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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## When You're OUT of the Boat

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ OCTOBER 22, 2017

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One of the most remarkable incidents in the remarkable and unprecedented life of Jesus of Nazareth occurred early one morning on a turbulent body of water. There were twelve eyewitnesses to what happened, and one of them recorded the events for posterity in the biography of Christ known as the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 14).

**I**mmediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. <sup>23</sup>After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

<sup>24</sup>Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. <sup>25</sup>About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. <sup>26</sup>When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

<sup>27</sup>But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

<sup>28</sup>Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

<sup>29</sup>"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

<sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have so little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?”

<sup>32</sup>When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped.

Matthew 14:22-32 (NLT)

## **Learning to Walk**

A few years ago, my nephew and his wife had their first child. And when that little boy named Julian was approaching his milestone Birthday Number One, he was attempting to take his first steps. We were on a Facetime call with them, connecting their home in Pennsylvania to ours in Florida. We watched Julian pull himself up on his chubby little legs while holding onto a chair leg, and come walking and stumbling towards his dad as dad held the phone. And sometimes little Julian fell along the way. The experiments in walking had been going on for about a week. I asked my nephew, Julian’s father, what seemed to be helping his son as he learned to walk. The dad replied, “He does better when he looks directly at me or his mom. When he looks down at the floor, or around the room, he seems to get frightened—and he plops down. So when he gets up on his feet, we call to him and try to keep his eyes on us. He does better that way.”

Living life as a Christian is all about learning how to walk by faith through a dangerous and challenging world. And maybe we have something to learn from young Julian ... and from a man named Peter who lived 2,000 years ago ... and from a current Christian author named William Paul Young.

Young, a first-time author, self-published his novel “The Shack” ten years ago; surprisingly, it became for a time the number one best-seller in America. An estimated 15 million copies have been sold in the US, with international sales in multiple languages more than doubling the total. A feature film was released last March, which many of you have seen. The mega-plot of the book and film is about a character named Mack (a man who has been deeply wounded by the tragic death of his daughter) learning how to trust God.

Mack discovers, as have untold millions of other believers, that we can trust our Creator and Savior:

- ◆ even when life seems frightening or out-of-control
- ◆ even when we don't know why things happened in the past
- ◆ even when we don't know what will happen in the future

Over the course of his weekend at the shack, Mack spends time with a young Middle Eastern carpenter by the name of Jesus. And one encounter in particular is especially resonant of our scripture text from Matthew 14. Mack has rowed out to the middle of a lake, where he suddenly finds himself in danger; the boat he is in is breaking apart and filling with water. At that crucial point, in his moment of fear and panic, Jesus appears ... calling out to him, "Keep your eyes on me." What was frightening and distracting Mack were his painful memories and deep anxieties. Jesus redirected his mind, and began his lesson in learning to walk by faith.

And to recap the scene from Matthew 14: the critical moment is when Peter, taking his first hesitant steps out of his boat onto the water towards Jesus, takes his eyes off of the Lord and focuses on the waves and the wind. Distracted by his fears and his anxieties, he begins to sink. And then Jesus takes his hand and lifts Peter back up. We will return to this in a few moments to draw lessons for ourselves.

### **A Beloved Story**

But let's think about why this well-known incident in the Gospel has been so cherished and has had such an impact on countless people through the centuries. Here are some of the reasons why it is beloved.

**It shows the power of Jesus over nature**, thus demonstrating that He was, indeed, far more than a mere mortal, a humble carpenter and itinerant preacher ... that in disguise in the normal clothing of His day, He was really God Himself walking among us incognito. The popular comic books and movies about Superman in modern America depict a figure with great hidden power who was known to most as mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent. Superman is a myth—

but perhaps one that was unintentionally inspired by the Real Thing, God in human flesh. This combined miracle of walking on water, helping Peter to do likewise, and then calming a violent storm was just one of dozens of times when Jesus of Nazareth briefly removed His disguise to reveal who He really was.

Matthew 14 is a **reminder to us that Jesus comes to His people in their times of greatest need** (which is represented in this story by the storm, the wind and the waves). When we are up against it, when we are at the limits of our strength and our abilities—just as those twelve wet and windblown disciples were in that dark night—we find that He comes to us.

Matthew 14 also has become a **timeless symbol for believers being invited to take a risk to learn to walk by faith**. The boat in this story represents those things which are familiar, and comfortable, and make us feel secure. Choosing, in response to the call of Jesus, to climb over the sides of our boat and begin to walk towards Him is a graphic image that has given courage to many.

### **Walking on Water**

Pastor John Ortberg took this story as the launching pad for a book about learning to walk by faith. His memorable title: “If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat.” If you haven’t read it, you’ll find it inspiring and motivating. He begins the book like this:

We will let Peter’s walk on water stand as an invitation to everyone who, like him, wants to step out in faith and experience something more of the power and presence of God.

Ortberg compares this experience of Peter to several other incidents found throughout the Bible when God offers a challenge to a man or woman to grow in their faith. Here’s the typical pattern:

1. There is always a **call** from God to trust Him and do something at His invitation.

2. There is always **fear**, the natural human reluctance to take risk and move beyond the familiar.
3. There is always the **reassurance** from God that He is with us and His strength and grace will be sufficient.
4. There is always a **decision**. (The decision may be to say “yes” and “step out of the boat,” or the person may say “no” to God’s invitation.)
5. There is always a **changed life**—whichever decision is made. The course from that time on will either strengthen a person’s ability to walk by faith, or they will decline—and miss what God has for them.

I appreciate the insights John Ortberg has for us. But I think the truths we discover in Matthew 14 go even further. I believe that the invitation of Jesus to walk to Him and trust in Him is relevant **whenever** we find ourselves “out of our boat” of comfort, security and the ability to control. It may happen because we, like Peter, climb over the side of the boat willingly. But it also may happen because our boat takes on water and sinks—as Mack thought was happening in the scene from “The Shack,” and as could very well have happened to those poor disciples in the middle of the sea if Jesus had arrived five minutes later.

I thrill to see the courage and risk-taking of people who climb out of their boat by faith. Risk-taking (when it’s not foolish but well-considered, and when it’s a result of God’s voice leading us) can lead to amazing growth and blessing. When a man and woman take vows to be faithful to one another, are they not climbing out of their boat of secure singleness and taking a risk of trusting the other? When a person decides to take a new and demanding job, or decides to go back to school to get a new degree, or decides to pull up roots from a place that is secure and move to a new place, is that not comparable to climbing out of a boat? When a person agrees to take on an important and responsible position of leadership in their church or community, are they not following the voice that summons them out of their boat?

But life's complexities and challenges are far greater than just those changes that we initiate. There can be times for **all of us** when we find ourselves out of our boat of comfort and security because of the storms of life that come upon us, including those changes that happen to us without our choice. I have prayed with people who have found themselves on choppy seas due to the death of someone they love, someone they depended upon, and now they feel alone and unprepared. I have prayed with people who have lost physical abilities, or mental abilities, and can no longer take care of themselves and manage their lives independently as they once could do. I have prayed with people who have unexpectedly lost a job—and with that loss face anxiety about their future and their finances. I have prayed with people who have gone through the breakup of a marriage, or through the heartbreak of alienation and rejection by a son or daughter.

The storms of life are not just the crises we can see coming from a long way off and prepare for (like a distant hurricane's "spaghetti plots"). The storm that struck the disciples was completely unexpected; the sky was apparently clear when they shoved off from land a few hours earlier. But life is like that—unpredictable and uncertain.

### **Truths for Water Walkers**

I will conclude with these timeless truths, relevant to every one of us who finds himself or herself out of the boat and having to try to be water-walkers.

- ◆ No matter how severe the wind and the waves, and no matter how we ended up outside our boat, Jesus is with us.
- ◆ Whether we chose to get out of our boat, or our boat sank underneath us, the safest place to be is in the presence of Jesus.
- ◆ Water-walkers sometimes fail (as Peter did for a time), but Jesus is there to lift us up. We may be knocked down many times, but the key is to reach out for His hand and get back up. Sir Edmund Hilary, the great mountain-climber and one of the first to

conquer Mt. Everest, was heard to say when he failed in one of his earliest attempts to reach the summit, "I'm going to defeat you, mountain, because you're as big as you're going to get, but I'm still growing."

- ♦ The best water-walkers among us are the ones who choose to keep our eyes on Jesus. Remember the lesson of little Julian, the one-year-old: When he kept his eyes on his mom or dad, he made better progress than when he looked around or looked down.

The filmmakers who produced "The Shack" this year chose a theme song, recorded by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, that plays as the movie draws to a close. Those who linger as the final credits roll hear this haunting melody, and it sticks with them. The song is "Keep Your Eyes on Me." It's what I believe Jesus wants to say to us, whenever we find ourselves out of our boats and on frightening waves:

### **Keep Your Eyes on Me**

Words and music by Faith Hill, Shane McAnally,  
Tim McGraw and Lori McKenna

Ain't it just like a tear to go and blur out everything.  
Ain't it just like glass to fall and break so easily.  
Ain't it just like love to leave a mark on the skin and underneath  
yeah, when the pain goes and shadows everything.

Keep your eyes on Me.  
When it hurts too much to see, keep your eyes on Me.

Ain't it the sinner who gets all the grace sometimes.  
Ain't it the saint who picks up the pieces left behind.  
Yeah, and it's human to hurt the one you love the most,  
And you can't find the sun.

Keep your eyes on Me  
when you're lost in the dark.  
Keep your eyes on Me  
when the light in your heart is too burned out to see.  
Keep your eyes on Me.

You swear you're all alone sometimes.  
Keep your eyes on Me.  
And you can't find your way home sometimes,  
keep your eyes on Me.  
Keep your eyes on Me.

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