

The Cycles Of Faith

Matthew 14:22-33

PREPARED BY
KEN GEHRELS
PASTOR
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA
ONTARIO, CANADA

Water -

Mysterious, wonderful, powerful - and sometimes very frightening.
It is the stuff of life.
It can also be the stuff of death.

We celebrated water and shared the deep symbolism of life and renewal that comes with baptism.

Here in Matthew we see that water at work again - one who is above the water and in control of it. Another who is immersed, and then raised up out of it – baptised as it were, plunged into what could have been a watery grave, and then raised up out of it by a divine, loving, powerful hand.

This is the second storm incident that we read about in Matthew. But last time Jesus was with the disciples. Here they are alone.

Alone on the water.

Alone in the dark.

Fourth watch - the darkest time of the night, and the coldest - just before dawn, between 3 and 6am.

That's the time when people who pace the floor can find it the most discouraging.
People toss and turn in bed reliving events of yesterday, or problems that await them at school or the office the next day.

If you're struggling with the waves and storms that life can throw at us, it can be one of the loneliest times.

Here are the disciples - bobbing around in a little cork, oh so vulnerable.

Out there in the middle of the lake, Jesus shows up.

And they draw what is a very reasonable, though terrifying, conclusion.

If the water won't get them, the ghost will!

See, these followers of Jesus aren't much in the zone for doing careful theological reflection. They haven't really processed what had gone on the day before when Jesus had taken 5 loaves and 2 fish - seven ingredients (the perfect biblical number),

and like God providing manna for Israel in the desert

Jesus had provided food for a huge throng in the deserted Palestinian countryside.

Hmm - maybe there was a connection between him and God.

Nope - disciples weren't processing that real well right about now.

IT'S A GHOST!!

What is Jesus doing?

Mirroring Job 9:8 when it says about God:

He alone has spread out the heavens

and marches on the waves of the sea.

What is Jesus doing?

He's putting legs to words that these very same disciples would have chanted many times over in the synagogue - from Psalm 107:

went back to words they would have sung and heard in the synagogue -

"Others went out on the sea in ships.... the Lord spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.... Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea

were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven."

Jesus is in the middle of wrapping Himself in the Old Testament and using those sacred words to identify Himself as God come to earth.

THAT'S what Jesus is doing.

It's an identification that is made most complete when Jesus calls out to the terrified disciples:

*"Take heart,
it is I;
do not be afraid."*

The English translation of these three phrases doesn't bring out the power as clearly as it could. Where Jesus says, "*It is I*" he's using the same words that God uses in the Old Testament as His personal name – "*I AM.*"

It's the name God gave to Moses when that man is faced with the impending task of freeing Israel from slavery and bringing them to a new land.

Moses asks, "*Lord, when they ask, who may I say it was that told me to do this bold thing?*" And the mighty Creator of the Cosmos tells Moses, "***I AM.***"

The One who always was, and is, and will be.
The One who is the source of all life.
The One who is the power for living.

***Take heart!
I AM.***

Don't be afraid.

They are the words of the same powerful, holy One who said through the prophet Isaiah: (Isaiah 43:1-5):

"But now, this is what the Lord says - he who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;..... you are precious and honoured in my sight..... Do not be afraid, for I am with you....'"

Well, I don't really know how much of all this the disciples get - at least then.

But this **IS** after all the second storm the disciples encounter with Jesus.

And somewhere inside Peter's terrified mind, a little light begins to blink.

This is Jesus.
They will be safe.

So he sends out the rather odd plea - "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*"

He realizes that the call to come has to originate with Jesus.

Great things don't happen in faith and life because of our own initiative.

God calls first.

We, then, respond.

Why walk on water?
To be closer to Jesus?
To imitate the Master?
Was it courage or insanity?
Who knows?

Hey, Peter was such an impulsive fellow that maybe even **HE** didn't really know.

Anyway - Jesus calls, and provides him with the miraculous ability to do what every logical person would clearly say was absolutely IMPOSSIBLE.

Over the side he goes.

A wonderful feat of faith - or were they faithful feet that were walking on the water that day?

Then the distraction.

The pounding waves.

The howling wind.

They distract Peter.

And he remembers - stones sink. So do Galilean fishermen.

Doubt and worry set in.

And down he goes!

You'd think that the tangible, physical thing of actually being out there on top of the water would be solid proof enough to keep this man's soul from succumbing to doubt and worry.

Truth be told - there's really **no** proof that is solid enough to chase away all doubt. There isn't a single believer on the face of this earth that never wrestles with doubt. In fact, doubt is so sneaky that it tends to creep in during the most intense times of life and ministry -
you know -

just the exact times when you'd like to have a rock-solid faith!

So,

if you find yourself wrestling with doubt, don't think that you're alone.
that you must be some wimpy, second rate believer.
or that you're losing it.

You're actually shooting par right about then!

Here's the other thing -

That as we're splashing around in our doubt and all obsessed with our weaknesses and failures, we're not left to fend for ourselves.

Notice that Jesus doesn't walk past Peter and head off to the boat in disgust.

He doesn't disappear into the night.

He doesn't yell, "*What? Can't hear you over the noise of the wind!*"

And he doesn't shout swimming instructions so that Peter can pull himself up.

Peter speaks the most often said prayer in the history of the Christian faith:

Lord, save me!

And the bible tells us:

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him...

There's lots going on here.

There's the wonder that Peter, in faith, was willing to get out of the boat.
More than you could say for the other guys - white knuckled, gripping the gunwales.

There's the amazing experience of rising above nature, riding on the power of God. What a thrill!

And there's the terror of encountering the full scope of human weakness.
The doubt.
The sinking.

Both are real.
Real in the life of Peter.
And, friends, very real in the life of every believer who desires to walk in Jesus' footsteps, who desires to be close to Jesus in the middle of the dark night and the storms of life.

And **both** of these moments,
opposite poles, really
both of them are used by God to develop and strengthen faith in us.

Successes in life are good. They are enjoyable. They can be confirming.
But failures are **OH** so important!

I dare say that failures are far more soul-shaping than success.
We become more Christ-like through suffering than through bliss.

Here's one way to think of it –

When you're going through deep stuff, who do you more instinctively turn to for wisdom and comfort?

Someone with a real success story and a great smile,
or someone who has suffered?

Our culture, which worships success, may not appreciate that truth.

And I, for one, tend not to appreciate it when I'm caught in the middle of it. You will not ask me regularly praying for the Lord to grant me extended periods of storm and suffering in my life.

But the truth is that God is not always so quick to prevent trouble from entering our lives. Because that is a deep and strong school for our faith, that we might, in the end, serve Him better.

He will go with us through the storms.
He will hold us through the storms.
He will strengthen and equip us to face the storms.

But

He won't necessarily spare us from the storms.
What Jesus says to us is this -

Take courage!
It is I.
Don't be afraid.

And we,

well,
we can join the disciples in their response.

Check out verse 33:

Did you know that this is the first time in the book of Matthew that the disciples are recorded as having worshipped Jesus?

The wise men had.

A leper had.

A synagogue ruler had.

And now the disciples did.

They **get** it - that Jesus is the Son of God.

That all the power of Creation is under His control.

That they are safe when in His presence.

They worship Him.

Which is what we do.

And which is what, Matt and Erin, I hope and pray you will teach your daughter to do. In her seasons of calm. And in the moments of storm.

That she will learn to call out with Peter.

And grab hold of the hand of Christ, which is extended to her.