

# Sermon Text for September 29, 2024

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## *Jonah 1:11-17 and Matthew 14:22-33*

### *“The faith to walk on water”*

Following the coverage of Hurricane Helene has been unnerving and tragic. While we lived in Florida for 8 years we were without electricity during a three week stretch for 16 days in the middle of August. It is brutal, but the loss of life with this storm is shocking. If you are following it there was a story about 54 people rescued from the roof of a hospital. The rushing waters overwhelmed the patients and staff and you saw this happening all around that region with dozens not being as fortunate to escape.

The more we see these events taking place the more we have to realize how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have no more control over nature than they did thousands of years ago, some would even argue that we have less control and there is less predictability. While we were in Iceland a few weeks ago visiting our youngest daughter we experienced a wind that was pretty powerful. Both of our Scriptures this morning depict the power of God as seen in nature which we have been experiencing so much of lately. But in our Scriptures we find people in boats struggling and fighting against the wind and the waves and filled with dread and fear.

They are a bit the opposite sides of the coin where in one you have people of faith trying to stay afloat and in the other you have people who come to faith by throwing someone out of a boat. But both address the need for faith in order to survive and then be able to experience the calm that come with faith and that can only come with a faith that is a verb and takes action, and not just a noun that you possess.

So as we read these stories this morning there are a couple different ways that we can take them and apply them in our lives. We can look at them literally, which they are, both are historical events that take place, we can have no doubt about that, and in this literal approach we see that God has power over the nature and as every Bible story has a point and a lesson, the lesson is that we can trust in God to deliver us from all things, including the power of the uncontrollable in nature.

But a deeper approach and more metaphoric lesson that we can take away from this is that this story depicts what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a follower even, caught midway between faith and doubt. It happens to all of us, and we are told to increase our faith, even as small as it might be.

**READ**

We all love the Jonah story, especially the part that we read where Jonah is thrown into the sea and a whale swallows him up. But it is without a doubt a story of reticent and hesitant faith which then turns into a faith that produces worship by an entire boatload of hardened and seasoned pagan sailors. The story unfolds with Jonah in the belly of the boat while a storm is raging out there, he tells the sailors that he is to blame and if they want to have peace and quiet to throw him overboard. Does it surprise you that they hesitate? They hem and they haw, and then they try even harder to row against the storm. They refuse to throw him overboard because then they will have to live the rest of their lives waiting for the vengeance of God to strike, because it will strike, because they killed an innocent man.

When they realize that there is not going to be a rest of their lives unless they take action and do something, then and only then they take action. The first action that they take we find in vs.14 where they cry out to the Lord and pray before they throw him overboard. They haven't heard from God what to do, just from Jonah, and right now they don't know how much faith to have in Jonah. The last thing they do once they throw him overboard and peace and calm prevails is that they pray, they go to God and worship him and offer up sacrifices, like a full legitimate worship service right there on the boat.

For these sailors, and this is going to be our point with Peter in Matthew, there is risk involved in their faith. That doesn't tend to be the normal way that we view our faith. Faith is often the result of not wanting to take risk. It is safe to be a follower of Jesus. It is safe to be a part of First Presbyterian Church and take part in its programs and activities because we are well respected, we are a known entity, our programs are vital and robust and full of life. There is nothing risky in being a part of the life of this church and really any church in general. Faith traditionally is seen as a safe move on the part of all of us.

But a faith that requires action and even requires, like it did with the sailors, to go against the norms of the day and to take actions that might not only be illegal but immoral as well, and just downright dangerous, well, that isn't part of what I was taught in Sunday School. Jesus is a good shepherd who takes his sheep under his arm, not a risk taker who thumbed his nose at society so that God would be glorified. Faith in this case with the sailors, requires action that seems contrary to the norm.

The same could be said for Peter and his encounter with Jesus on the water. John Ortberg is a Presbyterian pastor who is out in California and if you have not read any of his books, you should. In my time as a pastor we have looked at a number of his books for Sunday School classes. The one that sticks in my mind the most is the one entitled "If you want to walk on

water you have to get out of the boat.” It was written to Christians sitting in pews in churches that are mainline and traditional and whose members and attendees tend to come from the more mainstream crowd who live in this safe faith that is lifted up and followed across our nation. Faith that sees itself entitled to the many things in our country that Jesus never mentions and in fact for the most part shies away from. Any Christian faith that sees itself entitled to things is not a faith at all.

It is a challenging but important book for people of faith like you and me. We find Jesus in chapter 14 just trying to catch a break. We saw earlier in vs.13 that he had gotten into a boat to get away from people, but they had followed him so he had compassion on them and he healed them and gave them food. Now, these verses begin with immediately he sends his disciples away this time they are on the boat and is able to send the people away so that he is able to have some alone time. Twice we read that he is alone, completely alone, and that was all that he wanted hours ago and now the entire day has passed away and it is already dark.

He spends the evening on a mountain in prayer and in rest and then he gets up early in the morning, similar to when he was resurrected early in the morning, but here the Bible tells us it was the 4<sup>th</sup> watch of the night which would have been between 3-6am. And he comes down off the mountain and goes out onto the sea looking for his disciples. Oh, in case you missed it, he is walking on the water looking for his disciples. This is mentioned so matter of fact that we can just take for granted that this is no big deal. Sure, there are places in Scripture where we see God walking on the water. Look at Job 9:8 where we read that God has “trampled the waves of the sea.” Psalm 144:7 where we read: “Stretch out your hand from on high, set me free and rescue me from the mighty waters.” We see in Scripture here and all throughout that the laws of nature can be suspended by supernatural intervention.

God has it in him to walk on water, but this is a big deal, Jesus walking on water is as big of a deal as feeding of the 5,000. It is a miracle. He finds them in the middle of the sea, in the middle of a storm where the wind is driving the boat in directions that they are not able to control. Justifiably they are terrified by the storm and then when they see Jesus they are terrified by him. The morning is not going well for them.

Peter, on the other hand, sees an opportunity. He does tend to be the one who jumps out of perfectly good boats. Remember in John when Jesus comes after the resurrection and Peter sees him and puts his clothes on and jumps into the Sea of Galilee to greet him and makes the disciples bring in all the fish? But here in this case Peter sees an opportunity to prove his faith in Jesus in a risk. Peter tends to be the risk taker among many other things. That might be why I

relate to him so much. Not only does he invariably get things wrong, but he is also an unrepentant risk taker. I can relate to that. But family, to believe in the saving power of Jesus is to take a risk. It isn't safe because God isn't safe, he is good, and he is loving and gracious and full of mercy, but nowhere in the bible do we read that God is safe.

Faith is not a noun, it is not something that you possess and then you can go about your merry way. Faith is a verb, it is an activity, it is something that we do, that we live by, that we enact and put to work. It isn't and can't be just something that we have and that is all that matter. Faith, hope, love, abide these three, but the greatest of these is love. Faith, as we see here with Peter, is something that you do. So Peter does it, he asks Jesus to prove himself to him by commanding him to come out on the water. Jesus says, sure, come. And Peter comes, he walks on water, he does what only faith could make him do. I so wish the story ended there with Peter the hero, instead he turns into, not the villain, but the one who failed and who wants to be remembered for that?

In the middle of his walk of faith he began to notice the wind, Matthew says, not the water with the waves, not the fact that he was walking on water, but the wind and it scared him, and it distracted him. This lesson from this story of the need to focus on Jesus even while all around us is that which distracts and takes us away from him can never be preached enough. Peter's mind, and our minds, become more affected by circumstances than by the faith in the power of Jesus. Circumstances change, the wind changes, always, but Jesus never does. It takes a faith to walk on water to believe that when things are blowing around us. I know, it isn't easy, but it is necessary.

We take our first steps with Christ and we are excited for him to be by our side. As time passes we forget to fix our eyes on him, instead we get distracted by the blowing wind of society and what culture tells us is most important. That is especially happening now in this political season. We are being told by both sides what is most important. But Jesus has not changed, what is most important has not changed, our emphasis on Matthew 25 has not changed, even as we hear messages that when we focus on others it harms us. That is never the case. Society tells us to focus on us first and our welfare first. The Bible tells us to focus on our neighbor and their need first. That has never changed no matter what we hear.

These winds of society and these voices that we are following they move us away from Jesus and we begin to sink. In our sinking we cry out and it is then that we have to refocus our gaze on him. Notice, at no point does Jesus move away from us. It we who lose sight of him, it

is our faith that is diminished and so causes us to sink. There is no one to blame but ourselves in these cases.

But even in our sinking Jesus comes and immediately rescues us. He brings us into the boat, and the storm calms and stops. The result of Peter walking on the water is the same result that we see when the sailors have the faith to throw Jonah overboard, the disciples worship Jesus and call him the Son of God. The type of faith that leads us to walk on water is the type of faith that leads us to worship him in all times and in all places. For all of their weaknesses and small faith, they come to understand who Jesus really is. And at the end of the day, that is what we all want. Amen.