

## **“How to Waltz on Water”**

Matthew 14:22-33

*Series: Believe Week 14. Single-mindedness*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

February 12, 2017

In 1989 Lisa and I traveled with several other pastors and spouses on our first trip to the Holy Land. One of my favorite stops on that trip, and one of my most cherished places on earth, is the Sea of Galilee. It's not really a sea like the Mediterranean. It's a lake surrounded by sloping hills and peaks. You can stand on the shoreline and take in the whole thing. Jesus spent the majority of His three year ministry around this body of water. Thankfully, it has changed little since that day. There are no Starbucks, Walmarts, and McDonalds to tarnish the view. It takes very little imagination to picture Jesus walking over the hills and teaching by the shore.

On that first trip our guide arranged a quiet moonlit cruise on the sea. We boarded the boat and pushed out into the water prepared for a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Yet when we reached the middle, something as tumultuous as a storm seized our ship. Suddenly we were surrounded by loud pulsating music and flashing lights. The deck turned into a disco. Out of nowhere the dance floor flooded with Israeli Junior Highs. Our guide accidently booked us on a floating Bar Mitzvah. I complained to a friend that this is ruining our moonlit sail on the sea. He replied, “Cheer up. Who needs to walk on water when you can waltz?”

For the first time I understood why Peter wanted to get off that boat.

This week our topic in BELIEVE is Single-Mindedness. The key idea is “I focus on God and his priorities for my life.” In the study guide you'll have a chance to evaluate yourself by these statements:

- I desire Jesus Christ to be first in my life.
- I see every aspect of my life and work as service to God.
- I spend time each day reading God's Word and praying.
- I value a simple lifestyle over one cluttered with activities and material possessions.

On the banks of the Sea of Galilee Jesus tells us to focus on one thing:

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Single-mindedness simply means I put God first in every area of my life. Simple to say, hard to do. Why? Well like the blaring lights and music on that floating disco there are many attractions and distractions that grab our attention. Worry, fear, and busyness can take our eyes off Jesus. So can success, competition, pride and greed, temptation, terror, technology and turmoil. There's been a lot of talk about putting America first. Without

getting into the political fray, may I suggest that our real goal as Christians is to put Jesus' Kingdom first and to live like Him.

The whole point of BELIEVE is to help us think, act and be like Jesus. The miracle of Peter walking on the water is a model for what it means to follow Jesus. When Peter first agreed to follow Jesus he never expected the pathway to cross water. Walking on water may be the very last thing you want to do. You want to play it safe, stay secure, keep your walk with Christ quiet and calm. There is only one problem. Sooner or later, the storms will find you. You may be in one right now. That's why this miracle tells you what to do. Here's the first truth it teaches us:

**See Jesus in the Storm.** After feeding the five thousand, Jesus tells the disciples to get in the boat and cross the lake while He dismisses the crowd. It is a stressful day and He wants to call home, to check in with His Father through prayer. While He is on the mountainside conversing with His Father, the disciples head into a gale.

When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. (Matthew 14:23-24)

The original language says the waves "harassed, tormented, tortured" the disciples. On a later trip to the Sea of Galilee I talked with a man who found a first-century fishing boat in the mud. It is not a cruise liner. The tiny craft is patched together with slats of wood. The edges are not high. There is nowhere to hide. A storm can easily sink a boat weighed down with twelve men. Yet something terrified them more than the storm.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. (Matthew 14:24)

Sometime between 3 and 6 a.m. they look into the ominous darkness and see a phantom walking towards them on the waves. The storm makes them scared. This spirit makes them scream. They'd fought gales and survived. How can you fight a ghost? Is this the end for all of them? No. It is a beginning. The ghost speaks to them.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (Matthew 14:27)

Why does Jesus send them ahead and then walk out to them? Is He trying to impress them with a magic trick? No, this is a revelation – about Him and them.

I think Jesus waits to walk out to them because He knows they need to reach the end of their own strength before they will trust Him. It seems unfair. Yet in counseling people I find many are not ready to accept a way out. They would rather obsess about the problem then seek a solution. They want to do it their way even though it keeps getting them into trouble. They will not admit they are wrong, offer forgiveness, change their habits, seek a counselor or join a support group. People ask me, "Why does God wait

until I'm at my breaking point to come to me?" My reply is, "God asks you the same question. He's already here in the storm waiting for you to stop rowing uphill against the wind." Your way got you where you are. Why not try His way?

It takes faith to see Jesus in the storm. At first, the disciples think He is a ghost. Then He reveals Himself through His words. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Angels often say, "Don't be afraid." Jesus often says, "Take courage!" before He heals someone. And in the middle is the phrase "It is I" which is literally translated "I am" – the name of God. This was not just a stroll in the storm, a walk on the waves: God reveals Himself in the middle of a storm. God is always with us but He really shows up in the storm – when we come to the end of our power, when we stop trying to do it our way, when we reach the breaking point. What we need, in these moments, is to look for Him and, with the eyes of faith, see Him. What evidence of God do you see in the turmoil you face right now?

Next, **Hear His Call**. What happens next is not entirely unexpected. Peter, the impetuous, the risk taker says,

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. (Matthew 14:28-29).

Again, a better translation of "tell me" is "command me." This isn't just a risky step. Peter is a seasoned fisherman. He knows you don't walk on water. It has to be God's idea not his. This is obedience. How do you hear Jesus' voice in the storm? The BELIEVE series gives us three tools to help: prayer, Bible study and a trusted friend in the Christian community. When those line up you are ready for the next step.

Third, **Step Out of the Boat**. Put yourself in Peter's sandals for a minute. It's 4 a.m. Storm clouds shroud the night. A violent wind whips the sails to shreds. Your tiny craft is rocking and rolling up and down. Everyone else is clutching the ribs of the boat. Not Peter

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (Matthew 14:29).

Why would you leave the safety of the boat, grab the railing and go over the edge? For one thing, the boat is not that safe. Peter knows many boats go to the bottom of this lake. But beyond that, Peter knows the thrill of walking on the water waits for him out there on the waves. The only way to experience it is to get out of the boat.

What's your boat? To what are you clinging? John Ortberg says, "If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat." He says

Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable

that you don't want to give it up even if it's keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves.

Want to know what your boat is? Your fear will tell you. Just ask yourself this: *What is it that most produces fear in me – especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith?*<sup>1</sup>

What's your boat? What do you keep grasping even though it's taking you down?

- Your job is stretching you out, stressing you out and stealing all your time with your family. You are scared to make a change in this economy but you don't know how much longer you can keep your head above water.
- A relationship is getting rocky. You're afraid it's going to sink. But instead of stepping out and seeking counseling to improve communication you just keep clinging to the old patterns and hope it will get better.
- Your health is not right. You've suspected it for a while. You're starting to worry. But instead of having it checked out, instead of making changes you decide to ignore it and assume the storm will just blow over.
- When life gets stormy you keep turning to that thing which gives you comfort. Lately you've been turning to it more and more. In fact, instead of comforting you it's starting to control you and take you under.
- You want to be more open about your faith at school, among your friends, at work. But it's so much easier to blend in, to act like everyone else, to cling to the same stuff everyone else is. You don't want to stand out or be kicked out. But you feel you're pushing Jesus away.
- You would like to learn more about God and the Bible but you're a little afraid to join a Growth Group. There are plenty of excuses. Life is busy. But underneath it all is fear. What if they find out you don't know anything about the Bible? What if you ask a foolish question? What if you don't fit in?

Fear keeps us clinging to the boat. It also prevents us from growing.

That's why the next step is **Look at His Face**. Imagine the thrill Peter felt to be actually walking on the water. Like a baby taking his first steps, Peter the fisherman is out on the waves he was taught to fear. He's making progress toward Jesus. Then something goes wrong.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 17.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:30-31).

Here is the reality. When you get out of the boat, expect to face fear and failure. I’m sorry to say it will never go away. All growth comes through risk and risk always includes fear and failure. But failure need not be fatal or final. Failure can be the lesson that leads you to a better future. For Peter, the lesson he learned is always look at Jesus’ face. Don’t concentrate on the wind or the waves. Little faith is looking all around. Larger faith is looking at Jesus alone, following Him and refusing to let fear or failure be the last word on your situation.

Finally, **Bend Your Knee.**

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Matthew 14:32-33).

What a day and night this has been for all the disciples. They watched Jesus feed thousands from a little boy’s lunch, witnessed Him walk on the waves right through a storm and wondered at His ability to save Peter and silence the storm. You can expect two reactions when Someone that powerful steps into your boat: worry or worship. The disciples fell on their knees and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.” From that moment on, they knew God in a deeper way. He is the one to follow.

Why do we worship in this place? For one reason: to prepare us to get out of the boat and follow Jesus. If all you do is sit in a chair or a pew you’re still clinging to the boat. Real life begins when you get out of the boat because that’s where Jesus is. It’s time for you and I to step out of the boat. Here are some next steps:

- Join a Growth Group. Invite someone to your Growth Group.
- Invite a friend to worship or the Recovery service.
- Be more open about your faith. Offer to pray for someone at school, work or in the neighborhood.
- Sign up for a mission project or step out farther and go on a mission trip.

Don’t just sit there. Don’t just hang onto the boat. Do something. Take a step. There’s a whole new life waiting for you out on the waves. I know it will be frightening. I know you’ll face failure. But take courage. Don’t be afraid. Jesus will be out there to catch you.

On almost any given night there is a lot going on here at Woodside. The lobby is usually bustling and busy with people heading to one activity or another. Some years ago I walked out into the lobby and in the middle of the people was a man who looked lost. I did not recognize him and he seemed to be alone. “Can I help you?” I approached him and asked. He stared at me for a minute. Then he said, “I’m looking for a meeting.” I knew right away he wanted Alcoholics Anonymous. “Sure, I know which meeting you’re looking for,” I said, “just follow me.” I started to walk down the hall to the library where AA met. But when I looked back I noticed he wasn’t following me. I retraced my steps.

“The meeting is this way,” I gently offered. He blinked at me, took a few steps down the hall and then stopped.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “It’s hard,” he whispered. “Your first time?” “Yes,” he said. We inched a few steps closer to the library. “They’re good people in there,” I said, “They’ll help you.” Now we were standing outside the library. We could see the meeting through the windows. But he stood like a statue. “This is really hard,” he said. “I’m afraid.” “Do you want me to ask someone to come out and talk with you?” “No,” he said. “This is just so hard.” “I’m sure it is,” I said. “But there’s a whole new life waiting for you in that room. Let me go ask someone to come out.” I opened the door but before I could ask a member to come out, he was right behind me coming in.

He got out of the boat. It will be a long journey. But God will be with him all the way.

Are you ready to step out of your boat?