

8.9.26 Sermon on Matthew 14:22-33

This week our church was filled with the joyful chaos of Vacation Bible School. Kids and adults laughed, played games, consumed plenty of sugar, and learned stories about God's grace. The tagline of the week was God's grace is sweeter than candy – why? Because it is freely given, there is more than enough, and it is meant to be shared. Each night we followed someone whose life was transformed by encountering Christ: the prodigal son, Zacchaeus, the woman who anointed Jesus. And then on our last night, we heard the story of Peter meeting the risen Jesus on the beach after his resurrection, after he denied Jesus three times. In that story, we were reminded that grace never gives up on us.

But that wasn't the beginning, or the end, of Peter's story. A long time before that breakfast on the beach, Peter was constantly learning what it meant to trust Jesus, and today's reading is one of those lessons. Personally, I find a great deal of hope when I hear stories about Peter. He messes up in so many ways, and yet he still shows us glimpses of what faithfulness can look like. Peter went through times of fear and doubt, and times where he simply did not understand a thing. But Peter still becomes the rock upon which Christ builds the church. And if Christ can do that with Peter, then there is certainly hope for the rest of us, too.

Last week we heard the story of the feeding of the 5,000, and this week's narrative immediately follows. Once everyone was fed, Jesus sent the crowds and the disciples away to finally get some alone time. He goes up on a mountain to pray while the disciples are out on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. In the middle of the night, Jesus is still alone up on the mountain, and a storm comes upon the disciples. Wind and waves batter the boat, and they are tossed about in the middle of the sea.

It might sound like this is just bad weather, but there is a deeper symbolism to this passage as well. Throughout the Bible, the sea often represents chaos or danger. The disciples are caught not only on a physical storm, but a metaphorical one as well – surrounded by things that feel way beyond their control.

Perhaps that is a familiar experience to you. Most of us know what it feels like to find ourselves caught up in storms we never saw coming. Maybe it was an unexpected diagnosis, or a relationship that fell apart. Maybe it has been anxiety about our children or our future. Maybe overwhelming grief. And then, beyond the personal storms we experience, we look around and see endless war, political division, violence, injustice, and a world that looks like it is being tossed around by violent and chaotic waves.

The disciples have been fighting the wind and the water for hours, probably fearful and exhausted just trying to survive when, just before dawn, they see someone walking toward them on the water. And they freak out even more. Now, not only are they being tossed about in a violent storm, now an apparition is coming toward them. It's the stuff of nightmares (or my nightmares, at least.) They are terrified. They are fearful. And fear has a way of distorting one's vision. They can't even recognize the presence of God in the midst of their fear.

But then Jesus speaks words that are repeated over and over again throughout the Bible: "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus literally says, "I am," which is God's own name that was revealed to Moses through the burning bush. The one that is coming towards the disciples in the chaos is no other than the God who has always shown up to people in the midst of their fear.

As the disciples see Jesus coming toward them, they are still uncertain about his identity, so that's when Peter pipes up with a somewhat baffling (at least to me) response. He calls out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." If I were Peter and I wanted to test Jesus' identity, I would probably ask Jesus to show me in a different way. "Hey Jesus, could you turn this water into wine? Or maybe still the wind and the waves?" But Peter, in his response, reveals what I think is a remarkable act of courage.

While the other disciples stay in the boat, Peter climbs over the side and steps down into the water. He begins by showing courage and willingness. And he asks for an invitation. Jesus responds with one simple word: "Come." That is always Jesus' invitation. "Come. Follow me. Leave your nets. Walk with me."

As Peter steps out onto the churning sea, he reminds us that faith isn't about believing a right set of ideas – it is about responding to Jesus' invitation. It is about having the trust to step out and follow. And for a brief moment, what seems impossible becomes possible. As long as Peter keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus, that trust carries. But then Peter starts to get distracted by the storm that continues to rage around him. He becomes frightened again. He is distracted from Jesus. The wind and the waves haven't changed. The storm hasn't become more dangerous than it had before. Peter just stops looking at Jesus and instead starts getting caught up on the storm around him. He starts to panic – to flail and to sink.

Again, I think many of us can relate to this experience. We might start out with hope and passion – we volunteer, or we work for justice to serve our neighbors. We find out niche for using our gifts. And we begin to believe that God really can use ordinary people. But then we get caught up in the storms. We see the obstacles and the criticism. We see the depressing headlines. We see the financial reality. We start to notice what feels like impossible odds. And all of those things start to take all of our time and attention and we stop paying attention to Jesus, the one who has called us out into the storm with him. We begin to flail around and sink.

I can remember when I was young and I was taking a junior lifesaving swim course at my pool. One of the things we had to learn was the dead man's float, which is a basic survival water survival tactic for calm waters. We also learned a back float for survival in choppy waters. But both of those techniques involved very little movement. Paddling water and other large limb movements or flailing due to fear or panic would only increase the danger and cause you to sink faster. A key component of being able to use these survival techniques was to not let fear take over clear thinking.

Peter, in the moment that he becomes preoccupied with the storm, allows fear to take over and he starts to sink beneath the waves. I can imagine him flailing about. And as he starts to go under, he cries out, "Lord, save me!"

As I pondered this passage and Peter's experience, the theologian Howard Thurman came to my mind. Thurman was a black theologian and pastor who had a significant influence on the Civil Rights Movement. But he understood that fear is not always irrational. Sometimes the wind and the waves are actually powerful and dangerous. Sometimes there are good and legitimate reasons to be afraid. You may recall from a year or so ago when I did a sermon series on Thurman's book "Jesus and the Disinherited" where he explored what the teachings of Jesus mean for people living with their "backs against the wall."

These are people living under oppression and violence, those experiencing poverty and marginalization due to systems of power.

He knew that you cannot just tell people living with their backs against the wall not to be afraid, because fear is a reasonable response in a dangerous world. For many, the storm is real, and the possibility of drowning is real. But Thurman also understood that fear itself can become dangerous when it starts to define our lives – when we allow fear to tell us what to do, who to love, or what is possible. In his works, Thurman reminds us that Jesus offered a different way – that our deepest identity doesn't come through the forces that threaten us. It comes from knowing we are children of God. When that truth becomes rooted firmly in our hearts, fear might still be present, but it does not get the final word.

Jesus does not calm the storm before Peter gets out of the boat. He doesn't do away with the dangerous circumstances. He doesn't eliminate the obstacles and make it smooth sailing. The storm is still raging strong when Jesus says, "Come." Peter has to decide if Christ's voice is more trustworthy than the voice of his fear. This is where courage is born.

Courageous people are faith are not ones who look at injustice, suffering, or violence and convince themselves that everything is fine. You know, like the meme "I'm fine, this is fine, everything is fine." Faith isn't about pretending the storm is not raging on around us. It is about refusing to let the storm determine who we are and what we do.

Peter is courageous, but then the fear starts to take over. As he sinks and cries out, "Lord, save me", immediately, Jesus reached out his hand. He doesn't shame him or criticize him for the fear that has taken over, he just reaches.

I wonder, if in that moment, Peter began to realize something that would take years to fully understand – that God's grace is always greater than his failures, than his fears. I think of Peter's greater story. A few chapters after this experience, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replies with this great confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" But then, just moments later after Jesus begins teaching about his suffering and the cross, Peter rebukes him. The same disciple who made that confession still thinks Jesus' victory can come apart from power. One step forward, two steps back. Then on the mount of Transfiguration, Peter wants to build tents and stay up in the glory of the mountaintop than follow Jesus back into a hurting and suffering world. At the last supper, Peter, with confidence, tells Jesus he will never abandon him, even if everyone else does. Just a few hours later, Peter denies even knowing Jesus three times. Peter's story is one of courage and fear, wavering back and forth between the two.

But even that isn't the end of Peter's story. After the resurrection, Jesus meets Peter by another body of water. Peter is in a boat, and Jesus again calls him across the water. This time, Peter doesn't get out of the boat, but he does jump into it, swimming as fast as he can toward Jesus. There, Jesus asks him three times, "Do you love me?" And Peter answers three times, "You know I love you." Each time, Jesus entrusts him with the care of his people saying, "Feed my sheep." Peter's three-time denial now becomes a three-time calling. Later in Acts, Peter will again hear God speak to him three times in a vision on a rooftop, commanding him to cast aside divisive and exclusive theology preventing the Gentiles from fully participating in God's redeeming work. Even then, Jesus is still reaching out his arm of grace.

Peter kept discovering over and over again, that whenever he failed, whenever he took two steps back, Jesus was still reaching out his hand, inviting him to come. As I watched our kids learning about God's grace at Vacation Bible School this week, I couldn't help but think that Peter is the perfect disciple to learn about – not because he is perfect, but because he is so much like us and we are so much like him. Peter reminds us that following Jesus isn't about getting everything right, but it is about learning to trust in the one who doesn't give up on us.

The VBS theme this week was about the sweetness of God's grace – a grace that welcomes us home, and finds us in every storm. It's a grace that forgives us when we fail, but it's also a grace that never leaves us alone. It's a grace that calls us to have the courage to climb out of the boat and to follow Jesus where he leads us.

We all have days when we are brave enough to step out onto the water, and we all have days when fear takes the wheel. We all have moments where we feel close to Christ and others where we feel like we have failed beyond repair. But ultimately, we follow one who reaches out his hand to us before we can sink beneath the waves. This is the grace Peter spent a lifetime learning to trust, and that is the grace that Christ offers to each of us today. May we reach our hand back to the one reaching for us. Amen.