

Date: 10/11/14
Text: Matt 14:22-32
Title: From Good beginning to Great ending
Theme: The crucible of faith reveals exactly where our ability ends and invites us to experience the power and kindness of a faithful God.

(Matthew 14:22–32 NIV)

“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. 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.

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.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 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?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.”

From the time I was a young child this story was one of my favorites. In fact, I was in chapel one day in elementary school and the speaker told us to think of what we would do if Jesus came over our house that night. I knew exactly what I would do - I would fill the bathtub with water and ask Jesus to walk on it!

I still think that this is a really cool story. And I want to unpack it today in the hope that as we consider this event in Peter’s life the Holy Spirit will strengthen our faith. For the crucible of faith reveals exactly where our ability ends and invites us to experience the power and kindness of a faithful God.

Here is what I assume you know about this story. Jesus walks on water, the disciples get scared, Peter walks on the water until Peter gets scared. Peter goes glub glub, Jesus saves Peter, and they all live happily ever after. This is sort of the stripped down, children’s version, flannel-graph telling right? Well, I want you to move your focus off of Peter and on to Jesus in this story. And I want you to see a few very important things. They are: Jesus’ humanity, Jesus’ sight, Jesus’ compassion, and Jesus’ authority and power.

My title this morning is “From Good Beginning to Great Ending”. Chapter 14 starts with a paranthetical narrative note. Matthew tells us that Herod the king is aware of the miracles Jesus is performing and Herod either stems the thought or buys into the thought that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead. (I suppose a close look at

Jesus neck might confirm that assumption quickly, so perhaps Herod never got close enough to look.) Matthew, the former IRS man is telling this story. He tells us that after Herod murdered Jesus cousin John by cutting off his head - Jesus goes away to be alone. Now, it would perhaps be easy to slip into some pious gnosticism here and picture Jesus as walking a few feet above the ground, heading off into the seclusion of the mountain to enter into holy communion with God. We can see Brother Jesus of the order of the Holy Seclusion with his vow of silence and dirty brown burlap robe. But lest get real here. Jesus is more than likely getting away because his friend, and cousin, a man without equal in all of Israel has just been killed. Take this to the bank, Jesus was getting away to process and grieve.

Unfortunately for Jesus an early version of twitter caught wind of his location and it went viral. So when Jesus sees the crowd that has come out to see him he takes pity on them. Isn't it interesting that instead of saying "Jesus saw the multitude and got to work doing the mission that God had sent Him on", scripture tells us that Jesus had compassion on them. In other words we get a good look at the fullness of Jesus humanity in both his getting away by himself to mourn for John, as well as in his internal struggle when the crowds find him. Jesus was probably not done grieving. He was probably not yet eager to jump back into ministry either. And I can almost guarantee you that Jesus had little to no desire to be in the center of a needy mob... Yet, they needed HIM - and so, He had compassion.

We know too that Jesus did not just feed them that day, but he also healed them and probably taught them. In other words, Jesus shepherded them like a good pastor. In fact, I hear that Jesus once said that he was the Good Paster, I mean shepherd. And so at the end of the section of the story that comes immediately before our story we see Jesus as He displays his humanity, his compassion, and his power.

So, immediately after Jesus turns 5 loaves and 2 fish into an impromptu Olive Garden he sends his disciples away. "Get into a boat and go across the lake and I'll meet you there", He tells them. "I'm going to say goodbye to this mob and I'll be right behind you."

This is where we find the 12 disciples. Matthew is with them as they push the little boat out from shore. There's a breeze as the sun is beginning to set, and they expect a pretty simple night of rest as the wind carries them to their destination. Unfortunately, in scripture the water, and the dark are often places of terror and destruction. And this was going to be one of those kinds of nights. For his part Matthew is glad to have Andrew and Peter and the Zebedee boys with them. He himself doesn't know much about the sea, but they do, especially Peter. Of course Peter seems to always know a lot about everything. Or at least he talks like he does. At first Matthew remembers thinking Peter was an idiot the way he always opened his mouth. But after a while of Jesus just letting Peter be Peter, the rest of the disciples decided that it was safer - and funnier - if they unofficially nominated him as their spokesman. Thankfully, Peter seemed to be born for the job.

Tonight was no exception. At first Peter had been content to let the experienced sailors go about their normal duties of adjusting the sail and manning the rudder. But as the water began getting rough, and the wind began to impose on their little three hour tour Peter began taking more control. He had the rudder, or the sail, or the rudder. It kind of depended on who was being the most incompetent at any given moment. The

thing that most surprised Matthew was how commanding Peter could be even with that high nasally voice that sounded more and more goat-like the more upset he became.

By the end of the first hour of the storm everyone was soaked to the bone. Cold, tired, and a little annoyed at Peter they struggled pointlessly against the wind and the waves. By the end of the third hour no one was saying much of anything. Peter had gotten quiet and everyone just kept their heads down and pushed and pulled their oars as they fought through the muscle pain, the sore rumps and their falling eye lids. Then Peter started mumbling to himself, "just keep rowing, just keep rowing, just keep rowing rowing, rowing". And Matthew started asking God to send a wave to push Peter over the side.

Now, here's one of the great things about this story. Matthew has already told us where Jesus is. Jesus, after saying goodbye to the crowds is letting His humanity show again. Remember now, Jesus had been interrupted in the middle of grieving for his cousin when the crowds found Him. He then spent all day talking and healing and cooking for them. Jesus is pooped, Mentally exhausted, emotionally completely drained, and physically wiped out. So Jesus did what Jesus does when he needs rest. He went back to the mountain to be alone.

And its from that vantage point that Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus saw his boys out on the lake struggling against the storm. Remember. we see Jesus' humanity, and his sight. This is just like when Matthew told us that Jesus "saw the multitude". Only this time Jesus "saw the disciples". And here we now see Jesus' compassion. It is not explicit in this text as it was a few verses earlier. Here Matthew does not tell us that Jesus had compassion on his disciples. Rather, both Matthew and Mark show Jesus compassion by what he does. Only having gotten a little rest, maybe two hours of sleep Jesus heads out to sea to help his friends. Can I tell you brother and sister - this is what God's compassion looks like. The help that we have in Jesus does not come from an endless supply of energy. Jesus is not the energizer bunny just marching from one life to the next without ever slowing down. No, Jesus has endless love. And it is His love that energizes Him. How do I know that Jesus had compassion on the beleaguered disciples? Because in the midst of His own weakness, Jesus spent His strength to come to their aid. To my mind, this is a marvelous picture of both Jesus love and His humanity.

Now, it would have been simple enough for Jesus to speak to the wind and the waves as he had in the past. But He has something else in mind for tonight. Jesus wants to show his compassion and his power. So off Jesus goes, walking on the water. I still want to see this by the way. If Jesus did stop by my house later today I would ask him if we could run over to the South River for a quick look. After a bit of walking Jesus reaches the boat. Mark tells us that Jesus was so close he was literally about to pass the boat. Only then do the disciples see Jesus. And boy did they see him. Try to put yourself in their seat. It's dark, your soaked, cold, exhausted. You look up and there's a guy strolling past you - **on the water**. What would you do. You'd scream is what you'd do. If not out of terror, at least out of shock. And both Mark and Matthew tell us that the disciples were terrified.

And here Jesus speaks for the first time in this little vignette.

"Take Courage. It is Me. Don't be afraid."

"Hey guys, it's okay. I know this is freaking you out. But it's just me. There's nothing to be afraid of. And then Peter speaks up. I love it when Peter speaks up.

“If it’s *really* you Jesus, tell me to come to you.” Hearing this Matthew starts to feel bad about his earlier request that Peter be thrown over-board. What in the world kind of test of authenticity is this Peter?!? Are you crazy?!? What if this really is a ghost? You’re going to test it like this? Why not, “If it really is you, what’s my middle name? Or something? But, tell me to get out of the boat in the middle of this storm? Seriously? So why?”

This is not rhetorical. Why do you think Peter uses this as the litmus test right now?

I think that Peter is demonstrating here the best and most practical faith response in the midst of crisis. What do I mean by that? I have not referenced the Princess Bride in a while, so please bear with me for a brief excursus. You may recall that after having being bested at steel we next meet a drunken Inigo outside the tavern in the Thieves Forest. When the brute squad tried to move him he says, “You said, if all else fails go back to the beginning. This is it. This is the beginning.”

I believe that is precisely what Peter is doing. Peter’s first encounter with Jesus, the one that changed everything was when Jesus called to Peter, “Follow Me.” Peter’s first step of faith was to literally step out of his dad’s fishing boat to obey Jesus’ call. I think Peter tests Jesus this way because Peter knows that he will know the call of Jesus. Despite the raging storm, despite his own weakness, and despite the terror Peter feels - he know that he knows that he will know the voice and the call of Jesus. The memory of the very first meeting is the reason that Peter makes this otherwise ridiculous request. Dear friend, when you are in the midst of the raging storm, and you are afraid, look in faith to the One who first called you out of darkness. He will certainly be faithful to you.

And Jesus responds to Peter and simply says, “Come”. And you know what happens. Peter puts his left leg over the side. He puts the right leg over, He releases the left hand from the side of the boat. A wave hits the boat and throws it hard to the right. Peter grabs on reflexively. Then he releases the left hand again. That was the easy one. It now takes a very concerted act of the will to let his right hand fall. One white knuckle after the other Peter releases his death grip on the boat until he stands alone with no security in the very middle of the storm. From terror to tentative, to elation. For, he is not alone. He is not sinking. He is with Jesus. There is in that moment in fact no one except Peter and Jesus and the storm. No disciples to commiserate with. No oar to row in an attempt to find safety. Nothing but storm - and Jesus. Have you been here friend? Have you stepped out in faith and trusted Jesus in the middle of the raging chaos? Have you found yourself with no other hope that Jesus alone?

Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Look full in his wonderful face

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of His glory and grace

If you have been here then you have probably also experienced what happens next. Matthew tells us “Peter saw the waves and was afraid.” No one who has not been in this place and has not doubted has any room to critique Peter. How quickly we too go from walking in the unquestionable supernatural power of God looking away from Jesus and back to the natural world for protection and answers. I have been there friend. God

has proven Himself in an unquestionable display of His power and within moments I turn and say, Yes, you could stop that dog, but can you stop this dog?

Well you know the rest of the story. Jesus grabs Peter and they climb into the boat, and Jesus tells the storm to go away and then scolds Peter for his lack of faith. And then we move on to another story. So why then did I title this message “From good beginning to Great Ending”? Well, let’s take a look at that ending again.

In the Gospel of Mark this story has no mention of Peter walking on the water. In fact, it has no mention of Peter at all. Now, this may not seem significant to you unless you recall that Mark was not a disciple of Jesus, but a disciple of Peter. And, it is most likely that Mark wrote this Gospel as Peter narrated his own experiences with Jesus. So, either Peter did not see fit to mention this, or Mark did not think it all that important to the story. What Mark does tell us is that Jesus said to the disciples “Take Courage, It is me, do not be afraid”, and then Jesus stepped into the boat and the storm was gone. And Mark tells us that the disciples were amazed **because** they did not understand about the loaves. Why is this important? Because having gone through this adventure Peter understood one thing very clearly - Jesus is the point of this story. Anything that makes it difficult to see Jesus as the very heartbeat of this story needs to be stripped away completely. Now, let’s get back out of the boat with Peter and Jesus.

There Peter is, not seeing Jesus, seeing the waves, being afraid, sinking. This story has a great ending because of this very simple fact. When Peter called out to Jesus a second time it was no test, it was the cry of pure faith. By that I mean - this was no “Jesus as a crutch” prayer. It was very simply the soul cry of one who has no other hope - and to that cry Jesus responds. Reaching out His hand Jesus grabs Peter and pulls his life up once again.

I think that Matthew is borrowing from Mark’s gospel in his telling here. For the word “immediately” is most associated with Mark’s gospel. In Mark’s gospel the transition between one vignette and the next will often be a statement like, “Immediately Jesus left and went...” In the passage here in Matthew the word is used three times. Matthew tells us that Immediately after feeding the 5000 Jesus sent the disciples away. Then when the disciples saw Jesus on the water He immediately spoke to them the words of comfort. Finally, Jesus immediately reached out and rescues Peter. This story has a good beginning because it starts with Peter trusting and obeying the call from Jesus. This story has a great ending because regardless of Peter’s doubt - Jesus immediately saved him. And that - dear friend - is the point.

So let us turn now and consider this same test in our own lives. When you are surrounded by storm and you are afraid - what is it that causes you to doubt the compassion, faithfulness and power of God? I submit that it is almost certainly either forgetfulness or self-righteousness. Mark tells us that the reason the disciples did not understand about the loaves was because their hearts were hard. A hard heart is an easy thing to produce. It merely requires that you look only at the present with suspicion, and the future with terror. A hard heart is a heart which does not remember the faithfulness of God. Is it not for this very forgetfulness that Isaiah says:

“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 Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,”

(Isaiah 43:1–3 NIV)

Did Israel not pass through the water, was Israel not led by fire and smoke? And was not Egypt destroyed for the sake of Israel’s rescue? If you have doubt today listen to the call of Jesus for just as He called to Peter He calls to you today, “Come to me”.

““Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.””

(Matthew 11:28–30 NIV)

Likewise, Isaiah says,

““Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.”

(Isaiah 55:1–3 NIV)

Dear friend. if you have at the first obeyed the call of Jesus only to be tempted to doubt His faithful love to you. call to mind the first time you heard his voice and hear the tender strength which has spoken the word of life to you. And call to mind every time since that first day that God has been faithful to work on your behalf. Charles Spurgeon tells the story of two men who were swept off of their boat just up river from Niagara Falls. A line was thrown to the men for their rescue. When after both men had clung to the slender rope a large log floated past one of the men let go of the rope and grasped the larger log. That man’s faith cast him over the falls. Friend, there will almost always be a means of escape that looks more secure than the promise of Jesus. Yet no anchor has ever held more firm than the hand of Almighty God.

Okay then, we may be convinced that fear comes when our memory fails. But what about this self-righteousness? Why in the midst of struggle and pain, and confusion would I speak of this? Do I have no compassion at all? Friend, I speak of our tendency to stand on the basis of our own good merits before G^Od. I speak of this because it is our dearest idol. And it is in the crucible of faith that we see the extent of our ability. that is to say - we have no ability. No strength. No meritorious acclaim. No. We have only our sin, our doubt, and our wickedness. Picture this for a moment if you will: I go to buy an engagement ring for Hannah. I go to the Jeweler and pick out a ring. And he says to me, “Sir, this ring is very costly. But I knew your father, and I loved him as my own brother. I want you to have this ring as a gift from me because of the love I have for your father.” So I respond, “Sir that is all very good. I am deeply touched by

your generosity, and I am moved by your love for my father. How much shall I pay then?"

"Nothing." He replies, "This is my gift to you."

"Thank you, I accept." I say. "How much does it cost then? Tell me and I will give you the money."

"But I know that this ring is far beyond your price range. Simply take it as a gift."

"To be certain I will sir." I say. "Only tell me what the cost is to you and I will write the check."

The jeweler will finally relent and say to me, "Very well. The cost is tens of millions of dollars."

"Very well" I say pulling my hand from my pocket, "Here is the money."

But in my hand I hold no cash, no check. I hold a button and a scrap of paper from a previous day.

"Sir, that is not money." the jeweler tells me. "The cost is tens of millions of dollars and I will not trade for this ring. Please put your button away and take the ring as a gift."

"Ah!" I say, "You are indeed shrewd. Here then. Here is my payment." And pulling out my other hand I place a large amount of gravel on the counter top.

"That is a stone sir." the jeweler says."

"More then?" I ask sincerely. And I begin to run about the area picking up every bit of rock and dirt I can find and throw them to the jeweler as payment. Continuing in that same manner, I will spend the remainder of my life burying the poor jeweler under a mountain of pebbles and grime as I attempt to pay the man what he is due.

Now consider this. In Genesis we read that Eve "took and ate". And onto mankind was put the entire bill for sin. And now we stand before the Lord's table. Where Matthew records Jesus' words to the disciples, "Take and eat". Here is the mystery and beauty of the Christian faith. The only way to be held by the hand of God, is to completely let go of every other means of salvation. The only way back to God, and the only way to experience His protection in life and in salvation is by the very same means that separated us from God in the first. We took what was not ours and received death. Will we not now take what is freely offered and receive life? Dear friend. we walk each day in a new crucible of faith. We see each day that we have not the means to save ourselves. Will you then each day learn to receive and to experience the compassion, and power of our faithful Savior and God?

(1 Peter 1:3 NIV)

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,"

May He is faithful and true hold you in his power and grace by Jesus Christ through every wave of fear and doubt. And may He bring you safely to His banquet in this life and in the life to come.