

Matthew 14: 22-33

THROUGH THE STORMS OF LIFE, O GOD, YOU ARE WITH US IN THE PERSON OF JESUS YOUR SON. CALM ANY FEARS WHICH LAY HEAVY UPON OUR HEARTS AND STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH THAT WE MAY NEVER DOUBT JESUS' PRESENCE WITH US BUT CONTINUALLY PROCLAIM THAT HE IS YOUR SON, RISEN FROM THE DEAD, LIVING FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN.

I IMAGINE MOST OF US WHEN SHOPPING WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS IN ANY MALL HAVE SAID THESE WORDS: "I'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU LATER." ALTHOUGH NOT IN A MALL, THESE WERE THE WORDS OF JESUS AS HE WAS SENDING HIS DISCIPLES OFF ACROSS THE SEA OF GALILEE IN A BOAT. "YOU GO ON AHEAD: I'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU LATER." JESUS IS AGAIN TRYING TO GET AWAY. THIS STORY FOLLOWS THE ACCOUNT OF THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000, WHICH BEGAN WITH JESUS TRYING TO GET AWAY TO PRAY ALONE AND THE CROWD PERSISTS. NOW THAT THE CROWD HAS BEEN FED AND DISMISSED, JESUS TRIES AGAIN.

TODAY'S STORY ABOUT PETER'S BRIEF WALK ON THE WATER APPEARS ONLY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW. MARK INCLUDES THE STORY ABOUT JESUS COMING ACROSS THE SEA AND CALMING THE STORM, JOHN USES AN EVEN SHORTER VERSION OF IT, AND LUKE LEAVES IT OUT ALTOGETHER. THE 3 GOSPEL WRITERS WHO TELL THE STORY AGREE THAT IT FOLLOWED THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000 AND THAT JESUS' CALMING THE STORM WAS A MIRACLE WORKED FOR THE DISCIPLES ONLY.....A VERY UNUSUAL OCCURRENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. BUT ONLY MATTHEW MENTIONS PETER.

IT'S NOT HARD TO LOVE PETER. HE IS ONE OF THOSE ENTHUSIASTIC TYPES WHO TALKS A BETTER GAME THAN THEY PLAY, BUT STILL THERE IS SOMETHING SO SINCERE ABOUT HIM

AND PERHAPS SO FAMILIAR. HE IS FULL OF FAITH ONE MINUTE AND FULL OF DOUBT THE NEXT, RIDING HIGH ON HIS CONFIDENCE IN JESUS ONE MOMENT AND LYING IN THE DIRT THE NEXT. THERE IS NOTHING FAKE ABOUT HIM. THROUGH ALL HIS UPS AND DOWNS, ALL HIS GREAT MOMENTS AND HIS AWFUL ONES, PETER'S HEART IS ON HIS SLEEVE. WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET WITH PETER....A MAN WHO LOVES JESUS BUT ALSO LETS HIM DOWN. NO WONDER MATTHEW LIKES HIM.

SO JESUS HAS SENT HIS DISCIPLES ON AHEAD OF HIM WHILE HE GOES INTO THE MOUNTAINS TO PRAY. BY NIGHTFALL, THE DISCIPLES FIND THEMSELVES TRYING TO STEER THEIR LITTLE BOAT IN HIGH WINDS AND HIGHER WAVES. THEY'RE TERRIFIED. IN FACT, PHRASES LIKE 'TERRIFIED', 'CRIED IN FEAR,' 'DO NOT BE AFRAID,' AND 'BECAME FRIGHTENED' ALL OCCUR IN JUST 11 VERSES. FEAR PLAYS MANY ROLES IN THIS STORY.

THE DISCIPLES ARE ALL WATCHING THE HORIZON, LOOKING FOR LAND, WHEN SOMEONE SPOTS A SHADOWY FIGURE WALKING TOWARD THEM ACROSS THE TRECHEROUS WATER.

"IT'S A GHOST!" SOMEONE CRIES, BUT IMMEDIATELY THE GHOST SPEAKS, SAYING, "TAKE HEART, IT IS I; HAVE NO FEAR." PETER REPLIES, "LORD, IF IT IS YOU, BID ME COME TO YOU ON THE WATER."

TO ME THAT'S A STRANGE THING TO SAY. PERSONALLY, I WOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING LIKE, "LORD, IF IT'S YOU, PLEASE MAKE THIS STORM STOP RIGHT NOW." OR "LORD, IF IT'S YOU, TELL ME WHAT WE JUST HAD FOR SUPPER."

BUT INSTEAD PETER ASKS TO JOIN JESUS ON THE WATER...SHOW ME THAT WHAT YOU CAN DO, I CAN DO, IF ONLY YOU TELL ME. TAKE AWAY MY DOUBT. MAKE ME HAVE FAITH.

JESUS INSTRUCTS PETER TO COME SO HE SWINGS HIS LEGS OVER THE SIDE OF THE BOAT AND WHILE THE OTHER DISCIPLES WATCH WITH THEIR HEARTS BEATING IN THEIR MOUTHS, PETER PLACES HIS FEET ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER---THE WAVES CRASHING AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE BOAT, THE WIND WHIPPING HIS HAIR INTO HIS EYES..HE PUT HIS FEET FLAT ON TOP OF THE WATER, TAKES A HUGE, TREMBLING BREATH, AND STANDS. THEN HE TAKES A FEW HESITANT STEPS TOWARD JESUS AND IS DOING FINE UNTIL A GUST OF WIND ALMOST TOPPLES HIM, AND HE GETS SCARED, AND FEELS HIS FEET SINKING INTO THE WAVES BELOW AND BEGINS TO SINK.

“LORD, SAVE ME,” PETER CRIES OUT, AND JESUS DOES, REACHING OUT HIS HAND AND CATCHING HIM, HAULING HIM OUT OF THE COLD WATER AND DRAGGING HIM OVER TO WHERE THE OTHER DISCIPLES CAN PULL HIM BACK INTO THE BOAT. AND THEN THE AWFUL WORDS: YOU OF LITTLE FAITH, WHY DID YOU DOUBT?”

THEY ARE THE WORDS NONE OF US EVER WANT TO HEAR ADDRESSED TO US AND YET THEY ARE THE SAME WORDS MANY OF US ASK OURSELVES EVERY DAY. WHY DON'T I HAVE MORE FAITH? WHY AM I AFRAID TO LET GO AND LET GOD CARE FOR ME? WHY DO I DOUBT SOMETIMES? I BELIEVE I AM IN GOD'S HANDS AND THAT THEY ARE GOOD HANDS, BUT WHENEVER SOMETHING BAD HAPPENS OR I EXPERIENCE A SET BACK IN LIFE, MY FAITH WAVERS AND I FEEL LIKE I'M SINKING.

WE BELIEVE THAT GOD IS PRESENT AND ACTIVE IN THE WORLD, BUT TERRIBLE THINGS KEEP HAPPENING. WE HEAR THE NEWS...CRIME STATISTICS, VIOLENCE, DEATH....IT SEEMS LIKE THE STORM NEVER ENDS. WE BELIEVE IN LIFE AFTER DEATH, BUT WHEN A LOVED ONE IS

FACING DEATH, WE PRAY FOR A MIRACLE BUT NO MIRACLE COMES, OR WE PRAY FOR THE REASSURING VOICE OF GOD BUT NO VOICE COMES, AND THE WAVES BEGIN CREEPING IN AND WE FEEL LIKE WE'RE SINKING.

WHY DOES OUR FAITH WAVER IN THE STORMS? BECAUSE WE ARE AFRAID, BECAUSE THE SEA IS SO VAST AND WE ARE SO SMALL, BECAUSE THE STORM IS SO POWERFUL AND WE ARE SO EASILY SUNK, BECAUSE LIFE IS SO BEYOND OUR CONTROL AND WE ARE SO HELPLESS AGAINST EVIL AND SIN. WHY DO WE DOUBT? BECAUSE WE ARE AFRAID, EVEN WHEN WE *DO* HAVE FAITH. BECAUSE WE DO HAVE FAITH, YOU KNOW. WE DO NOT HAVE NONE; WE HAVE SOME. LIKE PETER, WE HAVE A LITTLE, AND A LITTLE IS BETTER THAN NOTHING, EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT DOES NOT SEEM LIKE ENOUGH TO SAVE US.

LIKE PETER, WE HAVE FAITH AND WE DOUBT, WE TRY TO WALK WITH JESUS AND WE FAIL, WE TAKE A FEW STEPS AND WE SINK, WE CRY OUT "LORD, SAVE ME!" AND HE DOES, GIVING US BOTH HIS HAND AND HIS REBUKE: "O YOU OF LITTLE FAITH, WHY DID YOU DOUBT?" HEARING THAT, MOST OF US COUNT OURSELVES FAILURES...BUT CAN YOU IMAGINE THE STORY TURNING OUT ANY OTHER WAY?

WHAT IF PETER HAD NOT SUNK? WHAT IF HE HAD JUMPED OUT OF THE BOAT WITH PERFECT CONFIDENCE, LANDED SPLAT WITH BOTH FEET FLAT ON THE WATER AND SMILED ACROSS THE WAVES AT JESUS, GLIDING TOWARD HIM WITHOUT A MOMENT'S HESITATION? WHAT IF THE OTHER DISCIPLES HAD FOLLOWED, PILING OUT OF THE BOAT AFTER HIM, AND ALL OF THEM, WITH PERFECT FAITH, HAD GRACEFULLY WALKED ON THE WATER WHILE THE STORM RAGED AND THE WIND BEAT THE SAILS AND LIGHTNING SPLIT THE DARK NIGHT?

IT WOULD BE A DIFFERENT STORY WOULDN'T IT? MIGHT BE A BETTER STORY, BUT IT WOULD NOT BE A STORY ABOUT US. THE TRUTH ABOUT US IS MORE COMPLICATED. THE TRUTH ABOUT US IS THAT WE OBEY AND FEAR, WE WALK AND SINK, WE BELIEVE AND DOUBT. BUT IT'S NOT LIKE WE DO ONLY ONE OR THE OTHER. WE DO BOTH. OUR FAITH AND OUR DOUBT ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE; THEY BOTH EXIST IN US AT THE SAME TIME...THERE IS ALWAYS THAT TENSION. FAITH AND DOUBT.

THIS IS WHY WE NEED JESUS. THIS IS WHY WE WOULD NOT BE CAUGHT DEAD ON THE WATER WITHOUT HIM. OUR FEARS AND OUR DOUBTS MAY PARALYZE US, BUT THEY ARE ALSO WHAT MAKE US CRY OUT FOR JESUS' SAVING TOUCH, SO HOW CAN THEY BE ALL BAD? IF WE NEVER SANK---IF WE COULD WALK ON THE WATER JUST FINE ALL BY OURSELVES....WHETHERING EVERY STORM IN LIFE JUST FINE...WE WOULD NEVER NEED A SAVIOR. WE COULD GO INTO BUSINESS FOR OURSELVES. OUR DOUBTS, OVERWHELMING AS THEY ARE, REMIND US WHO WE ARE, AND WHOSE WE ARE, AND WHOM WE NEED IN OUR LIVES TO SAVE OUR LIVES. WHEN WE SINK, AS PETER DOES, AS WE ALL DO, OUR LORD REACHES OUT AND CATCHES US, RESPONDING FIRST WITH GRACE AND THEN WITH JUDGMENT----"WHY DID YOU DOUBT?"—BUT *NEVER* WITH REJECTION. JESUS RETURNS US TO THE BOAT, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THE ONLY REASON WE ARE IN THE BOAT IN THE FIRST PLACE IS BECAUSE WE BELIEVE, OR WANT TO BELIEVE, AND BECAUSE WE WANT TO FOLLOW HIM THROUGH ALL OUR DOUBTFUL TIRED DAYS.

"YOU OF LITTLE FAITH, WHY DID YOU DOUBT?" COULD IT BE THE REASON WE OFTEN LACK FAITH IS THAT WE ARE NOT DOING ANYTHING THAT REQUIRES IT? THE KEY TO FAITH AND FULLNESS OF LIFE IN CHRIST IS TO FOLLOW PETER'S EXAMPLE AND BE WILLING TO STEP OUT

OF THE COMFORT AND SECURITY OF THE BOAT IN FIRST PLACE AND HEAD INTO THE TROUBLED WATERS OF THE WORLD TO PROCLAIM THE LOVE, MERCY AND JUSTICE OF GOD THAT WE FIND IN JESUS CHRIST.

THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY: IF PETER HAD NOT VENTURED FORTH, HAD NOT OBEYED THE CALL TO WALK ON THE WATER, THEN PETER WOULD NEVER HAVE HAD THIS GREAT OPPORTUNITY FOR RECOGNITION OF JESUS AND RESCUE BY JESUS. I WONDER IF TOO MANY OF US ARE MERELY SPLASHING ABOUT IN THE SAFE SHALLOW WATERS OF LIFE AND THEREFORE HAVE TOO FEW OPPORTUNITIES TO TEST AND DEEPEN OUR FAITH. OUR STORY TODAY ALSO IMPLIES IF WE WANT TO BE CLOSE TO JESUS, WE HAVE TO VENTURE FORTH OUT ON THE SEA OF LIFE, WE HAVE PROVE HIS PROMISES THROUGH TRUSTING HIS PROMISES, THROUGH RISK AND ADVENTURE.

GETTING OUT OF THE BOAT WITH JESUS IS THE MOST RISKY, MOST EXCITING, AND MOST FULFILLING WAY TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST. WHAT RISKS ARE YOU WILLING TO TAKE? HOW WILL YOU STEP OUT IN FAITH THIS WEEK, ASSURED JESUS IS WITH YOU.