

“Live by Faith, Not By Sight”

Matthew 14:22-33

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Christianity is all about faith in God and Jesus Christ as our Savior. There is no question about our basic foundation, but sometimes, it is hard to prove what our faith should look like. What does it mean to have faith that is rooted in the love of God? Every time I talk about our Christian faith, I am always reminded of a silly news article that I read when I was a high school student. Actually, it was serious news: A Christian cult group flew to Africa on a long journey to the largest lake in the African continent. The purpose of their trip was to prove their faith by walking on the water. The depth of Lake Victoria is over 200ft. They went to the deep water and tested their faith in God. They believed that they could walk like Peter if their faith was true. According to the news reports, more than thirty people literally drowned to death. They didn't bring any safety equipment with them - no life jackets, air tanks or life-saving flotation devices.

Do you have solid enough faith to walk on the water if we were all to go down to the American River after our service? Don't ask me to go first! I am not ready to prove my faith yet. I have a beautiful wife who I plan to love much longer and an eight month old baby to take care of for awhile! This morning, I would like to speak to you about faith as a basic trust not to be shaken by the strong winds and storms in the journey of our life.

Today's Scripture reading shows us a perfect example of 'faith' in Jesus, our Lord. Literally, Jesus challenged Peter and his disciples for their lack of faith and encouraged them to not be doubtful and to have faith in Him. After Jesus fed over five thousand people on a field and moved up the mountain by himself to pray, Jesus wanted some personal time because he heard that the John Baptist was beheaded by King Herod. The hardships and persecutions on his disciples because of his ministry weighed heavily on his conscience. Obviously, Jesus' ministry was not welcomed or accepted by political leaders and Jewish society because what he said when he talked about God was too radical to be accepted in Jewish culture: That was: "God loves you no matter who you are. There is nothing that you can do about this. God is always with you if you believe in God. Once you are connected to the love of God in faith, as the Apostle Paul reminded us, neither death nor anything else in creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord." This is what we believe in God and how we express our faith.

Today's Scripture reading symbolically represents the reality of the Christian community and the difficult situation the disciples faced in the Jewish – Roman emperors' times. When the evening came, the boat, with the disciples aboard, was battered by the waves, far from the land. Jesus worried about his disciples. So he came down to the shoreline and walked towards his disciples. The wind was so severe and wild, and the disciples were pulling on the oars against an adverse wind. Because of fatigue and stormy weather, they couldn't recognize their master in front of them even though Jesus approached them. Even Peter failed recognize the ability to walk on the water because he had such doubts when he saw the strong wind against him. This picture of the disciples' situation represents the 'bitter reality' of how hard it was for Christ's followers to keep their faith in the context of their challenging everyday lives.

The Sea of Galilee is the place where our Scripture story happened. This is important background to the larger story. Before we go deeper into the Scripture reading, it will be helpful to get some information about the Sea of Galilee. I researched some information

about the Sea of Galilee. In fact, the Sea of Galilee is not an ocean, but it is a lake, the largest freshwater lake in Israel (13 miles long and 8 miles wide. The depth of lake is around 141 ft deep.) If you have a little difficulty in picturing the size of this lake, I can compare the Sea of Galilee with Lake Tahoe. I am sure that you have been to Tahoe. It is a beautiful place to see. Lake Tahoe is 21 miles long, 13 miles wide, and its average depth of lake is 1,000ft. The maximum depth of lake is 1,645 ft. You better not test your faith by trying to walk on water at Lake Tahoe because Lake Tahoe is much deeper than the Sea of Galilee unless you have a stronger faith than Peter. According to the research of this text, their boat was 26 feet long and 7 feet wide, and it could carry 15 people maximum. Since they had to travel 3-4 miles overnight in a stormy weather and in the darkness, they were exhausted.

Let's revisit our text again. The story is very simple: first see what is happening on the surface of the water. Early in the morning, Jesus came walking towards them on the sea, but when the disciples saw him, they were terrified saying, "It's a ghost." Jesus said, "Take heart, It is I. Don't be afraid!" This is the first event. And the other one is that when Jesus asked Peter to get out of the boat to come to him, it seemed that he made it, but he failed because of his fear of the strong wind. Jesus said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" What lesson can we learn out of this magical story?

There is another important thing that we need to be aware of and carefully give our attention to - that is the surface of the water in the Sea of Galilee in the stormy weather. This story is happening not on the bank of the lake of Galilee, nor at the shoreline, but it is happening on the actual surface of the Sea of Galilee, on the water. This is a very important clue to understand the structure of this event, and it is also a crucial metaphor to understand the point of the whole story.

In this entire story, the surface of the water divides the world above water and the world seldom seen below the water level. Symbolically, it shows us two different worlds which are above the water and under the water: First, the 'above the water world' shows us a world where storms, crisis and challenges are happening, but Jesus stood on the water above, and he asked Peter to join him there in faith. The other one is the 'under water world.' This world shows us a space where Peter began to sink when he had a doubt seeing against the strong wind. This is a world that is not as visible and not seen. In our Scripture reading, the surface of the water is set up as a borderline of faith which means if you have a faith, then you can stand on the water and remain above, but if you have doubt, you will immediately sink into the water below. Jesus encouraged Peter and his disciples, including each one of us, not to be afraid to stand and walk on the water as Jesus Christ did. No matter what hardship and persecution threatens you in life, do not hide yourself 'under water,' but firmly stand and boldly walk on the water. In common sense, when we are afraid and fearful, we tend to step back which means we fall into the 'under water' world, but Jesus commands us to take courage to stand on the water.

In the world of psychology, there is a differentiation in the feelings of fear and anxiety. The feeling of fear arises when there is any specific threatening object before us. But the feeling of anxiety arises without any immediate threatening object before us. Let me give you an example: my wife is my hair dresser even though she is not a licensed and trained hair dresser. She has been cutting my hair since we married four years ago. (I got permission from her to share this story with you).

This week, on Monday night, she told me that "it is time to cut your hair. Your hair grows so fast." Anxiety arose in me because she cannot always guarantee to meet my hair-cutting expectations. In about twenty minutes, I realized that she was still cutting my hair. I was more anxious than ever, and I asked her, "Are you getting all my hair and making me a skinhead?" I reminded her that I am a pastor! She told me that if you don't like it this time, it

might be better next time. That made me really feel confident - NOT. That was an example of anxiety. After she finished my hair, she asked me to go and get baby Jacob. He was sleeping because it is better to give him a haircut when he is asleep. It was around eleven o'clock. As soon as she turned on the haircut clippers, the baby was frightened. He woke up and started crying. He tried to avoid this fearful sound by turning his head right and left because he felt the immediate threat of the clippers. This was a fear to an eight month old baby.

What is happening on the surface of the water are the feelings of fear and anxiety among disciples. In the darkness of night, fearful waves battered their ship during night, and they became physically and mentally weakened and exhausted. When they saw Jesus in front of them, they couldn't recognize him as their master. The disciples thought of him as a Ghost. The anxiety also arose to them, but Jesus tried to calm them down and said that "Don't be afraid. Take courage. It is I." We live in a world surrounded by many anxieties. The anxiety of an unpredictable future, worries about health, fears of losing jobs and anxiety about getting old and other worries around us discourage us and weaken our souls and hearts everyday. Psalm 27 reminds us that "God is our strength and shield: My heart trusts in him and I am helped. My hearts leaps for joy, and I will give my thanks to him in a song."

Let's look at that feeling of fear: When Jesus asked Peter to get out of the boat to walk on the water, it seemed that he made it, but when he saw the strong winds, the Scripture says that he immediately began to sink and failed. He had a great fear from the strong winds. Self-doubt allowed questions in his mind and must have discouraged him to stand firmly by Jesus even though Jesus was standing close to Peter on the water. Both anxiety and fear were happening at the same time on the surface of the 'above water world.' Self-doubt has not made a positive change in the past history or even in our individual life. Being negative and full of despair can't help generate any energy to turn around our wrong direction, but faith always can make a change and remind us that there is hope even in the midst of despair. A philosopher, Kierkegaard gives us a great definition of faith by saying: "Faith is the highest passion in a person." Faith in God can bring us strength and direction towards hope in God. Don't give your life to your enemy as a slave to anxiety and fear, but be a master of your life standing in faith by putting your trust in our God.

What makes you afraid? In life, there are threatening waves and strong winds that make us fearful. Among us, some people are suffering from cancer, anxious about treatment, and others are fighting different challenges in their lives. We are afraid and fearful in these storms of life. We know that there will be always the strong wind and fearful waves in our future lives, but don't be afraid of them, don't let anxiety and fear control you, but overcome your difficulties and troubles standing strongly in faith. Jesus invites all of us to get out of the boat and to walk on the water. It is a bold and daring invitation to a life of faith. Actually, it is a great commandment to our life. Live by faith, not by your sight. Jesus our Christ still speaks to us, "Take Courage, don't be afraid. I will be with you."