

Get Out of the Boat!

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Date: 13 August 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning again. We, as some of you know, my family, we traveled a lot this summer, so we were away for several weeks.

And as we traveled, we were on planes and buses and, you know, metros and lots of Ubers. And I found myself thinking the other day how interesting it is that in all this travel, how many times we entrusted ourselves to total strangers.

We entrusted our lives. We entrusted our safety. We entrusted the safety of our children to people we've never met, right? Every time you get on a plane, every time you get in an Uber, that person most likely is a total stranger.

You have no idea what kind of person they are. You have no idea what kind of training or qualifications they have. You have no idea what state of mind they might be in at that particular moment. And yet, at least for me, I most of the time don't even think about it.

I just assume that this person is going to know what they're doing and that they're going to get us where we need to go safely and on time. I just sort of implicitly trust these people even though we've never met.

[1 : 1 6] What's interesting about that and what I was thinking about is that while I have that attitude and posture in that context, when it comes to God, when it comes to God who is in some ways the great pilot of history, right?

If there's someone up there in the cockpit guiding all of this towards somewhere or some win, if there is a God, then you would imagine that because that God is all-powerful and all-knowing that we would trust that kind of God infinitely more than we would trust a human being to get us across town.

And yet, at least when it comes to me, I have the opposite attitude. I continually question. I continually doubt. I continually wonder. I would never dare go up in a cockpit and tell a pilot how to fly the plane better.

I have no idea what I'm doing, right? But I'm constantly wanting to tell God ways that I think he needs to guide my life in ways that are better than what he's currently doing.

And I realize how much I struggle with even a basic level of trust. It just doesn't come naturally. And, you know, every single day of our lives when we wake up, that's the question that we have to answer.

[2 : 3 3] If I do believe there is a God in the cockpit of history, do I trust him? Do I trust where he's leading me?

And this is the theme, really, at the heart of this passage from our gospel reading in Matthew chapter 14. It's the story that many people are familiar with of Jesus walking on the water and Peter attempting to go out and meet him in the midst of the storm.

And what this is really, it's a picture of the Christian life. And it's a picture of the way faith and doubt and fear and failure and grace are all interwoven together.

And so we're going to look at this story this morning and then we're going to look at what it teaches us about faith and trust in the midst of uncertainty and fear. Let's pray.

Lord, our heavenly Father, we thank you for being a God who's with us and a God who speaks. I confess my own great hesitation in entrusting anything to you.

[3 : 40] Lord, the constant doubt that plagues my mind. And so, Lord, I pray that you would speak to us through your word this morning. I pray that you would do what you have promised to do, that this ink and paper would come alive, that it would become flesh, that through your written word we would come to see your living word, Jesus Christ.

And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. So first of all, just let's get oriented to the story and what's happening here.

It's been a long day for the disciples. They've just seen Jesus do something incredibly miraculous. He took a few meager loads of bread and fed thousands of people.

They've now sent those people home. Jesus commands his disciples to get in a boat and to head northwest. We see later in the text that they're headed to a town called Gennesaret.

And he says, go ahead and get in the boat and start heading over there, and I'm going to spend some time alone in prayer. And Jesus has gotten some hard news. He's been rejected at Nazareth, his hometown.

[4 : 47] He's heard about the death of John the Baptist. He has things to reflect on. And he's looking forward to where they're going. There's a change coming. And so Jesus is preparing himself. We'll come back to that.

So the disciples set out on the boat, and a storm hits. It's not uncommon for storms to come up pretty quickly in the Sea of Galilee, but also in the Bible. And for those of you who were here a few weeks ago and heard Jeff preach on Jonah 2, which we read again, you know that in the Bible, storms are often a place of spiritual transformation.

And that's exactly what we're going to see here. A storm comes. By evening, they're a long way out, two to three miles at least out in open water. The wind is howling.

Matthew uses the word that means tormented to describe the waves. They are being tormented by the waves. And it says, and it's easy to miss this until you kind of look closely, they end up battling this storm from evening until the fourth watch.

In other words, they battle this storm for over nine hours. It's been a long day, and then they get into a boat, a storm hits, and then they spend all night battling this storm.

[6 : 00] And then in all of their exhaustion, they're weary. They look out into that dark, dark abyss of the open water.

And they see in the midst of that murky darkness, they see a figure walking toward them. You can just imagine what that would have been like.

Now, up to this point, they have not been afraid. It's not said they're afraid of the storm. But now they're terrified. But they're not terrified of the storm. They are terrified of this figure that they see walking toward them.

One of them cries out, it's a ghost. It's very common in the ancient world, as it is today, to think that such things could happen. It's a ghost.

But Jesus calls out to them and says, take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid. Then Peter does something pretty surprising. Peter stands up and says, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

[7 : 00] And you might think that Jesus would say, oh, come on, Peter. But Jesus immediately says, come. Come on out. And we just need to imagine what that must have been like.

Lord, if it's you, let me, command me and I'll come out and meet you on the water. And Jesus says, all right, come. Get out of the boat. And you can imagine all of the stunned looks as everybody turns to Peter to see is he actually going to do it.

And then you see Peter very slowly lifting one leg out of the boat and then lifting another leg out of the boat. And once he's out, he realizes that he can actually stand.

And you can imagine all of the disciples just freaking out at this point. And, I mean, it's quite a scene. I don't know if we have, you know, older kids here every week we're giving you an image to draw or to think about.

This would be a really fun image to try to draw. If you're drawing and you want something to, you want a project or a focus, creative focus, draw Peter trying to go out to meet Jesus walking on the water.

[8 : 10] And you can draw the other disciples looking with incredulity, looking with utter disbelief at what is happening, right? Peter gets out of the boat. Now, I want to stop right here and I want to kind of make our first point from this text.

And that is this. When it comes to faith, faith demands risk. Faith demands that we take risks. In our modern age, we've come to think of faith primarily along intellectual lines.

We think of faith primarily as intellectual ascent. So having faith in God or having faith in Jesus means I believe that God exists.

I believe that Jesus was real, is real. But if we understand what faith really means, that's not really faith by itself. It's certainly a part of faith.

But that alone is not sufficient to qualify as faith. Faith doesn't really become faith until you act on it. So you intellectually ascent, but then you have to actually act on it.

[9 : 15] You have to entrust yourself to it. Right? So I can look at an airplane and I can believe that it can fly. And I can read and try to understand all of the laws of physics and lift and how it's able to hang up there in the air.

And I can say, I believe that that thing is capable of flight. But it doesn't really become faith until I entrust my life to it. As long as I'm sitting on the ground, it's not faith. When I'm sitting in that plane in the air, then it becomes faith.

Because I've entrusted myself to it. Peter wants to be with Jesus, but in order to do that, he has to entrust his life to Jesus. He has to get out of the boat.

He can sit in the boat and think intellectually, I ascent to the possibility that Jesus has the power to make it possible for me to do this. But only when he gets out of the boat does it become faith.

And this kind of faith is the only way, this kind of risk-taking is the only way that faith can ever grow. I read one time about lobsters.

[10 : 23] I don't know much about lobsters, so I just assume this is true. I read one time that lobsters from time to time, they actually have to leave their shells in order to grow.

There's this period of time after they shed their old shell where they're extremely vulnerable. It's this time before the new shell is formed, and they're vulnerable to the elements.

The currents can carry them along. They can slam them into corals. There are schools of fish that would love to eat a nice, tender, vulnerable lobster with no shell.

And so they enter this time that, you know, I don't know what lobsters think about or feel, but I can imagine it would be, if they felt anything during that time, it would be pure terror. Because they're completely vulnerable.

They have no shell. And I imagine if you're a lobster, and that, you know, it's just like, man, you know, next week I've got to shed my shell. That's probably all you're thinking about. You know, and you're probably staying up all night thinking about shell-shedding day and what that's going to mean for you.

[11 : 26] And I can imagine it would be really tempting if you're that lobster, say, you know what, maybe I'll just stay here another week. You know, it's kind of the water's a little warm. Let's stay another couple of weeks. And I'll do it tomorrow.

I mean, that's the way I would be if I was a lobster. I'll do it tomorrow, you know. And it would be very tempting to do that because the shell is safe and it's comfortable and it's familiar. But here's what happens.

If a lobster stays too long in its shell, that shell becomes its prison. And if it stays longer than that, it eventually becomes its casket.

It will die in that shell. So it has to leave the shell to grow. And if it doesn't, it's going to die. And in order for our faith to grow, there are times when we need to leave the shell behind.

We need to, in order to follow Jesus, we have to leave what is comfortable, what is safe, what is familiar, and do something that seems, looks, feels utterly impossible.

[12 : 30] This may mean letting go of an old framework. This may mean letting go of a set of assumptions that we grew up with.

It may mean letting go of ways that we thought, things that we thought God always did. Ways that we thought the world happened to be.

Maybe we have to change our views about certain issues. Maybe we have to change our views about certain people. But there come these moments where we have to sort of shed that shell.

And those experiences can be terrifying. And it can be very tempting to go back to the old way, to go back to the old shell because it's safe and comfortable and familiar. Or, at the risk of mixing metaphors, it can be very tempting to stay in the boat.

But if we play it safe, we refuse to ever take risks, we refuse to ever get out of the boat, shed that shell, eventually, that's going to become our casket.

[13 : 28] Our faith is going to wither and it's going to die. So, even though it seems like Peter is in danger, Peter's actually the safest person here in the story.

The ones who are in real danger are the other 11 disciples who are still in the boat. They're the ones in real spiritual danger because they don't know what it's like to step out.

To have that experience of Jesus meeting them on the open water in the midst of the storm and holding them up. For them, this at least is still purely theoretical.

It's just intellectual assent. And what we need to understand is, you know, we look at this and we're like, well, why the theatrics? Why the storm? Why the walking on water? What does this have to do with? Well, the implications of this are very practical.

This whole ordeal, I would say, is preparation for what is to come. Peter and the disciples are going to have to shed their shell in all kinds of ways.

[14 : 31] I mentioned in the beginning that they're going to Gennesaret. And it's no coincidence that this event in the water happens on the way to Gennesaret. What's happening here? What's happening here?

I alluded before to the change that is coming in Jesus' ministry and his focus. What he's preparing for and where they're headed is going to be different than what they've done up to this point in Matthew's gospel.

Because up to this point, Jesus has been ministering primarily to the Jews, God's people. Well, that's what we all would expect. That's what the old way, the shell, would predict. Right?

But from this point forward, Jesus and the disciples are going to begin to minister to the Gentiles. In the very next chapter, chapter 15, Jesus is going to perform another miracle like he's just done, where he takes a few loaves of bread and he feeds multiple thousands of people.

And you say, well, is this the same miracle? Is Jesus just doing this all over the place? Why the repetition? That's very different in one major way. The second time he does it, he's not feeding Jews, he's feeding Gentiles.

[15 : 39] So the first time he feeds the Jews and everybody's like, well, this is like God feeding his chosen people in the middle of the wilderness, sending manna from heaven. But what do you do with the next time he does it and it's a bunch of Gentiles?

God's feeding Gentiles? What's that all about? See, the faith of the disciples has been contained within the shell of their Jewish cultural expectations.

The Jews are God's chosen favorites. The Gentiles are the enemy. And Jesus has come to liberate God's people from the wicked, evil Roman Gentiles, the occupiers, and to vindicate them.

All of a sudden, they're going to have to realize that that is an old shell that they are outgrowing rapidly. And they're going to have to leave that shell behind if they want to continue following Jesus. Because Jesus has come not just to save the Jews, he's come to save the whole world.

He's come to bring down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. And he's not come to conquer, he's come to be conquered. They're going to have to recognize and accept the reality.

[16 : 44] They're going to have to get out of the boat of safety and realize not only is their master going to suffer and die, but they're going to have to suffer. It's not going to be the road they thought it was going to be. And so again and again and again, the disciples are going to have to decide, am I going to get out of the boat?

Am I going to trust where Jesus is calling me to go, even though I'm terrified? Or am I going to stay in the safety of my old ways of thinking? Faith demands risk. Faith demands risk.

And that brings us to the second point. In order for us to be willing to take risks like that, that requires trust. That requires trust. Notice when Peter first steps out of the boat, he's standing on the water.

He's actually doing it. And then it says he starts to come toward Jesus. But then verse 30, In the Bible, wind and waves often symbolize evil and chaos.

There is so much evil and suffering in the world. The question many of us struggle with most is not whether or not there is a God, but whether or not that God is good.

[18 : 01] Whether or not that God is good. Our daughter got really sick one time, and she had all these sores in her mouth, and she was really sick, and she was miserable.

And she said over the period of several days, why would God do this to me? She said, I prayed and I asked God to take this away to heal me, and he didn't.

Is he mad at me? Is he punishing me? Is he just mean? You know, she was asking those questions as a five-year-old.

To be honest, I sometimes ask those questions as a 45-year-old. You know, I see kids getting shot in our city. I see wars being fought.

I see wildfires wiping out entire towns in minutes. I pray for biopsy results. Struggling marriages. And I ask these questions.

[19 : 12] Same as my daughter. We read in the book of Genesis that God's original creation was good. We read that evil somehow entered in. We read that only after humans rejected God did suffering and death become part of the world and part of our lives.

But how do we make sense of the suffering and evil that we experience? What do we do when God seems silent or when God seems absent or when God seems capricious?

How can we possibly trust God in a world like this? And the only answer that has ever given me any comfort is the answer that we see in passages like this.

Only by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Here we see Jesus commanding the wind and commanding the water. He has power only God could have.

And yet he's allowing this storm to happen. He commanded the disciples to get into the boat and the storm comes. It's not because Jesus dropped the ball. Jesus knew the storm was going to come.

[20 : 24] He allowed it to come. And in a few moments in this story, he's going to silence the storm with a word. He has absolute authority over the storm and yet he allows it to come.

And yet we also know that Jesus loves Peter and the other disciples more than we can possibly imagine. And we know that because he's eventually going to go and be willing to suffer and give his life to save Peter.

And he's going to do that knowing that Peter is going to deny him three times. He's going to utterly betray him. He's going to be abandoned by his disciples. And yet he's going to suffer and die to save them. He loves them that much.

And yet somehow Jesus who loves them that much and who has absolute authority over the wind and the waves allows the storm to come. And there's this mystery that we have to reckon with.

Sometimes God loves us so much that he ends the storm. Sometimes God loves us so much that he sends the storm. God's love is found in his yeses.

[21 : 29] God's love is found in his noes. How do we make sense of that? I have no idea. That is well above my pay grade. When Jesus asks Peter, why did you doubt?

The word doubt that Matthew uses literally means divided in two. Peter, why were you divided in two? What does he mean by that?

Well, Peter's looking at Jesus, but then he looks at the waves and the wind. And then he looks at Jesus, and then he looks at the waves and the wind. He's literally divided in two. And we know what that feels like to be divided in two.

Right? All the injustice and all the sickness and all the evil and all the suffering in the world, it can easily convince us that there is no God, or there is a God that he's not worth worshiping. And we're looking at the wind and the waves, and Jesus says, why are you divided in two?

I know. I know you can't understand that. You're human. Of course you can't understand that. Look at me. Keep your eyes fixed on me. And you fix your eyes on Jesus, and you see this man who heals the sick and gives sight to the blind, who welcomes outcasts at his table, who suffers and endures humiliation to save people who are sinning against him, who have rejected him.

[22 : 55] And you look at that, and you look at the wind and the waves, and the invitation here is to say, I know this doesn't make sense. But look at me.

All right? Look at his heart. Look at his character. Look at his life. And that gives us the strength to trust. If that's who God is, if he's the image of the invisible God, I can trust a God like that, even if I don't understand.

So faith demands risk, and then risk requires trust. Don't look at the wind and the waves. Don't focus on them. Focus on Jesus.

This leads to our final point, which I'll make more briefly. Faith requires risk.

Risk requires trust. But ultimately, it's that trust that glorifies Jesus. Trust glorifies Jesus. Peter and Jesus get into the boat, and it says the disciples worship Jesus, saying, truly, you are the Son of God.

[24 : 06] In Matthew's gospel, this is the first time we really see them get it. This is who Jesus really is. And, you know, to worship Jesus, to glorify him, is to praise and honor him for who he truly is.

It's recognizing this is who Jesus really is. And that's to recognize, in other words, that Jesus is the true hero of the story, not us.

Jesus is the true hero of the story, not Peter. Peter. It's easy to miss how presumptuous Peter is for trying to imitate Jesus. It's so interesting that his first reaction is to say, well, that's amazing.

I can't believe it. I want to do it. I can do that like you can. Come on, Jesus. I want to do it like you are. And there's a level of presumption there.

And this is why it's so important that we see Peter fail. It's so important that he fails. I would say this is what makes this a distinctly Christian story.

[25 : 08] If Peter had simply gotten out of the boat, had enough faith, walked over, high-fived Jesus, end of story, right?

This story wouldn't really be about Jesus. Then it would be a story about Peter. And then the sermon would be a very different sermon. You know, the takeaway, we would all be saying, hey, look at Peter's faith.

Look how much Peter trusted and believed in Jesus. And the moral of the story would be, have more faith like Peter. Now, you could tell that kind of story in a mosque.

You could tell that story in a synagogue. That kind of story would fit in just about any religion. You need to have more faith, have more devotion, get serious, get your life together, really show God that you care, really prove by the way you live that you really mean it this time.

Be like Peter. But in this story, because it's a Christian story, Peter fails. His doubt overwhelms his faith. He starts to sink and he realizes like that, he cannot save himself.

[26 : 17] He does not have enough faith. It is insufficient for what he's being called to do. All he can do is cry out in panic and desperation, Lord, save me.

And that's where it becomes a Christian story. Because immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and he takes hold of him and he lifts him out of the depths.

And what we see here is something very important to understand about faith and trust. Trust glorifies Jesus because it recognizes that it's not the quality of our faith.

It's not the quality of our faith. It is the object of our faith that saves us. It is not the quality or the quantity of your faith.

It is the object of your faith that saves you. You may have a huge amount of faith. You may be the kind of person who has a spiritual gift of faith you've never doubted in your life.

[27 : 21] You think God can do anything. You've seen miracles. You may be a Christian.

It's not the quality of your faith. It is not the quality of your faith. It is not the quality of your faith. It is the object of your faith that saves you. It's the fact that when our faith fails us, when, not if, when our faith fails us, all we have to do is cry out and Jesus will take hold of us.

Faith demands risk. Risk requires trust, and trust like that glorifies Jesus because it acknowledges it is Jesus. He's the hero, not us.

So if you want to follow Jesus, if you want to grow in your faith, you have to get out of the boat. Get out of the boat. And I don't know what that is for you. I don't know what in your life is the safety, the security, the comfort, the familiarity, the thing that you're clinging to.

If you want to follow Jesus and grow in your faith, you have to get out of the boat at some point. You know, it's funny. I thought about this recently as we've been navigating this whole building purchase.

[29 : 04] We felt called for years and years and years to secure a permanent home for Advent in the heart of the city so that we can honor our commitment to loving the people of D.C. so that we can continue to love and to serve people for the sake of the gospel for generations to come.

This is something that we felt called to, we're committed to. But this means we have to get out of the boat. It means we have to move to a different neighborhood. It means moving into a building that frankly is not nearly as nice.

It needs a lot of work. It's hot. It's dirty. It's old. All that work's gonna be incredibly expensive. It's gonna be lots of work projects on weekends.

It's gonna be down on our hands and knees, scrubbing and cleaning and painting. It's gonna be figuring out where to park and how to navigate. It's gonna be really hard. It's gonna be really expensive.

It's gonna take a long time. It's gonna take a lot longer than any of us think it's gonna take. It's gonna be extraordinarily hard. You excited? We have to get out of the boat.

[30 : 12] Why? Because that's where we feel called to go. This is where we feel called to be as a church. We have to get out of the boat. You know, when you're committed to intentionally seeking out relationships with people who are nothing like you, whatever Gentiles represent for you in your life, kind of whatever that other kind of person might be, when you're committed to tightening your budget so that you can be more generous, when you're committed to forgiving the person that hurt you the most because you know that Jesus has forgiven you more, when you're willing, the times that you're willing to have a public and open and honest faith in this climate, those are all times when you're getting out of the boat.

And when we get out of the boat, we know that we might succeed. We know that we will probably fail.

We know that we will have some successes. We know that we will have some failures. But we can always trust that no matter what happens, we will always remain firmly in the grip of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for, not for the strength or the quality of our own faith, because we know that even that comes from you, Lord.

That's something that we rely on you for. We thank you that despite ways that we may fail or fall short, you are always there. We thank you for that sure hand, that grip, that even when we might wanna let go, holds us fast.

[31 : 55] Lord, we thank you that whatever we might be called to risk, whatever we might be called to leave behind or to sacrifice, it is nothing compared to what you left behind. It's nothing compared to what you gave up in order to be with us.

So we pray that we would have the courage, that we would have the kind of faith that is willing to take the kind of risks so that we can meet you out there on the open water in the midst of the storm.

Because wherever you are, there we want to be. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.