

Walking on Water

Matthew 14:22-36

Some of the things that Jesus did have taken on an almost mythical quality, and some of his actions have become little more than a proverbial expression. Or even worse, a cliché. So overused, so misused, it loses any sense of reality. Words describing what Jesus did can become trite, a platitude, a time-worn and thread-bare expression that have lost all their original force. And this afternoon we come to one of those expressions that has that danger, Jesus walking on water.

The image is easy to understand, because we all can instinctively feel the impossibility of it. Walking on water. None of us can do it, and the very phrase has come to represent that impossibility. But Jesus did it. So let me be sure to emphasize this is not a myth at all, but an actual event. And though I will make plenty of applications to our own daily lives, this is not simply an illustration or an allegory, nor a literal example given for us to follow. Because Jesus actually, literally, physically walked on the water.

But if you come away merely thinking, “Wow, isn’t that amazing?”, you really have missed the point as well. You see, Jesus was teaching his disciples something about faith. And life. Jesus wasn’t showing off. He was putting on a display of his power in order to promote himself and to exalt himself. It was his ministry, his purpose to build the faith of his disciples, and that purpose extends to us today. The purpose of this event is for Jesus to continue to build the faith of his disciples, all of them, including you and me. The purpose of this study is for you and for me to go about our own lives as Jesus’ disciples with courage. Without fear. With strength. And with much encouragement! “Be of good cheer,” Jesus says in verse 27. Take heart.

So that’s our focus this afternoon. Whatever the storms of your life might be. Whatever the dangers or disasters that might be threatening you. Whatever the trial, whatever the trouble, be of good cheer! Take heart. Why? Because Jesus is God, and because Jesus works with the power of God as he works in your own heart and life.

So let’s begin with,

I. A DISPLAY OF THE POWER OF GOD.

But first, notice what Jesus did after the miracle we studied last week. He has been actively engaged in performing miracles, he just fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. And “immediately”, we read in,

v.22

There was a clear reason, of course,

v.23

Jesus got by himself in order to pray! So our starting point today is that,

A. In his humanity, Jesus enjoyed personal communion with his father.

Jesus was fully human. We read in the book of Hebrews that he “learned obedience.” More fully,

Heb. 5:8 “...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. 9 And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, 10 called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Beloved, don’t miss this example, nor that encouragement regarding the importance of personal communion with our

heavenly Father. Even Jesus, in his humanity, made the commitment and exercised the discipline to preserve and protect a time to be alone to pray. And when you read these chapters, you can't claim the excuse of being too busy, can you?

Jesus put his disciples in the boat, dismissed the crowd, and went up to the mountain by himself to pray. May we learn to imitate that example! But Jesus still had something to teach his disciples, for in God's good providence, with Jesus' own full awareness, the disciples in the boat were fighting a fierce storm.
v.23b-24

Jesus didn't intervene until the fourth watch of the night, which was from 3 to 6 a.m. And since the disciples had been in the boat since "evening," it could have been as long as 10 hours that they spent fighting the wind and the waves. That's a long time to be fighting for your life, which is precisely what the disciples were doing, at least from their own vantage point. They were "in the middle of the sea," more literally, "a long way from the land," so returning to the shore was no option. They were "tossed by the waves," and "the wind was contrary." It was against them. Imagine a rather small boat, filled with 12 men, spending up to ten hours in a desperate attempt to stay afloat in the midst of a raging storm. And Jesus is up in the mountain praying to his father.

That's the stage for this familiar miracle, this act of supernatural power. So remember, Jesus is a man, fully man. He weighed whatever men weigh. It's 4 o'clock in the morning. And the storm is raging, but he is walking on water.

B. In his humanity, Jesus exercised supernatural power.
v.25

Let me include verses 34-36 at this point, not because they

are unimportant, but because they add to the evidence of supernatural power that has already been so overwhelming. I won't spend much time on exposition, but simply reinforce the point of the power of God evident in the person and work of Jesus.

v.34-36

That's all it took, a simple touch. So great was Jesus' power, so great was his authority, that a simple touch of his garment was sufficient to effect his healing power. And there is a point to be made in all of this. As I said at the outset, Jesus wasn't showing off. He wasn't grandstanding. Walking on water is not a pious platitude about doing the impossible, instead Jesus has a purpose. Jesus had a message for his disciples, and it is a message for you and for me every day of our lives as well. "Take heart...Do not be afraid."

C. In his humanity, Jesus taught his disciples not to fear.
Indeed, they were afraid. Terrified, we read.
v.26-27

That's the message. That's the encouragement. First, "Be of good cheer." The word is sometimes translated, "Take heart." The idea is one of encouragement, especially in the face of trials. The idea is one of cheerfulness, or even a heartfelt peace and joy, in the presence of much trouble

John 16:33. "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Take heart, beloved, no matter your circumstances might be. Jesus has overcome the world! Take heart, be of good cheer, no matter what the obstacles might be that you face, for Jesus has overcome the world. Take heart, no matter how severe the

storms might be that you face, because no matter how strong that storm is, Jesus comes to you “walking on the sea.”

However much you might identify with these disciples in the boat fighting the wind and the waves, in the midst of that storm Jesus is walking on the water, coming to you. And these are his words to you, “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.”

I think those two things are slightly different, and obviously complimentary. Be of good cheer means to be of good courage, secure even in the midst of danger. And then the negative, do not fear! Do not be afraid!

Remember when Moses was about to die, and Joshua was about to assume the leadership of God’s people. The words were so strikingly similar.

Deut. 31:6 “Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.” 7 Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. 8 And the LORD, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed.”

Then again in Joshua 1, God repeats his promise and repeats that encouragement.

Josh. 1:5 “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. 6 Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law

which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Beloved, in the big picture of your life, God would say the same thing to you today. That doesn’t mean that every problem with disappear, or that every problem will work out so that you can live happily ever after. But it does mean this, that “the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” And that is the basis of the exhortation, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed.”

So take heart! Be of good courage! Do not be afraid, no matter what circumstances you face in this age. Why? Because of Jesus. Because Jesus is the son of God. Because Jesus has the power of God. Because Jesus loves you. Because Jesus is with you. Because when you face a storm, and even when it seems like you are left for hours to fight the battle alone like those disciples in the boat until the fourth watch of the night, even then, Jesus walks on the water in the midst of that storm in order to give you this encouragement.

And what we see first, in response, is,

II. A DISPLAY OF THE EXERCISE OF FAITH.

Peter leads the way.

v.28-29

Peter gets a lot of criticism for his impulsiveness and impetuosity, but here is his faith. Here is the right response. Here is the radical willingness to believe, to obey, and to live in the power of God. And as far as it goes in verse 28-29, Peter gives us an example to follow. We are, indeed, to live by faith not by sight. We are, indeed, to believe Jesus, and to trust him, even when he bids us to come by walking on the water.

This is the exercise of faith, the trusting confidence of faith. Jesus told Peter to “come,” so “Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.” That is as it should be.

A. The power of Jesus is evident in the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

So, to speak metaphorically, there are times when Jesus calls you to walk on water. There are times when the circumstances of your life seem paralyzing, when you are afraid. There are storms that might well cause you to be terrified. I know that. I’ve endured some of those storms myself.

There are times you will be tempted to fear. Perhaps often. We have all sorts of fears these days, and the insecurities that breed those fears are everywhere. You might fear danger. Or sickness, the loss of good health or strength, even death. You fear grief, perhaps the death of others. Or injury, infirmity, and pain. You fear the stress of the unknown. You fear financial loss, or an uncertain future. You fear the loss of your job. You fear the loss of freedom in our country, you fear the dangers of more socialism, and military weakness. You might fear for your own safety, or for your success at a job or in school.

You fear the loss of friendship, the rejection of those whom you count as friends. You fear the sorrow that comes with any form of grief. You fear being alone. You fear failure. Or danger.

Opposition, even persecution. There is a lot to fear. And again, Jesus’ words in John 16, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

So let this encouragement be yours. Jesus walks out on the water of the storm of your life and says to you, “Come.” So get out of the boat and walk on the water to him! In the more precise theological language of Paul,

2 Cor. 5:6 “So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. 7 For we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. 9 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him.”

We walk by faith, not by sight! Or even more precisely and more fully,

Gal. 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Beloved, when Jesus says “Come,” get out of the boat and walk by faith!

What happens, though, when you walk by sight? You look down at the water, and begin again to fear. You look at the wind, and you begin to sink. Just like Peter.

v.30

How true it is, and how common an experience it is to see that,

B. The weakness of faith is evident in the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus had said, “Do not be afraid.” He urged Peter to come to him on the water, and Peter succeeded. He walked by faith. And then his faith failed him. And he was left helpless, but not hopeless. He cried out for help again, “Lord, save me.”

That is the characteristic common to men. Our faith fails us, as well. The dangers and the temptations of this life overcome us, as well. And we are given to fear. Our courage fails. We are not of good cheer. And at your worst, trying to fix things yourself in your own strength, you might just as well be Peter standing out on that water, sinking to what would appear to be your own doom and destruction.

But the point of this event is to note Jesus’ reaction, because it is the same reaction that he will give to you and to me, when we cry out as Peter did. “Lord, save me.” What comes next?

v.31-32

So much there. First, Jesus reached out his hand. To speak objectively, in terms of his divine power, he didn’t have to do that. It was a symbolic act, a truly significant symbolic acts. And I don’t mean merely symbolic, or insincere. Rather, Jesus is outwardly demonstrating his compassionate care and personal interest in the life and well-being of his disciple.

Jesus does not push us out of the nest, as mother birds do at a certain point with their young, in order to teach us to fly, or push us into the water to sink or swim. Rather, Jesus encourages our dependence upon him. And that’s the point. That’s where your strength and courage comes from. Not from yourself. Not from your own self-reliance or your own self-sufficiency. Your strength comes from Jesus. And when you are desperate, when you are helpless, when you are trying to walk on water and find yourself sinking, Jesus reaches out his hand and takes hold of you.

And then he says to Peter,
v.32 “O you of little faith, why did you doubt.”

That’s not a condemnation, nor even a chastisement. Rather, with the outstretched arm, it is an encouragement. It is the very way in which our faith is made strong, when, in weakness you cry out to Jesus so that he would take hold of you! And guess what? At that point, the wind ceased.

I believe Paul learned the same lesson as Peter did here when Paul struggled with what he called a thorn in the flesh. We read that,

2 Cor. 12:8 “Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

When you are weak, you cry out to Jesus. When you are in the midst of the storm and the wind, and when you are in danger of sinking because it is as if you are walking on water, then you cry out to Jesus, “Lord, save me.” When you are weak, then you are strong, because Jesus is strong.

So listen to Jesus as he speaks to Peter, and let me him speak to you in the midst of your own life. In your distress, whatever that might be, cry out to him, and when he reaches out his hand and takes hold of you, as he did for Peter, then listen to his encouragement, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt.”

Such courage to exercise your faith should characterize your

life as a disciple of Jesus. Such courage to trust Jesus in the midst of all the storms of your life should characterize your life. Such courage to walk on the water, to walk by faith not by sight, ought to characterize your life.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”
“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; [Jesus has] overcome the world.”

Then what? What comes with this courage? Look at,
v.33

C. Courage and worship should characterize the lives of Jesus' disciples.

They worshiped him! They honored him as “the Son of God.” They acknowledged his power, his glory. And that is to be the characteristic description of our lives as his disciples. We are to be worshipers of Jesus.

Let me emphasize, this was a real event. It really happened. And it happened to illustrate such a vital biblical and spiritual reality, that the power of God in Jesus has already overcome the world. There is nothing in the world, no power, no force, no authority that is greater than Jesus. Not even death itself.

So let this historical event in the life of Jesus' first disciples be a symbol of your whole life of faith. Let this familiar account of Jesus' miraculous and supernatural power be the stimulus and the motivation for you yourself as you confront the storms of your own life. When Jesus says, “Come,” get out of the boat, fix your eyes on him, and walk. Walk on the water. And don't look down. Walk by faith, not by sight.

So, dear friends, take heart, no matter how desperate the situation might appear. Take courage, no matter how dangerous. And do not be afraid, now matter how threatening. “For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”