FACING THE STORMS  
The Man Called Peter (Part 3)  
March 2-3, 2013  
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Matthew 14:22-33 (TNIV)

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” 28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This is the third in our series of messages on The Man Called Peter and it’s based on one of the best-known stories in the Gospels. By now Peter and the other disciples have seen Jesus’ do some amazing things. That miraculous catch of fish Pastor Graig talked about last week. All kinds of people healed from diseases and demons. And just prior to this story feeding a crowd of more than 5,000 with a sack lunch. And the question they’re asking is: Who is this Jesus? Who is he? Our story provides us with four clues.

First, he’s the Lord who keeps his eye on us.

Second, he’s the Lord who comes to us in the storms.

Third, he’s the Lord who calls us to come to him.

And finally, he’s the Lord who catches us when we fall.

He keeps us, comes to us, calls us, and catches us. Let’s look at each of these.

The Lord Who Keeps His Eye on Us

First, he’s the Lord who keeps his eye on us. Matthew tells us he made his disciples get into the boat and head for the other side of the lake while he went up the mountain by himself to pray. If you’ve ever visited northern Israel, you know the Sea of Galilee is situated like a bowl of water surrounded by steep hills. The gaps between those hills act like the Columbia River Gorge and bring powerful blasts of wind. Sudden storms come up without warning and that’s what happened on this night. The disciples were caught in a storm so strong it was all they could do to keep their boat upright. Hour after hour the winds roared and the rain...
pounded and they were going nowhere.

And through it all, up on one of those hillsides, Jesus was watching.

As he prayed, he never took his eyes off his disciples. He watched as they tried to get across the sea but could only go a short distance. He kept his eyes on them as they struggled against the wind and the waves. It was just after 3:00 in the morning, and they were exhausted, frightened and alone.

Have you ever been there?

Sooner or later, everyone goes through a great storm. It may be a storm that batters your marriage and you can’t seem to make any progress through it. It may be a storm of some terrible disease in your body, or maybe worse, in the body of someone you love. Or you may lose your job and feel you’re too old to start over. Or your child gets into trouble – serious trouble. Lately, all it takes is to open the morning paper or turn on the evening news to make us hunker down as the skies grow dark and winds start blowing – the storms of war and school shootings, of sequestered cuts and fears of further job losses.

The thing about storms is they always leave us feeling alone and afraid. It’s always the worst around 3:00 a.m. – everything seems so dark and hopeless. You’ve been there, haven’t you? Maybe not in a little boat in a raging gale, but tossing and turning in your bed, battered by worries over your future or your family. And if you aren’t careful, you’ll start believing you really are alone. I was touched to read how Pope Benedict admit that at times it’s felt like he was out there alone in the boat as the storms blew over him, and that the Lord was in the back sound asleep. Whether you’re an emeritus pope or an everyday Presbyterian, being caught in the wind and the waves can make you feel that way – alone and afraid and cut off from God. That’s when you need to remember what this story tells you about Jesus. He’s the Lord who keeps his eye on you. You may not see him, but he sees you. He watches over you. And he isn’t sleeping. A couple weeks ago Pam Baker was with us, and she sang a song based on Psalm 121, a psalm that has the wonderful line that says,

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\begin{align*}
He & \text{ will not let your foot be moved,} \\
he & \text{ who keeps you will not slumber.} \\
Behold, & \text{ he who keeps Israel} \\
will & \text{ neither slumber nor sleep.}
\end{align*}
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Or, as Ron Mehl, beloved pastor of Beaverton Foursquare Church, used to say, “Our God works the night shift.” He is the Lord who keeps his eye on you when you’re all alone, when you run out of strength and don’t know what to do next. He keeps his eye on you when the wind and the waves are at their worst. And the great advantage of being the Son of God is that he has no trouble seeing you, even in the darkest night, even at 3:00 in the morning. As John reminds us in the opening verses of his Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” That’s our Jesus.

The Lord Who Comes to Us

That’s the first clue: he’s the Lord who keeps his eye on us. The second is this: he’s the Lord who comes to us. Verse 25 tells us, “Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.” He doesn’t just watch us from afar. He comes to us through the howling winds and the stormy waves.
He comes to us.

That’s so important. We don’t work our way to him. Whatever Christianity is, it’s not a do-it-yourself religion. It’s not about doing all the right things and working your way to God. It’s about a Lord who comes to us. Even in the storms. Or, I should say, especially in the storms. As some of us have discovered, he does his best work in the wind and the waves, when we’re at wit’s end, alone and exhausted. He doesn’t wait for us to find him. He finds us. He is the Lord who comes to us.

The disciples on the boat weren’t expecting him, weren’t looking for him. In fact, they were terrified when he showed up. They thought he was a ghost. But then he spoke, and his voice cut through the howling wind: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

There is a powerful truth in Jesus’ words that English translations cannot convey. In Greek, the words “it is I” should be “I am.” Ego eimi in Greek – the same emphatic form we find in Exodus 3 when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. Moses wanted to know God’s name, and instead of a proper noun, God gave Moses a verb:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’"

In Hebrew it’s Yahweh. In Greek it becomes Ego eimi. It’s the same expression Jesus uses in John 8:58 when he says, “Before Abraham was, I AM” and his opponents tried to kill him because they knew he was claiming to be none other than God himself. Jesus comes to these terrified disciples in the powerful name of the great I AM – the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. The power of God that moved over the face of the waters at creation, that spoke the world into being, now comes walking over the roaring sea like it’s dry land. In our times of doubting, wondering, looking for God and not feeling him near, we need to remember who he is and what he’s done. God himself in human form comes to rescue his frightened followers. In an unexpected time (the middle of the night), in an unforeseen way (walking on the water), he comes. “Take heart,” he cries, “I AM! Do not be afraid.”

The Lord Who Calls Us to Come

Who is this Jesus? He’s the Lord who keeps his eye on us. He’s the Lord who comes to us. And third, he’s the Lord who calls us to come to him. In verse 28 Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And I’ve often wondered what Peter was feeling when he heard Jesus call back to him: “You bet it’s me. Come on!”

But, bless him, Peter puts one foot over and then the other. But he’s still holding onto the side with white knuckles. And then he lets go – abandons himself to the power of Jesus. And for the first time in history, an ordinary human being walks on water.

For a while it’s as if only Peter and Jesus are there. Peter is beaming with delight. Jesus is pumping his fist and calling, “Come on, Peter!” And then verse 30 says, “But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened and began to sink.” Peter feels a blast of wind, turns his head and takes his eyes off Jesus. And what he sees is this big wave headed straight for him. And it dawns on him, “What was I thinking? I can’t do this!” And he began to sink.

I think Peter gets a pretty rough deal from most of us, certainly from most preachers like me. During Holy Week we talk about how Peter denied Jesus. And, yes, he did – three times. But the fact is, Peter was pretty much the only disciple around to do any denying. The others
had all scattered. Peter may have failed, but at least he was there. And yes, he took a few steps on the water until he became distracted. But at least he took the first step. At least he got out of the boat when Jesus called.

As John Ortberg says, if you want to walk on water you’ve got to get out of the boat. If you want to follow Jesus, you’ve got to climb out of the place of comfort and security. Out of the place of despair and hurt. Out of whatever you cling to. Your boat is whatever you are most afraid of losing. That’s what you might have to step away from to answer Jesus’ call.

Frederick Buechner defines faith as “not always being sure where you’re going but going anyway.” In other words, following Jesus has everything to do with taking risks. And I am painfully aware how much I hate having to say that. Because I do not like risks. So much of my life I’ve been cautious, careful, and risk-averse. When I picture myself in this story, I know exactly where I can be found. I’m the guy with both feet planted firmly in the boat, arms in a death grip around the mast, and my life preserver cinched up as tight as I can get it. I’m kind of interested in Jesus, mind you. But whereas Peter says, “Lord, command me come to you on the water and I will,” I would have yelled something like, “Lord, guarantee me that I won’t go under. Or at least promise me the water won’t be too cold. Give me a couple days to think about it and then I’ll probably come.”

I’m pretty sure I’m not alone. A few years ago a writer named Wilbur Reese wrote these words about our yearning for safety and comfort. See if you identify with them as much as I do:

_I’d like to buy $3 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep. But just enough to equal a warm cup of milk or a snooze in the sunshine. . . I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of [eternal life] in a paper bag. I’d like $3 worth of God, please._

If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat. Could it be Jesus is calling you and me to do that? To take a risky step of faith? To do something, or give something, or become something that is outside your comfort zone, that can only be done in the power of God? What would the next step look like? What does it mean for you and me to get out of the boat and head for Jesus?

The Lord Who Catches Us When We Fall

We’ve said Jesus is the Lord who keeps his eye on us, who comes to us, who calls us to come to him. And lastly, he’s the Lord who catches us when we fall. Because stepping out of the boat doesn’t guarantee success. Getting out of the boat will get you closer to Jesus, but it doesn’t mean you won’t get wet – or worse. Many of you will remember that great scene at the end of the first _Lord of the Rings_ movie when Frodo the hobbit tries to cross the river in a little boat all by himself. His friend Sam Gamgee discovers it and knows he’s supposed to go with Frodo. So he just wades into the water – clothes, cloak, backpack and everything. Out in the boat Frodo cries, “Sam, you can’t swim!” But that doesn’t stop Sam. He keeps wading until he’s in over his head. Then he tries to swim, but the fact is, _he really can’t_. And he’s going under for the last time when Frodo’s hand comes through the water and grabs him and pulls him to safety.

Just like Peter on the Sea of Galilee. He gets partway to Jesus, and then realizes he’s in trouble. He takes his focus off of Jesus and for a moment sees only the wind and waves, feels
the cold water start to swallow him.

But then Peter makes the smartest move of his life. He calls out to Jesus: “Lord, save me!” And Jesus doesn’t hesitate. Verse 31 says he “immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter.” I’m so grateful for those words. Jesus didn’t turn away in disgust and let him go under. Or offer some advice on how to tread water. No, “immediately,” it says, Jesus reached out and caught him. And as he pulled him up, he said, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” I don’t hear that as Jesus criticizing Peter. I hear that as Jesus wishing for more. “I wish you’d kept your eyes on me, Peter. I wish you’d trusted my power was greater than the wind and the waves.”

And I can hear him saying much the same thing to me. I don’t think I’ll ever hear Jesus say, “Bob, you were too reckless. You took too many risks for me. You trusted me and did these crazy, awesome things.” No, the Jesus of my life probably won’t say that. What I’m pretty sure he will say is, “Little-faith, why did you take your eyes off me? Why did you doubt?”

Good question. Why do I doubt? Why do you doubt? We doubt when we forget who this Jesus is. He’s the One who keeps his eye on you, even when you’re battered by the storm and it’s 3:00 in the morning. He’s the One who doesn’t wait for you to come to him but comes to you through the wind and across the waves. He’s the One who calls you to get out of the boat and come to him. And he’s the One who catches you when you fall.

And you will fall. Or have fallen. Some of you are in trouble today. Some of you are facing a storm that’s got you terrified. The place to begin is to fix your eyes on Jesus. Not the wind and the waves. Only Jesus. The great I AM – he’s here to meet you at this Table. You don’t have to do anything heroic. You don’t have to walk on water. But you do have to take the next step and come to him. Take Peter’s prayer and make it your own when you come to the Table. Take the bread and the cup and in your heart or even out loud pray, “Lord, save me!” And he will. He’ll reach out his nail-pierced hand, and he’ll catch you and he’ll keep you and never let you go.

O my fellow little-faiths, don’t doubt. Take this next step and pray with me:

Lord Jesus, when the storms rage against our little boat and we’re terrified, give us faith to know Your eye is ever on us. Give us the vision to see You coming through the wind and waves to save us. Give us the courage to step out of the security of the boat when You call. And give us the trust to know You’ll catch us even if we take our eyes off you and begin to go under. Amen.

Psalm 121: 3-4 RSV.
John 1:5 RSV.
Exodus 3:14 NRSV.