

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Laura Crosby
Elemental: The Word or The Wave | Matthew 14:22-33

I had a nightmare last night. I dreamt that I missed preaching at both services this morning, and then I tossed a huge salad in front of you all. So, I'm really hoping this is not a dream and you are here and I am here, because I love the passage that we're talking about this morning, and I'm so excited about what God has to teach us from it. However, as my husband, John, reminded me, John Ortberg wrote a whole book about this passage and I only have twenty-five minutes, so I'd better get to it.

Two years ago I was sitting in my seat on an airplane waiting to take off for Chicago. As I was sitting there, the pilot came on over the PA and he said, "Um, ladies and gentleman, those of you sitting on the left-hand side of the plane, if you've looked out the window you may have noticed a part of the wing is missing, but we know about it." I was like, *what?!* This man who says he's the pilot, whose safety record I don't know, who's credentials I don't know, tells us that a major part of our plane is missing, but don't worry about it because they've got it covered. You can't make this stuff up, right?

Have you ever been in a situation where you've taken a step? You've gotten on an airplane, you applied for a job, you've made a move, or you've stepped out and done something, and you felt like you were a little out of control—like your life is in someone else's hands. When I was on that plane—basically every time I get on a plane—I felt like I was a little out of control and it made me think of the disciples in our passage of Scripture today. I think they may have felt out of control with Jesus all the time, like what the heck is He doing now? Right? I think particularly in our passage today they probably felt very out of control. We're going to be looking at Matthew 14:22-33, and if you have a Bible, I'd encourage you to turn there. If you want to use a pew Bible, it's on page 1459. We'll go through this passage verse by verse eventually, but as you're looking for that, I want to give you a little bit of the context here. This passage comes right after Jesus has fed the 5,000. It's been a very busy time. Jesus and the disciples have been doing ministry around the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus has been healing, and teaching, and reaching out. It's a super busy time! Mark's Gospel says this: "So many people were coming and going that they didn't even have time to eat." Now, if you're a mother of a toddler you get this, right? They were busy, they were tired and depleted. This is a really familiar passage, so I'm going to ask you a favor; as I read through it, I'm going to ask you to try to live into this. I'm going to ask you to try to put yourself on the Sea of Galilee, and try to think about one of the characters, or a group of people, that you identify with. So, it says in verse 22:

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd. ²³ After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. Later that night, He was

there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. ²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ²⁸ "Lord, if it's You," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ "Come," He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. "You of little faith," He said, "why did you doubt?" ³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
[Matthew 14:22-33]

So, who do you identify with most? The disciples being tired and battered by the waves? Do you identify with Peter, bold and courageous, stepping out? Or do you identify with the sinking Peter, taking his eyes off of Jesus, maybe feeling like a failure? Or maybe you identify with the disciples in the boat watching from a distance, kind of an observer, not really with the courage to step out. Let's unpack this verse by verse.

First of all, Matthew 14:22:

"Immediately Jesus MADE the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side while He dismissed the crowd. ²³ After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray."

Now, John's version says:

"Jesus, knowing they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself."

We see that Jesus has this pattern of engagement and retreat, and maybe Jesus knew that everybody just needed a little time out; time to step back from all the business like we all do, time to remember who they were and whose they were and who was ultimately in charge of their life.

"Later that night, He (Jesus) was there alone ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it."

Now, Mark's version says that the disciples were straining at the oars because the wind was against them. Okay, have any of you ever seen this saying on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt: *The safest place to be is in the will of God?* The safest place to be is in the will of God. That sounds really good and I believe it's true, but when you think about that, what do you think of? When I think about the safest place, I think about comfort. I think about predictability. I think about security. But look again at verse 22. It says, "Jesus

MADE the disciples go ahead of Him.” That means it was His will. He made them, right? So it’s got to be His will. Now, Jesus was completely human and completely God, right? As completely divine, He knew the beginning from the end. He knew that He was sending them into a storm. Why? Why would He make them go ahead if He knew that they were going into a storm? Maybe, just maybe God’s will . . . Just because something isn’t hard doesn’t mean that it’s not God’s will. Just because something isn’t hard maybe doesn’t mean that it’s not God’s will. Could it be that Jesus sent them ahead knowing they were going into a storm, knowing that He wanted to use the storm to refine them, to remind them of who He was in their lives? Maybe this is you. One of the disciples in the boat feeling tired and battered, and like the wind is against you.

I know this feeling of straining at the oars. I felt out of control when I was on that airplane—I feel out of control every time I fly. I felt out of control when our daughter got sick when she was living in the slums of Nairobi and I was thousands of miles away and couldn’t do anything about it. I felt out of control last year when my brother died of cancer. Thirty years ago, I felt out of control. John and I were living in a suburb of Chicago and had prayed and prayed and just determined that it was God’s will for us to move to Washington D.C. So we moved for the first time, away from friends, and family, and home. We had a 19-month-old little girl and I was eight months pregnant with our second, and we moved to a place where we knew no one, where it was the highest cost of living in the nation, where we were buying a home for the first time, where we were like fish out of water. And the whole time that we lived there, I prayed that God would change the circumstances that something would get better, and the whole time we lived there nothing changed, but God was faithful and knit us together as a family, and God taught us to depend on Him.

Sometimes, God delivers us from our circumstances, but sometimes God delivers us through them. God didn’t deliver us *from* the circumstances while we lived there, but He delivered us *through* them. Now, we may make dumb choices, bad decisions that put us into storms where we need to learn a lesson, but I really believe that sometimes we are making good decisions, we’re in God’s will, and He allows us into a storm to use it in our lives, to teach us something.

So what about you? Can you think of a place where you’re feeling out of control or buffeted by the waves? When Maggie was a two-year-old, we were walking and it was really windy and she said, “Mommy, the wind struggles me.” So, where are you feeling struggled by the wind? Maybe you’ve lost a loved one, or lost a relationship, or a job. Maybe you felt the sting of betrayal, or you’ve been wounded and you’re wondering why God has allowed this in your life. Maybe your marriage feels like a stormy place right now or life just feels lonely and dark. God may want to deliver you from those circumstances you’re experiencing or maybe He wants to deliver you through them.

So, the disciples are tired and depleted and then something unexpected happens. Verse 25 says:

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.²⁶ When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

Mark’s version says Jesus was about to pass them by, like He was just strolling along on the water, *hey guys*, and He stopped because they cried out. Could it be that God wants us to cry out to Him? Not necessarily even in faith, but the disciples cried out in fear and we can, too. Maybe God is waiting for us to cry out to Him. Verse 27 says:

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸ “Lord, if it’s You,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹ “Come,” He said.

Now maybe this is you—like Peter—impulsive and bold and wanting to experience everything. Think about this: Peter had enough faith to step out on one word from Jesus, “Come.” So, we can either respond to God’s word or we can react to the waves. Maybe we need to ask which is going to have more power in my life, the word or the wave? Yeah, we do, we look at the wave, we look at the circumstances in our lives, but then we can look beyond that to God’s word, what God says. The Gospel of John says, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The word spoke everything into being. In the beginning God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light.’” If we have the power of God’s word, what do we have to worry about? But I think we often walk around, we stand around, and we go *you know, Lord, speak to me. Tell me what to do*, and we expect maybe something mystical. I’ve never heard God speak audibly. We need to remember that if we want to get a word from God, we need to get into the word of God. If we want to hear from God, we need to get into His word. When Peter was walking on that word “Come” he was fine, but when he took his eyes off Jesus he started to sink. Verse 29 says:

²⁹ Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

So maybe you are the sinking Peter, taking your eyes off Jesus, maybe feeling a little bit like a failure. If this is you, I’m wondering if maybe you could ask what things have shifted your focus from all that God is to all that you’re not? This is when I need to remember a lot, but what shifts our focus to all that God is to all that you’re not? What waves are you focusing on?

Now, a lot of people point out that Peter sinks when he takes his eyes off of Jesus and looks at the wave. Absolutely, really valid point, but I think this passage is about more than just faith. It is about God’s greater grace. What did Jesus do when Peter took his eyes off of Him? Did He hold Peter down and say, “Well, take that, that will teach you. I want you to learn a lesson?” No, He reached out. This isn’t just about Peter who walked on water and sunk. It’s also about Jesus, who reached down with His greater grace; it’s about Jesus reaching down to Peter, to you, and to me.

On my flight two years ago, my hope couldn't be in the defective plane; instead I had to trust the pilot and trust God. Our hope isn't in our boat or in our own efforts to muster up enough faith, but our hope is in the One who made the wind and the waves. However, when you and I, like the disciples, get tired and weary and the waves are big, we can lose perspective. In the darkest season of my life, I felt engulfed by the waves. I felt like I couldn't see and I knew I had to try to lift my head and focus on Jesus. Our friend Mark Batterson taught me that I needed to stop talking to God about my waves and start talking to my waves about my God. We need to remind the waves in our life that God will never leave us or forsake us. We need to remember that He has designed good plans in advance for us to do. We need to remember that we can do all things through God who strengthens us; that if God is for us who can be against us? And most of all, that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God. We need to preach the power of God, the promises of God, the love of God to our waves. Verse 31 says:

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. "You of little faith," He said, "why did you doubt?"

Another version says, "Faint-hearted, what got into you?" Now, I love it that John Ortberg notes that Jesus said this to Peter while they were still out there on the water. He says:

"It may be that Jesus—like any good mentor—did not want to embarrass Peter in front of the other disciples. Peter fell. You will, too, I will, too, but Jesus will catch us."

People call this a story about Peter, but what about John and the other disciples in the boat? I think it is fascinating that in John's Gospel, he writes about Jesus walking on the water, but he leaves the Peter part out. Why do you think that is? John wasn't the one out experiencing it, right? He was just an observer. And maybe this is you today—an observer, one of the disciples in the boat, watching Peter and wishing maybe you were brave enough to take a step. So maybe we need to ask ourselves, what's our boat? What is it that is keeping us from trusting God? I love this Bob Goff picture. God invites us on a new adventure every day. If we're observers, we might need to ask, where is God asking me to trust Him and step out of the boat and walk on water?

I think there may be four things we could pay attention to, where God is prompting us to step out of our boat. The first one is **invitation**. Are you getting an invitation? Last spring, I received an invitation to go on a trip that was completely underwritten by the Gates Foundation. It was a trip with World Vision; it was an advocacy trip. It was about learning to deal with political systems and be better advocates for the poor and the marginalized. Well, I'm not a great advocate. I'm not really into politics, and it wasn't going to be a comfortable trip. I didn't want to go, but I sensed that God was saying to me, *this is an invitation and you need to step out of your boat and just go*. So I did and I was glad that I did. The second prompt I think we may need to pay attention to is **fear**. I mentioned that my brother died a year ago. My sister-in-law, Susan, has been so afraid of going back to church by herself. She has been afraid that she would fall apart. She

couldn't handle it emotionally. Finally, a little over a month ago she said, "Lord, I want to go back. I know I need to do this, but I just can't do it without You. I can't do it." And so she said she literally prayed every step of the way. She prayed as she opened the car door, she prayed as she started the ignition, she prayed as she got out of the car, and she made it. She's been going back to church with God's help. Fear prompted her to step out of her boat. A third prompt might be **frustration**. Our daughter Maggie did an internship in Northern Uganda in the middle of nowhere working with a girls' school a couple of years ago. And she discovered, the girls told her, that they were missing 3-5 days of school a month because when they had their period they had no sanitary supplies to deal with it, so they stayed home. She was indignant and thought *this is wrong. This is so frustrating; these girls shouldn't have to miss school!* So, she mobilized them. She taught them to advocate for themselves. They wrote notes to try to get donations from companies in Africa, and she wrote me and we mobilized people here to make donations to send to them. But then she took it a step further. She went on YouTube and learned how to make reusable pads, and she taught the girls how to sew them and to sell them also. This frustration was the prompt that got her to step out of her boat of comfort. The last one I would suggest is a prompt of **loss**. You guys remember—who have been around here a long time—you remember Nan and Paul Bertelson who were here many years ago. They lost their precious little boy Brett. And when Brett died, Nan could have just curled up in a ball and lived in that grief the rest of her life, but she didn't. She used that loss to turn her mourning into mission. It prompted her to create ministries to minister to people with special needs. She used that loss to prompt her to step outside her boat. Maybe you'll recognize yourself in one of those. So verse 32 says:

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is a part that we often leave out, the worship part. Again, this isn't just a passage about Peter's faith, but about God's greater grace, and when we recognize God's grace, our response is to worship Him. There's a lot in this passage, so before we come to the Communion table, I want you to just reflect for a minute. If you are feeling tired and battered, if you're feeling bold, if you're feeling like a failure and you're sinking, or like an observer...regardless of where you are, Jesus is with you and He reaches out His hand to you wherever you are. We come to the Communion table because we need Jesus—the Lord of the wind and the waves, and the One of who reaches out to us no matter how far down we go, and lifts us up.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.