he’s asking for further proof. Partly it also shows Peter’s growing faith. He’s grasping something that the others didn’t see yet: Jesus is wanting them to learn how to walk by faith in impossible situations.

How does Jesus respond to him? Look at verse 29. It’s amazing; Peter could walk on water, just like Jesus, when he trusted in Jesus and kept his focus on Jesus. As we saw in the previous event, Jesus was training his disciples through the words, “You give them something to eat.” He was challenging them to learn his compassion, and to learn faith in God to feed people even when it seemed impossible to do so. When they brought him even the little they had, by faith, they experienced a great miracle. Here Jesus is helping Peter experience further to do something impossible, by faith in God. Again and again in his ministry Jesus will challenge his disciples to do the impossible, by faith in God (17:20; 21:21). Jesus wants everyone who follows him to live by faith, not by sight (2Co5:7). He wants us to live daily with the conviction of the Apostle Paul: “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Php4:13). To truly live by faith, we need to learn to depend on God, not on ourselves, in all that we do.

What happened next? Look at verse 30. It says, “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid…” It means he took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the dangerous wind whipping up the waves. Peter was able to walk on water when he kept looking at Jesus. But when he started looking at his situation, he began sinking. This is such an important lesson for us: Faith is not to ignore realities, but to focus on Jesus in the midst of impossibilities. Jesus calls us not to live in denial, but to live by faith in him. Hebrews 12:2,3 says, “…fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Do you feel like you’re sinking in your situation? Have you grown weary and lost heart for ministry? Let’s fix our eyes on Jesus who walked on water and newly experience the power of faith.

Read verse 31. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus often calls his disciples “you of little faith” (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20). It’s about not the size but the quality. Our faith can be as small as a mustard seed, but when it’s genuine, it’s powerful enough to make impossible things possible (17:20). We also see in verse 31 that Jesus was able to catch Peter when he was sinking. Even when our faith fails and we feel like we’re sinking, Jesus is totally able to rescue us.

Look at verse 32. Both Jesus and Peter finish walking on the water and climb into the boat with the others. Read verse 33. The key word is “worship.” It’s another important theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus was not just a man, or a human king; he’s the one worthy of our worship. At the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, the magi come to worship him (2:2,11). And at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the disciples worship him (28:9,17). It says here in verse 33 that they realized that he is the Son of God. Matthew’s Gospel tells us again and again that Jesus is the Son of God (4:3,6; 16:16; 26:63; 27:43,54). Many doubt that it’s true, or only hear it second-hand, but Jesus wants us to experience it personally.

Today we heard Jesus’ voice: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” May God bless us to encounter Jesus the Son of God personally, be healed of our inner fears, and find the courage of faith to attempt great things for God.