

Walk by Faith

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 13, 2019.

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:22–33).

After miraculously feeding over five thousand men, women, and children on five loaves and two fish, rather than bask in the glorious moment, Jesus sends his disciples by boat to Gennesaret. Matthew does not explain why Jesus does this "immediately," but the Gospel of John reveals that the people "were about to come and take him by force to make him king" (John 6:15). Perhaps Jesus is concerned for his disciples' enthusiasm. They certainly were ready for Jesus to be king.

Regardless, the disciples are sent ahead and Jesus goes "up on the mountain [or, "into the hills"] by himself to pray." The Gospel of Mark records that Jesus rose very early, "while it was still dark," to pray alone before preaching in Galilee (Mark 1:35-39). The Gospel of Luke reveals that as Jesus' popularity grew "he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). Before he called his twelve disciples, he went into the hills to pray, "and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). Simply put: Jesus prayed; he prayed often, and often alone.

In a passage in which we witness the divine nature of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us not overlook his human nature. Jesus of Nazareth prayed, because he enjoyed the solitude of time with his heavenly Father, and so should we. Do not resist the solitude of time with your heavenly Father; no one loves you more, no one knows you more, and you need no one more. Jesus of Nazareth prayed, because God uses the means of the prayers of those he loves. Likewise, we pray not because God *needs* our petitions but because he uses our prayers for his sovereign purpose and glory. Jesus demonstrates for us that praying is an integral part of walking by faith. Prayer is evidence of faith, for the faithless do not pray.

As Jesus continues in prayer so does his disciples' voyage straight into a storm. It is in the midst of this storm, and our Lord's insertion into it, that I want us to consider three imperatives of the Christian life. First, unlike the disciples, we are to *witness without fear* (And by "witness," I mean "perceive"). The Christian response to what we encounter in this life should not be fear. Second, fear can lead to doubt, but we are to *walk by faith*. The Christian response to what we

encounter in this life is not natural fear but supernatural faith. Third, since we have not been given a spirit of fear, walking by faith we *worship only God*.

Witness without Fear

While Jesus prays, the disciples are in trouble, driven off course by the wind and the waves. Such a condition is striking since many of the disciples are salty seamen. Despite their expertise, they are reminded of their human frailty and the force of nature. They found themselves in frightening conditions. The temptation to fear rarely arrives in a moment of safety and security. We are often tempted to fear when we feel vulnerable. And fear can distort our perception of reality, leading to an irrational (even superstitious) perception.

Revealing his human nature in his time in prayer, Jesus reveals his divine nature proceeding to Gennesaret across the sea, not by boat but on foot. Yes, Jesus really did walk on water, which may sound miraculous, because it is. Lest we consider Jesus anything but God, Jesus is witnessed by all of his disciples not sailing, not swimming, but walking on water.

Witnessing the miraculous, the disciples do not respond in worship but fear. It is not a holy, reverent fear but an irrational fear: they are “terrified.” And in their fear they respond not like the disciples of Christ but like pagans: “It is a ghost!” Popular culture believed that evil spirits inhabited the sea and the victims of drowning haunted the waters. Such superstition may have contributed to the disciples’ irrational fear. How else can you explain a man walking on water unless he is a disembodied apparition floating across the surface?

While we may scoff at the disciples’ superstition and even question the substance of their theology, we too live in a pagan era and are susceptible to the same. While we like to think of ourselves as rational moderns, our culture grows increasingly religious, not Christian; but certainly religious. The majority of Americans believe there is a God but he (or she) is untethered from the revealed Word of God. As a result, such “religious” perspectives of God have led to a host of unfounded and unsubstantiated theologies or superstitions, beliefs that have easily crept into a biblically and theologically illiterate church.

We have strayed so far from the bible today that some are more likely to believe the superstitious over the written Word. We live in an age where “God told me” has replaced “It is written.” Let us not be surprised to hear of an anxiety-ridden church, filled with fearful Christians. When the church becomes untethered from the written Word of God, irrational fear fueled by superstition steps in.

The only way to confront irrational fear is with the truth, and Jesus says (in John 17:17) that the standard of truth is the Word of God. And so, the living Word of God speaks truth to his disciples, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” The Word of truth confronts their irrational fear, and ours as well. When the circumstances of our lives tempt us to fear, let us go to the sure and solid Word of God and hear: “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

There is, however, more to these words of Jesus than we first perceive. The imperative to “Take heart” is followed not only by identification but by divine description. In English it is translated

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“it is I,” but in the Greek quite literally it is: “I am.” The subject *ego* (“I”) is followed by the verb *eimi* (“I am”).

Where else in Scripture do we hear of a first person present tense introduction to a people in need of salvation? As it is recorded in Exodus, “Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ...This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex. 3:13-15).

And so, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob stepped into time and space in the person of Jesus Christ. Fully God and fully man, he walked on water and revealed himself to his disciples by his word: “Take heart; I AM. Do not be afraid.” He indeed is the Lord, and there is no other (Isa. 45:5). And it is in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, that we witness without fear as he teaches us to walk by faith.

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Upon our Lord’s descriptive revelation, the most ambitious of his disciples wants to join him: “And Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’” And Jesus responds with command: “Come.” We do not know Peter’s motivation, other than restless spontaneity, but he rightly requests that our Lord command it; for, what the Lord commands we must obey. And so, Peter walks as commanded on water toward Jesus, until... until the fearless fisherman sees the rising waves, until he hears the howling wind, until he fears for his life and doubts the Lord’s provision.

Jesus will later tell Peter and the other disciples, “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,” (Matt. 16:25) but in this moment, as he sinks into the sea, Peter fears for his life. And in his desperation, Peter cries out, “Lord save me,” realizing that to obey the command of Christ requires not natural ambition but supernatural faith.

How quickly we like Peter sink into the stormy waters of living for Christ apart from faith. Legalism is alive and well in the modern church as it was in the ancient. We like commands not because we keep them but because we know what is expected of us. We somehow think the knowing is doing, forgetting that doing requires faith. I’m reminded of a friend who after a recovery from illness told me that she wanted to do “big things for God!” And I thought, why not start by walking with him? We are so conditioned to a performance-mentality that we think first of what we must do for Christ (even if it means walking on water) rather than walking in what Christ has done for us.

How easily we forget: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). And the gift of faith that God gives in Christ, he enables by his Spirit. Therefore, we who walk by faith “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16), and “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). You can separate what God gives.

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As Peter sinks, rightly crying out to his Lord, Jesus reaches out and delivers him asking, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” The question of faith and doubting is ultimately one of trust. Peter doubted when he began to focus on his natural circumstances rather than trust in his supernatural Savior. Peter doubted when he focused on his problems rather than his provider.

We are no different. The waves and the wind of this natural world cries out for our attention. And if we focus on them long enough, we can begin to believe that the storm is unceasing and our sinking inevitable. We can forget that our Lord stands ready to help us. We can forget that he is there at all. It is when we feel as if we are sinking, we must cry out, “Lord, save me,” singing with the psalmist:

“God is our refuge and our strength,
In straits a present aid;
And, therefore, tho’ the
 earth remove
We will not be afraid;
Tho’ hills amidst the seas be cast,
Tho’ troubled waters roar,
Yea, tho’ the swelling
 billows shake
The mountains on the shore.”

“Be still and know that I am God;
Among the nations I
Will be exalted; I on earth
Will be exalted high.”
The LORD of hosts is on our side.
Our safety to secure;
The God of Jacob is for us
A refuge strong and sure” (Ps. 46:1-3, 10-11).

And so it is, in the strong refuge of our Lord, we witness without fear, walking by faith, and worshipping only God.

Worship only God

The same Jesus who revealed his divine nature by walking on water also knowingly sent his disciples into the storm. There are no accidents in the providence of God. We can believe the first but the second is far harder to accept. We don’t like the dark providences of God. In our mind, we think it should be different: If it is from God, then it should be smooth sailing. But God’s greater purpose is not your health, wealth, or happiness, or a waveless, windless voyage.

Rightly did Job respond to his wife’s lack of faith, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). Because it is often in the storms of life that we truly learn to worship. Jesus sent his disciples into the storm not to punish them but to reveal himself more fully to them. It was in the presence of their Lord that the wind ceased upon the sea. In the midst

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of the storm they feared for their lives, but in the presence of Jesus they worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

As it was with Jesus’ disciples on that day so it is with his disciples today. What is your greatest fear? Pain? Suffering? Death? Conflict? Loneliness? Uncertainty?

Consider the words of one of my favorite hymns:

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
Holy his will abideth;
I will be still whate’er he doth;
And follow where he guideth:
He is my God: though dark my road,
He holds me that I shall not fall:
Wherefore to him I leave it all.

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
He never will deceive me;
He leads me by the proper path;
I know he will not leave me:
I take, content, what he hath sent;
His hand can turn my griefs away,
And patiently I wait his day.

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
Though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart,
I take it, all unshrinking:
My God is true; each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,
And pain and sorrow shall depart.

Whate’er my God ordains is right:
Here shall my stand be taken;
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine,
Yet am I not forsaken;
My Father’s care is round me there;
He holds me that I shall not fall:
And so to him I leave it all.

Let us not fear but trust in the one who walks on water and calms the storm. Has your fear led you to doubt in the Lord’s provision? “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5-6). Has your lack of faith left you feeling hopeless? Then come and worship the Son of God, who is Lord over the wind and the waves, and says to you, “Take heart; I AM. Do not be afraid.”