

“WHO BUT GOD?”
MATTHEW 14:22-33

This has been a week that none of us who live in Oregon will ever forget. I'm not just talking about the forest fires that have threatened our homes and communities and livelihoods; I'm talking about what those forest fires have forced us to think about and evaluate. After evacuating our homes (or at least being ready to evacuate), some of us spent a few days living with the realization that many of the things that are precious to us might be utterly destroyed, and there wasn't anything we could do to prevent it.

I don't know about you, but during those few days I found myself being repeatedly confronted with a choice—a choice that had a profound affect upon my state of mind and heart. It was a choice between believing that God is sovereign, that we are His children, that nothing can happen to us apart from His permission, that all that we are and have ultimately belong to Him, and that He will be with us no matter what happens...OR... worrying that we might lose everything for which we have worked so hard, that all the things that have made us comfortable will be destroyed, that we may never fully recover financially or materially, that the beauty we have enjoyed will not return in our lifetimes.

One choice results in profound peace—a peace that truly passes understanding. And the other results in panic—two completely opposite states of mind and heart.

What makes the difference? Because neither choice necessarily changes the circumstances or the outcome (those who have peace could still experience enormous loss). The difference is a Person—a divine, sovereign, omnipotent Person. The difference is that those who have peace choose to fix their attention upon and put their trust in the Lord. They choose to dwell on who He is and what He has promised to those who are related to Him.

Of course, this principle is not just true in crises like the one we faced this week; it is true in the ordinary and mundane circumstances of life as well. We are constantly being confronted with these two choices. And whatever choice we make always has a profound impact on our state of mind and heart.

We're going to look at a familiar story this morning that is going to remind us just how awesome and capable our Lord is, and that our choice to either fix our attention on Him or not during turbulent times makes all the difference in the world. Look at Matthew 14, beginning in **verse 22**. *²² Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone...*

Remember, Jesus and His disciples, upon hearing about John the Baptist's death, boarded a boat, and crossed the Sea of Galilee to a remote place where they could have a quiet retreat. The crowds, however, learned where they were going and ran to other side ahead of them, because they were desperate to be with Jesus. When the disciples saw the crowds, they wanted to send them away, but Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. After spending several hours teaching and healing, Jesus performed the miracle of turning five small loaves of bread and two dried fish into a satisfying meal for thousands.

When Jesus did this miracle the crowds immediately connected the dots from this event to Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 in which he said, "God will raise up a prophet like me." They *correctly* made the connection that since Moses had given them bread from heaven while they wandered in the wilderness, Jesus was the prophet like Moses, since He

also provided bread in a supernatural way. And they were so excited that John tells us they wanted to make Jesus king by force.

But Jesus knew that they did not yet understand who Messiah really was and what He was supposed to do. They *incorrectly* assumed that He would merely be a political ruler, that He would provide for their physical needs, secure their political freedom, and establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness in Palestine.

But while Jesus *was* concerned with their physical plight, His primary role as Messiah was to secure a spiritual victory in the heavenly realms, to provide spiritual freedom and spiritual healing which would meet their most *profound* needs. And we know the story—He would have to die in order to do this.

This explains the urgency as to why Jesus summarily dismissed the crowd and directed His disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side of the lake without Him. Matthew does not tell us their destination, but He does suggest that Jesus told them He would catch up with them later. The disciples thought that meant on the other side of the lake. Jesus had something else in mind.

When everyone had gone their separate ways, Jesus went up to the mountain to pray. Don't forget, He had been planning a getaway *before* He met the crowds and spent a long day healing and teaching and feeding the five thousand. He was tired before this day; imagine how exhausted He was now. Yet, Jesus was determined to spend time with His Father alone—to converse, to worship, perhaps even to rest. Just being in His Father's presence provided solace and refreshment.

But while Jesus was having some refreshing alone time with His Father on the mountain, the disciples were struggling on the sea. **Verse 24,** *²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them.* The disciples, many of whom were fishermen, were as familiar with this lake as anyone. Otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee, the lake lies in a vast inland basin 650 feet below sea level. It is thirteen miles long and six miles wide and is surrounded by hills and mountains that reach an elevation of 2,000 feet in the West and over four thousand feet in the east. Every afternoon the cool Mediterranean air from the west collides with the hot desert air of the basin, creating strong winds and frequent storms that swirl over the sea.

The disciples were familiar with these weather patterns, and so they would not have been surprised by the wind and rough waters. They were used to riding out such storms. So, they continued to row until, according to John's Gospel, they had gone about three or four miles.

In other words, they were well into their journey, more than half-way to their destination, but they were facing a strong head wind and were being held back by the waves. Matthew says that the boat was being "beaten" by the waves. The word is literally "tormented," a word that is elsewhere used with reference to demonic hostility against people (Matt. 8:6; Rev. 9:5). The point is the wind and waves were severe enough that they were preventing progress.

Verses 25-27. *²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night [Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

The Romans divided the night—the time between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m.—into four "watches." The fourth watch was between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. It was during this time that Jesus came to the disciples walking on the sea. And when they saw Him, they were terrified.

Already exhausted and on edge for having stayed up all night battling the storm, when they saw this spectacle coming toward them, they naturally concluded that it was a disembodied spirit.

Remember, they were in the middle of the lake. This was not someone walking on a sandbar or in the shallows close to the beach. Where they were the water was deep and rough. It was not humanly possible for a human being to stay afloat in such conditions, let alone be walking on the surface of the water. That is why they thought it was a ghost.

Jesus recognized that they were scared and immediately called out to calm them. He said first, "Take heart," or "Don't be afraid." Then He identifies Himself with the words "*it is I.*" It would be natural for Jesus, after seeing the disciples' fear, to immediately call out and say, "Hey, it's me! No need to worry!"

But the grammatical construction of this phrase, "It is I," may be intended to communicate *more* than Jesus merely identifying Himself to His disciples. It is the same emphatic pronoun used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) where God is speaking, and it literally means "I am." As most of you know, that is the name of God—"Yahweh"—in Hebrew. So, the expression has overtones of deity, and, at the very least, Matthew is giving us a hint that Jesus was identifying Himself as more than a mere man. Besides, who *but* God could walk on water?

More about that in a bit. First, let's look at the response of one of the disciples. **Verse 28.** *²⁸ And Peter answered Him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."*

"*If it is you,*" which is a first-class conditional clause, is probably better translated, "***Since it is you.***" Peter was *not* trying to authenticate the identity of Jesus; He was merely affirming that Jesus could, if He wished, enable Him to walk on water too. Which is an interesting first response.

For Peter, apparently it was not enough to see Jesus do something that had never been done before. *He* had to do it, too. "Wait, Lord! Before you come over to the boat and get in, let me get out and join you so I can walk on water, too"?

Whether this was a nervous reaction (like his reaction on the Mount of Transfiguration), or whether he was being impetuous, or whether he was a thrill-seeker, I am not sure. But what is just as interesting is that Jesus does not hesitate to grant Peter his audacious request. **Verse 29.** *²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.*

To Peter's credit, it took a lot faith to get out of the boat and put his feet down on the water. Particularly because the wind was still howling, the waves were still crashing, the sea was still splashing. He exercised faith *in the midst* of the tempest and turbulence. And the reward of his faith is that he is the only other person in history besides Jesus to have walked on water, *and* the only one to have done it who was not divine.

But his faith was short-lived. **Verses 30-31.** *³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*

During Peter's brief wave adventure, his faith started to waver. Why? Matthew simply says, *he saw the wind*, which, of course, means that he saw the *effects* of the wind—the rolling waves, the rocking boat, the spray and the splash of sea water. Whether he actually shifted his gaze from Jesus and began looking around at all these things, we can only speculate. But, certainly, Peter's mental focus shifted.

I told you earlier that when we (who know Jesus) are in scary situations we are confronted with a choice—the choice to focus on the One who is sovereign, who loves us,

and who can protect us...OR...the choice to focus on our chaotic circumstances and how they might harm us. One choice leads to peace, and the other leads to panic.

Peter defaulted to that second choice, which is essentially faithlessness. “What am I doing out here on the water? This is crazy! This is impossible! I’m not safe! I’m getting further and further away from the boat! I have to find something to hold onto!” He defaulted to self-reliance, self-protection, and self-preservation, which, in these kinds of circumstances, leads to panic. When he shifted his focus from Jesus, who was enabling him to do what was humanly impossible, to the danger and the peril all around him, he panicked and began to sink. And unfortunately, when someone gets in panic mode, it is very difficult to come to one’s senses and shift one’s focus back to what it was on before.

But fortunately, when he cried out, Jesus immediately *came* to his rescue. He reached out His hand, took hold of him, and lifted him out of the water. By the way, you do know that Jesus could have rescued Peter by simply speaking, just like He told Lazarus to rise from the dead. Instead, He firmly gripped His hand, which must have been reassuring to the panicking apostle.

But Jesus does rebuke Peter, “*O you of little faith. Why did you doubt?*” I just told you that it took a lot of faith to get out of the boat and walk toward Jesus. I still believe that is true. And yet the climactic detail of this story is that Jesus declares him to be a man of *little* faith.

And there is a really important lesson here that we can learn here about *real* faith—the kind of faith that impresses God. There are many people who, because of temperament or personality, can respond to extraordinary circumstances with instant enthusiasm and optimism. We call them “gamers.” But when their emotions settle down or reality sets in, they default back to fear or faithlessness.

God has never been impressed with sudden bursts of faith that quickly peter out (pardon the pun). Jesus rebukes Peter (gently, I’m pretty sure), because the only kind of faith that brings Him pleasure is a long obedience in the same direction. I am positive that Jesus enjoyed the first part of Peter’s walk on the water. I think He took pleasure in watching Peter having fun, and I’m sure He would have enjoyed an embrace from Peter when he reached Him, and then a nice leisurely stroll back to the boat together. But Peter forfeited that opportunity when his faith faltered.

And the same is true for us. Jesus takes great pleasure in our faith and would love for us to enjoy the benefits of an *unwavering* faith. Peace is certainly one of them. Because remember, faith is ultimately about a Person. It is about choosing to fix our attention upon and put our trust in a Person. And whether or not we continue to focus upon and put our trust in that Person speaks volumes about the depth of our relationship with Him. It reveals who we really think He is and what He is capable of doing and how much He loves us. And I would suggest to you that this is the whole point of the story of Jesus walking on the water.

What is the significance of this story? Why did Jesus send His disciples on their way without Him, and tell them He would meet up with them later? Did He know that He was going to meet them on the lake like this? I believe He did. So, was He was just having a little fun with His disciples—playing a practical joke on them—trying to scare them?

We know for sure why John recorded this event in his Gospel. He said, “*These things I have written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name*” (20:31). For John, this story was another proof that Jesus really is the Son of God.

But Mark sheds further light on the significance of this event in an editorial comment. He said that even after the disciples had seen Jesus turn the loaves and fish into a meal for

thousands, they did not understand the significance of it, because their hearts were hardened.

They could, along with the rest of the Jews who were present at the feeding of the five thousand, affirm that Jesus was the predicted prophet who would be like Moses. But no Jew would ever claim that Moses was anything other than a great man, even though he *also* did many miracles, like parting the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk on dry ground.

But no mere human being, not even Moses, can walk *on* the Sea. And if Jesus was walking *on* the Sea, then Jesus is no mere man. He must be the Son of God. He must be the Lord of creation who has the ability to transcend natural laws. He must be divine.

Which brings us to Matthew's account. **Verses 32-33.** ³² *And 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."*

The experiences of seeing Jesus walk on the water, then calling Peter to walk to Him, then delivering Peter when his faith failed, then causing the wind to suddenly cease when He got into the boat, did something to the disciples' understanding of Jesus. They came to the logical conclusion that who, but God could do such things. And they were compelled to worship Him. By the way, as strict Jews the disciples knew that it was forbidden to worship anyone but God, so the fact that they worshiped Jesus signifies that they were convinced He really was God. Indeed, when they said, *"Truly you are the Son of God,"* they were acknowledging Jesus' divinity.

Brothers and sisters, this story ought to compel us to acknowledge it as well. Acknowledging that Jesus is divine is one of the essential doctrines of our faith. Yes, He was a man—He had flesh and bones just like us. But He was also God. And as God He could and can do anything.

Which means that we can trust Him...at all times. Like the times we are in right now.

Who But God? **Matthew 14:22-33**

Main Idea: ***Jesus proves His deity by walking on water.***

Going separate ways (22-23)

Jesus directs the disciples to cross the lake (22a)

Jesus dismisses the crowds (22b)

Jesus ascends the mountain by Himself to pray (23)

Drama on the High Seas (24-33)

Winds buffet the boat and prevent progress (24)

Jesus walks to the boat on the sea (25)

The disciples are terrified, thinking Jesus is a ghost (26)

Jesus calms and assures the disciples (27)

Peter's "Come to Jesus" Encounter (28-31)

Peter makes an audacious request of Jesus (28)

Jesus invites Peter to come to Him (29a)

Peter's remarkable faith (29b)

Peter's faltering faith (30)

He takes his eyes off of Jesus

He focuses on the wind and waves

He cries out for Jesus to save him

Jesus rescues Peter (31)

He pulls Peter up by the hand

He rebukes Peter for his lack of faith

Worship service in the boat (32-33)

Jesus and Peter climb in the boat (32a)

The wind immediately stops (32b)

The disciples worship Jesus (33a)

The disciples confess Jesus' deity (33b)