

Abandon Ship!

Matthew 14:22-33

Out of our comfort zone, Jesus saves us.

A sermon preached by
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When you read about sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee, you'd better believe it. They still happen all the time. When I was leading a group to the Holy Land in 2011, we had an excursion on a boat out onto the lake. It was a big, double-decker touristy boat with several groups. The sun was shining when we left, but the sky soon turned dark. The wind began to whip up whitecaps on the water. Then the rain began to pelt the boat. The passengers crowded into the cabin as the boat began to rock.

Of course, some idiots and invincible pastors had to go up on the upper deck to gaze out across the wind-swept sea and to experience the full power of the storm. It was impressive. As I was coming down the steep stairs back to the cabin, the boat rocked, and the wind blew my poncho up in my face, and I lost my balance. That night I got acquainted with the Israeli medical system (which was very nice) for cracked rib.

All I wanted to do was feel what the disciples might have felt in the Scripture. Of course, their experience was very different from mine. It was just before dawn, the darkest part of the night. And their boat was not a double-decker tourist craft. Archaeologists have uncovered a fishing boat that they have dated to the first century. Called the "Jesus boat," it is like many that Jesus and the disciples might have sailed in. It is 27 feet long, 7 ½ feet wide in the middle, and only 4 feet deep. It's easy to see how a boat like that could be swamped and sunk by the wind and waves.¹

Our story today is not the first time the disciples got in trouble with Jesus on the lake. In chapter 8 of Matthew, and parallels in Mark and Luke, Jesus is with the disciples as they attempted to cross the Galilean sea. A storm blew up, and the disciples were fearing for their lives. Jesus was oblivious, asleep on a cushion in the rear of the boat. The disciples woke him up, crying out at his lack of concern. So Jesus stood up and told the wind and the waves to be still—and they did! The disciples just looked at each other and wondered, "Who is this, who can calm the sea with a word?"²

In our text today, Jesus is not with the disciples. After feeding 5,000 men plus their families with five loaves and two fish, he did what he came to do anyway. He went away alone to pray. In the middle of the night, the storm came, and Jesus knew the disciples would be struggling and fearful. So he went to them. Not having another boat, he just

walked. In the dark of the night, the lightning flashed, and the disciples saw a figure standing on the water beside their boat. They screamed in fear—a ghost!—but Jesus said, “*Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.*”³

The Greeks and Romans had some stories of gods who came to earth and could walk on water. Some commentators think that Matthew was trying to show the divinity of Christ. They point to the similarity between Jesus saying, “It is I,” and God saying to Moses, “I am who I am.” But in Matthew’s day, it was easier for people to believe in the divinity of Christ than in his humanity. They were used to stories of gods walking the earth—and on the water. What Matthew wanted people to understand was that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of Man, the human Son of God, and that this divine power was not his essence, but a gift from his heavenly Father.⁴

Nevertheless, this story, like the feeding of the 5,000, stretches our credibility. Our scientific, skeptical minds want to know more. So we can ask two types of questions. One seeks an explanation. How did this happen? Did it really happen? There are some theories, and I’ll be glad to point you to some commentaries for your own research. It’s all fascinating.

But ultimately, I don’t think that is the right question. How it happened or if it historically happened is really not the point. It’s almost like this story is a parable of Jesus, a story told to help us understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow him. The right question is, what does this mean and how can it help me be a better disciple of Jesus? I think the story tells us four things.

First, don’t be surprised by the storm. The disciples were not protected from bad weather; it was just as dangerous for them to cross the lake as anybody else. In fact, Jesus once got caught in a storm, too. Following him doesn’t keep you out of trouble. Sometimes it may be the opposite.

As followers of Jesus, we don’t get a pass on the storms of life. Maybe if we live faithfully, we can avoid some of the turmoil that comes from living a godless life. But faithful people still have to deal with illness, death, grief, divorce, conflict, and tragedy just like anybody else. Faith doesn’t exempt us from the challenges of life; faith gives us a foundation from which we can address the challenges, overcome the obstacles, and declare a victory. Life is not smooth sailing; you can expect the storms.

But here’s the crazy thing: the real adventure of life happens outside the boat. Smooth sailing in a small boat is not that exciting. It’s the struggle to meet the challenges that purifies our hearts and proves our faith. We get so complacent in our comfort zone—not reaching out, not trying anything new, not risking failure. Pastor John Ortberg named a book of his *If You’re Going To Walk On Water, You Have To Get Out Of The Boat*.⁵ If you find yourself stagnant, bored, depressed, and lacking the excitement of discipleship, maybe it’s time to abandon ship. Jump overboard!

Several decades ago, when the Air Force was training its first jet fighter pilots, they encountered a unique situation. Emergency ejection from a jet fighter was supposed to be the same as ejection from a propeller aircraft. The pilot would push a button, clear the plane, and roll out of his seat to free the parachute so it would open. The problem with jets was that they were going so much faster that the pilots would not let go of their seats. They would eject and freeze with a death grip on the seat, and the parachute was not free to open. So the engineers devised an electronic take-up reel that attached to the front of the seat.

Two seconds after ejection, the reel would literally pull the seat out from under the pilot, thus freeing the parachute.⁶

There is nothing about that story that sounds comfortable to me. As if ejecting from a crashing jet were not uncomfortable enough, those pilots had to have their chairs pulled out from under them! Sometimes life ejects us forcibly from our comfort zones. But if we have the foundation of faith, even those uncomfortable situations can become the defining moments of our lives.

Peter actually left his comfort zone voluntarily. Only Matthew tells the story of Peter stepping out of the boat and walking on water. That's not surprising; Matthew really likes Peter, and Matthew likes actionable discipleship. The Peter part also tells me to take this story more symbolically, because something this courageous, something this out of the ordinary, had it really happened, would not have been ignored by the other Gospel writers. Both Mark and John tell about Jesus walking on water, but they don't say anything about Peter. As soon as Jesus reassured the disciples that it was him, Peter said, "Lord, if it is really you, command me to come to you." Jesus said, "Come on in; the water's fine!" Peter stepped over the side of the boat, stepped on the rolling water, and it held!

So the third thing is, if you're going to step out of the boat, if you're going to leave your comfort zone, if you are going to risk anything significant, you'd better keep your eyes on Jesus, or you'll go down. Peter's walk didn't last. He took enough steps to know he was doing it, but then reality set in. The storm was still storming. The wind whipped his clothes, and the water splashed his face. He looked between his feet and realized he was a long way from solid ground. And down he went. The disciple nicknamed the Rock sank like a stone.

If you're going to step out of the boat, you have to stay focused. There's a Buddhist story about a monk who could walk on water or sink, depending on how he focused on the Buddha.⁷ We focus on Jesus. To be successful at the challenge of discipleship, we have to stay focused on his words, his life, his grace, and his Spirit.

Another uncomfortable activity: mountain biking. I like riding a bicycle on a street or a paved trail—no big risk there. But riding a bike on a dirt path with rocks and trees on an incline just sounds kind of scary to me.

Lee Ann Zanon of Oregon wrote a devotional for *The Upper Room* a year ago about her adventures on mountain trails. She said, "I pushed myself to ride rugged single-track bike trails far beyond what I'd ever done. Switchback turns, jagged rocks, tight spaces between trees, quick inclines and descents just kept coming. I barely navigated one obstacle before another was right in front of me. What had I gotten myself into?" So far I'm right with her. But Lee Ann had a guide who told her about "target fixation." It's the idea that our bodies gravitate toward our focus. If we target the obstacles in front of us, we are more likely to hit them. But if we focus on where we want to go, we can more easily bypass the danger.

Eventually, Lee Ann learned this technique. She reported, "Rather than nervously approaching a narrow passage between tree trunks, I forced myself to look ahead. I cleared it with no problem and cheered out loud!"⁸ If you're out of your comfort zone, keep your focus, and you will stay above water.

But when you lose focus—and you will from time to time—reach out to Jesus, and he will save you. Hang on to your faith, and you will survive the storm. Peter's hike on the Sea of Galilee lasted about two steps before he got nervous and sank. He cried out, "Lord,

save me!” Jesus reached out and pulled Peter up. Standing together on the water, Jesus said, “*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*” “Small faith person”—the Greek word is *oligopistos*—it’s the same word Jesus called all of the disciples when they were caught in the storm before and they got so scared. It seems a little unkind here; after all, Peter was the only one who had enough faith to get out of the boat. Maybe it was a term of endearment.

Nevertheless, Jesus put him back in the boat, and the storm, like before, just quit. And all of the disciples worshipped, saying “*Truly you are the Son of God!*”⁹ These words are a foreshadowing of the confession Peter will make in chapter 16 that will be the turning point in the ministry of Jesus and the confession made at the foot of the cross by the Roman centurion as he watched Jesus die. When all else fails, when you’re drowning in your troubles, when you have nowhere else to turn, hang on to Jesus, and you will survive the storm.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was a Nobel-Prize-winning Russian novelist, poet, and political dissident. Much of his work stemmed from 10 years spent in Soviet prisons for criticizing the Communist government. He said that only once during his long imprisonment in a Soviet labor camp did he become so discouraged that he thought about suicide. He was outdoors, on a work detail, and he had reached a point where he no longer cared whether he lived or died. When he had a break, he sat down, and a stranger sat beside him, someone he had never seen before and would never see again. For no apparent reason, this stranger took a stick and drew a cross on the ground. Solzhenitsyn sat and stared at that cross for a long time. He later wrote, “Staring at that cross, I realized that therein lies freedom.” At that point—in the midst of his storm—he received new courage and the will to live. The storm didn’t end that day, but holding on to Jesus, Solzhenitsyn found the strength to ride it out.¹⁰

Max Lucado once compared faith to a child on a swing. As a kid, we all used to love riding on a swing. When we had the youth over to our house a couple of weeks ago, I was surprised and delighted to see that the teenagers made a bee line to the swings in our back yard. They still love to swing. Swinging is great fun—thrusting your feet toward the sky, leaning back until the world looks upside down, your stomach leaping into your throat as you come down. Swinging is fun, as long as you know who is pushing the swing. As long as it’s your mom or dad or a friend or somebody you trust, the higher the better, right? Even twists and turns are greeted with giggles. But let a stranger step up to push your swing, or the school bully on the playground, or anybody in a clown costume, and suddenly the swing can be a fearful flight.¹¹

Sometimes life is a scary ride. But we can rest in confidence knowing who’s behind the swing. God is behind us, and under us, and above us, and in front of us, and God is not out to hurt us. We can expect the stormy times of life; they are going to come. But sometimes it’s outside of our boat that we find the greatest adventure of faith. Don’t be afraid to abandon the ship of comfort. We know the One who walks on water, and we can walk with him. Keep your eyes on Jesus; maintain your focus; fix your target. And whenever you start to sink, call out to him. He’s always there. He will save you. He will pick you up. And the storm will pass. You can count on it.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Galilee_Boat.

² Matthew 8:18-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25.

³ Matthew 14:27.

⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation Commentaries* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 168f.

⁵ John Ortberg, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You Have To Get Out Of The Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁶ Danny Cox, *Seize the Day: Seven Steps to Achieving the Extraordinary in an Ordinary World*. (Career Press, 1994)

⁷ <http://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>.

⁸ <https://www.upperroom.org/devotionals/en-2022-04-13>.

⁹ Matthew 14:30-33.

¹⁰ Johnny Dean, “Oh, Me of Little Faith,” www.eSermons.com.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr_Solzhenitsyn.

¹¹ <https://maxlucado.com/listen/whos-pushing-swing/>.