



11th Sunday of Pentecost

Message Transcript

Imagine you are in the boat, with the disciples:

What would you have done?

Main verse:

When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

Main Point:

Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in that boat, on that stormy, windy morning? In the distance, you see a human shaped figure walking across the water toward the boat. Who is it?

Are you hallucinating? Is it a ghost?

Then the figure calls out, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

It is Jesus' voice; you've heard it before. It is Jesus' shape; you've seen it before.

But why is he walking on the water?

What would you have done at that moment?

Would you have called out, 'Lord save us, we're going to drown'?

Would you have called out, "Lord, command the wind to stop, like you did before?"

or

Would you have done what Peter did: Be willing to test your faith, by calling out "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water."

What about you? What would you have done?

Intro |

If there is one story in the Gospels that I could read over and over again it would be today's. I love stories about people who showed great faith, doing the impossible, through trusting in God's faithfulness to His promises.

In order to get the full thrust of what is happening, I want us to visually step into the 'days in the life of a disciple of Jesus'. A quick journey through Matthew's account tells us that the disciples had already seen Jesus heal the sick, the blind, the leprosy, the lame many times over.

They had seen Jesus cast out demons, raise the dead, forgive the sins of the paralytic, and they had heard him teaching about the kingdom (Matthew 8-10). They had been with Jesus in the boat when a furious storm blew over, and they'd seen Jesus command the wind and the waves to be still (Matthew 8:23-27). Then, Jesus had sent them out with authority to drive out all demons and heal all diseases and sickness (Matthew 10:1, Luke 9:1). When they returned from their missionary trip, they reported to Jesus all that they had done (Luke 9:10).

And that bring us up to where we were last week; Jesus led them to withdraw with him to Bethsaida, for some rest and reflection. But the crowds learned where Jesus was and so he continued to teach them and heal all who were sick (Luke 9:10-11). Now, the disciples were pretty tired. They wanted to send everyone home, but instead, Jesus miraculously provided food for everyone. So, tired as they were, they spent hours collecting twelve baskets of leftovers as the crowds dispersed.

Then - keeping in mind they still haven't rested – Jesus makes them get into the boat and head to the other side of the lake (Matthew 14:22). But, this time he doesn't join them. He withdraws by himself to pray.

Meanwhile the disciples are in the boat, struggling against the strong winds which are kicking up huge waves, probably making them all pretty seasick. From what we are told, this violent weather continued for many hours. So, they're tired (having just returned from a mission trip), they've been rowing for hours, they're feeling wretched, their stomachs nauseous, and unlike last time they were in this situation – they were alone.

Jesus wasn't with them. He was off praying.

Then suddenly, one of the disciples says that he sees something. He points into the distance, and says, 'Over there, it looks like a person.' All eyes peer through the hazy stormy weather and agree, they too see it.

'Who is it?' One disciple says, "It's a ghost!"

Another says, "It's walking towards us!"

It doesn't take long before the figure can be seen a little more clearly.

Then you hear a voice, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

You know that voice! It is Jesus! And, yes, it looks a bit like Jesus.

But, you're completely baffled, 'What the heck is he doing walking on the water?'

OK – Let's stop the scene for a moment.

What you would have done if you were there? As I visualised myself in the boat with the disciples, I asked myself that question. I think, I would have cried out, 'Oh thank goodness you're here, Jesus!' Save us, please, we're about to drown.' I may have remembered the last time I was with the disciples in this same situation, when a storm tossed the boat back and forth (Matthew 8:23-26). That time, Jesus had been asleep. We'd woken him up and he had rebuked the wind and the waves, commanding them to be quiet. Then he told us our fear showed that we had little faith (v26).

So, I probably would have called out, "Lord, command the wind to stop, like you did before.'

What I'm very sure of is that I never would have said what Peter said.

Peter called out, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." (Matthew 14:28)

What was Peter doing? I sat with Peter's request for a while.

At first it sounded a little like Peter was testing Jesus, "Lord, if it is you ..." It reminded me of the devil's accusations to Jesus in the wilderness, "if you are the son of God then do a miracle to prove it ... turn these stones into bread, throw yourself off the cliff, and see if God will save you." (Matthew 4) It kind of sounds like a test, doesn't it?

But Peter isn't testing Jesus, nor is he questioning Jesus' authority and power. Peter is actually testing his own faith. And that is what makes Peter's request really inspiring. Peter didn't just want Jesus to command the winds to be quiet, so he could watch the power of Jesus' words ... he wanted to *experience* the power of Jesus' words for himself. He wanted to put Jesus' authority to test in his own life.

To put his feet where his faith was: onto Jesus' word 'Come'. And he wasn't just willing to have his faith tested – he actually *wanted* to have it tested. What I find amazing is that this willingness was not initiated by Jesus. Jesus didn't say, "Peter, get out of the boat and walk towards me."

It was Peter's idea to step out onto the stormy waters and stand solely on Jesus' word. Peter was willing to go against everything he knew in the natural – to step out of the safety of the boat, into turbulent water, which he knew could not possibly support him. And, as long as his eyes remained fixed on Jesus, Peter walked on the words of Jesus across the water towards Jesus.

That's what makes what Peter did so relevant to our lives.

What Peter did is the same thing, we are called to do. We are called to walk on the Lord's words, fixing our eyes on Jesus, knowing that it is God's promises that sustain us. Peter walked on one word: the word 'Come'.

Isn't it amazing that just one word of the Lord has sufficient power to sustain and support us to do what would otherwise be impossible. When we take a step of faith, placing our trust in God's word and promises alone – it is like we are stepping onto a substance of which no-one, but us, can see or perceive is there.

We read in Hebrews, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Peter was able to walk on the word of Jesus as long as his eyes were fixed on Jesus.

But unfortunately, Peter's natural reasoning overpowered and squelched his faith. We saw, "when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord save me!" (Matthew 14:30)

Peter looked away from Jesus and away from his word, and his gaze turned towards the wind and the waves – he stepped out the realm of faith and sank into the realm of doubt.

Before I close, I'd like us to remember one other important lesson from this passage.

Yes, Peter took his eyes off Jesus and sank into the waves. But Peter will forever inspire me. It was Peter, and only Peter, who was willing put his faith to the test. And what was the reward of being willing to put your faith to the test? Well, I'm absolutely positive, Peter never forgot his experience on that lake that day.

We kind of see evidence of that in what Peter later wrote in one of his letters. He was writing to the believers who were going through some intense testing of their faith. They were experiencing serious persecution. And Peter has the audacity to write,

⁶ So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here. ⁷ These trials are only to test your faith, to see whether or not it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests gold and purifies it—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold; so if your faith remains strong after being tried in the test tube of fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day of his return. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

So, let me finish by asking:

What would you have done on that windy night?

Would you have just watched, or even tried to convince Peter to stay in the boat?

Would you have asked Jesus to command the wind to be still?

Or would you have been as keen, as Peter was, to test your faith?

To experience, for yourself, the thrill of walking on the impossible?

If so, then let us all confidently take steps of faith onto Jesus' solid words.

And as we fix our eyes on Jesus, we can be sure His words will support us.