

“If you want to walk on water...”
Series: Miracle Man
Matthew 14:22-33
Rally Day ~ September 13, 2009

On Labor Day, Paul and I returned from our annual Busch Family Beach vacation in South Carolina. It's a great week with Paul's brothers and sister, their spouses, and most of our children and grands. We've been doing it more than 20 years. Our grandson Tyler, who just turned 6, was there for only a couple of days, but that was long enough to see that he is a pretty fearless kid. Whether it is running into the waves, jumping into the pool, throwing and catching and running with the football, Tyler is an "all in" kind of kid. Most everything he does, he does with everything in him, fearlessly. He's "all in."

Today in the gospel of Matthew, we're going to encounter another "all in" kind of guy: Peter, one of Jesus' twelve apostles. Today and for the next four weeks, we're going to look at some of the miracles Jesus did. Jesus was a Miracle Man. Matt. 14:22-33.

Don't you just love Peter?! He is an 'all in' kind of guy. No sitting back in the boat for him. He's out in the water. Now, our purpose in examining these miracle accounts is not to question whether or not Jesus really worked miracles – I believe that He did, and so did the crowds of people who regularly gathered around Him. Our purpose is to discover what the miracle *meant*. And maybe more importantly, what it *still means* for us today. Now, we know that not everything Jesus said and did was recorded in the Scriptures. So why did God put this particular event in your Bible? What does this miracle of Jesus and Peter walking on the stormy sea mean for us today? What does it mean for you tomorrow as you go to work or school, care for your children, go to the club?

First of all, even when you're following Jesus – maybe *especially* when you're following Jesus – there will be storms. This hardly needs to be said because we've all experienced it. But sometimes we think that because we follow Jesus – we should somehow be exempt from storms. Jesus never promised that. In fact, He promised the opposite: "In this world, you *will* have trouble," Jesus said. Trouble shouldn't surprise us. Storms are a fact of life. Nobody is exempt. In fact, Matthew says that Jesus "made them" get into the boat. Basically He *ordered them* to get in the boat without Him and go to the other side. Being God, Jesus must have known the storm was coming and yet He *intentionally* puts them out in the boat in the midst of the storm – and *He does not go with them*. Why would He do that? Just so He could show off His water-walking skills? I don't think so.

You see, God is more interested in your character than your comfort. Growth takes place most often in the storms of life, more than in the sunny days. So, there *will be* storms. And in the midst of the storms of life, there will be fear. No matter how well you know and love Jesus, in the middle of the storm, you will be afraid. Just before this, the disciples had watched as Jesus took a little boy's bag lunch and turned it into enough food to feed a small army. And yet, when Jesus comes to them, walking on the water in the midst of the storm, they are *terrified*. They don't even recognize Him. They think He's a ghost.

But in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the fear, there is always reassurance. What Jesus says to them here is very significant, and it's easy to miss. According to our English translations, in the face of their fear, Jesus says to them, "It is I. Don't be afraid." But in the Greek, "It is I" is literally, "I AM." "I AM." This is the name by which God had identified Himself when Moses asked, "What is your name?" "I AM" was God's reply. This is significant. Please don't miss this today. In the face of the disciples' fear, Jesus says, "I AM. So don't be afraid." "I AM *with you* in your storm." "I AM *for you* in your storm." "I AM *more powerful* than your storm." "I AM in control, regardless of how it feels to you." "I AM able to do abundantly, exceedingly, far above all you could ever ask or imagine or think." "I AM now, I WAS before you got into this mess, and I WILL STILL BE when the storm has passed." "I AM. So fear not."

Jesus comes to them and sees their fear, and He reassures them. In the midst of the storm, in the midst of your fear, hear Jesus say to you today: "I AM. So fear not." You know, I wonder: Why didn't Jesus just appear in the boat with them in the midst of the storm to reassure them of His presence and His power? Why did He come to them walking on the water? Was He just showing off? That wasn't Jesus' way. I wonder: Could it have been that Jesus was showing them that the impossible was possible, in the hopes that they might be willing to trust Him and try it? Sometimes I think Jesus shows us that what we think is impossible is really possible for us, IF we will join with Him to do it. You know, the miracle is not really that Jesus walked on the water. Jesus, after all, is God. God can do anything. The miracle is that *Peter* – a mere mortal – walked on the water. But you see, in order to do that – in the midst of the storm, in the midst of his fear, even with Jesus' reassurance, Peter had to make a decision.

There is always a decision. Jesus doesn't go to the boat and drag Peter out onto the water. Peter was willing to go. He is the only one. The rest of them probably thought he was nuts. But Peter decides it is worth the risk. Because Peter was an "all in" kind of guy. If you are willing, Jesus will call you out of your boat in the midst of the storm. Notice that Jesus doesn't quiet the storm first and then show up. He shows up *in the storm* and calls you to do what seems impossible to you. And *you* will have to decide. He will not come and drag you out of your boat. You will have to decide. You will have to decide to do what seems impossible to you: Forgive the one who has hurt you so much; give your difficult marriage one more try; give money to help others; give time to serve in some new and challenging way.

Now, if you know much about Peter you know that he is often rather impetuous. But here he doesn't just see Jesus out there and jump recklessly out into the wind and the waves. He checks to make sure it really *is* Jesus and that it is okay to step out. "If it's you, tell me to come to you." Peter says. And Jesus says, "Come," so out of the boat into the water Peter goes. Now remember, Peter's not stepping out onto a sun-splashed lake as smooth as glass gleaming in the summer sunshine. It's the middle of the night. It's the middle of a raging storm. But Peter steps out at Jesus' command and in that instant the impossible becomes possible: Peter walks on the water. Can you imagine what that must have felt like?

Peter actually walked on water. Until, what? Until "he saw the wind." Peter could do the impossible – walk on water – as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But once he got out there, rather than staying focused on Jesus, Peter became distracted by the storm and began focusing on the wind and the waves instead. And now Peter begins to sink. He can't walk on the water when

he focuses on the storm. He can only do the impossible, he can only experience the miraculous, when he is focused on Jesus and does not allow the storm to distract him.

Sometimes like Peter, *we* are ‘all in’ with Jesus, willing to follow Him, to try whatever we believe He is calling us to do. And we jump in and do it. And it’s wonderful. It’s a miracle what God does in us and through us. *Until*...until we begin to look around and see the wind. Until we remember who we are and where we are and what we’re attempting to do. And then very often, just like Peter, we panic, we realize we must have been crazy to think we could do this water-walking thing. And that is when fear overtakes our faith and we begin to sink.

Some of you are old enough to remember the movie *Chariots of Fire*. In that film, British runner Harold Abrams runs against the Scottish champion Eric Liddell and loses for the first time in his life.¹ The pain of failure is so great that Harold decides he will not race ever again. His girlfriend, Cybil, says, “Harold this is absolutely ridiculous. It’s a race you’ve lost, not a relative. Nobody’s dead.”

But Harold moans, “I’ve lost.” “I know,” Cybil says. “I was there. I remember watching you; it was marvelous. *You* were marvelous. He was more marvelous, that’s all. “Well,” Harold says, “that’s that.”

“If you can’t take a beating,” Cybil replies, “perhaps it’s for the best.” “I don’t run to take beatings – I run to win!” Harold shouts. “If I can’t win, I won’t run.” Cybil pauses, and then says to him firmly, “*If you don’t run, you can’t win.*”

Fear is the great paralyzer, isn’t it? Especially fear of failure. What is Jesus calling you to do that you are afraid to do because it seems impossible and you’re afraid you might fail? How is God calling us as a church – Where is He calling us to follow Him that might seem scary or impossible or even crazy? And so we don’t try because we’re afraid to fail. We get paralyzed by the ‘what ifs?’ Jesus calls us, but we don’t even get out of our boats because of the ‘what ifs?’: “What if I fail?” “What if I look silly?” “What if people think we’re crazy?” For those of you who are perfectionists, like me: “What if I try but I don’t do it perfectly?” “What if somebody doesn’t like me because I do this?” And on it goes. We see the wind and the waves and we begin to rethink this whole water-walking thing and start to sink.

As John Ortberg says, what we have to do in those moments is “Feel the fear and do it anyway.” Peter was the only one who was willing to do that. He was the only one who was “all in.” Listen: To “walk on water” – to do the miraculous things Jesus is calling us and will empower us to do – we must be willing to risk failure. We have to be willing to be “all in” with Jesus. We have to be willing to get out of the boat. Remember: Jesus did not let Peter sink. Peter allows the storm to distract him, and he begins to sink, and he calls out to Jesus to save him. And Jesus does save him. Even when you are afraid, even when you waver, even when you hesitate and doubt God’s power to do what He says He can do, Jesus will still reach out to save you.

If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat. If you want to do the impossible, you will have to take the risk of failing. You will have to take the risk that people may think

¹ As described by John Ortberg in *If You Want to Walk on Water You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, p. 147.

you're crazy. You will have to take the risk that people will not like you, will walk away from you, even. But if you will take that risk – if you will trust that God is with you in the storm, if you will trust that God can do the impossible and that He can empower *you* to do the impossible, too, your life will be changed.

You will walk on water – or whatever the miraculous equivalent of that is in your situation. Because in the power of God, it is possible to do the impossible – *as long as* you keep your eyes focused on Jesus and not on the storm raging around you. Your part – our part, church – is to stay focused on Jesus in the midst of the storm. Our part is to trust. Jesus' part is to save. You trust. Jesus saves. When you're walking with Him, He will not let you sink.

Well, today is Rally Day – a new season has begun in most of our lives, whether you have kids in school or not. It's a new season, and maybe you're new here. Maybe just coming here today is a step out of the boat for you. Or maybe you're one of the folks who has just completed the *Experiencing God* study and made a new commitment to living every day in an intimate relationship with God. Maybe you've recently made a new commitment to being “all in” with Jesus, to following Jesus out onto the water, or maybe you want to. And maybe all of that seems at best unlikely to happen and at worst impossible because of all the other chaos that swirls around you in your life.

Here's what this miracle means: You *can* walk on water – but you will have to get out of your boat. You will have to face your fear of failure, your fear of looking silly or crazy, your fear of not doing it perfectly. Following Jesus is risky business – and it's meant to be. John Ortberg says this: “To be a follower of Jesus you must renounce comfort as the ultimate value of your life.” And if you do – *if you do* – know this: Miracles await! Peter was the only one who got to walk on the water that day. Do you think that changed his life? You bet it did!

Will you cower in your boat in the midst of the storm OR get out into the waves with Jesus and trust Him to protect you? Church, will we hunker in the bunker of our beautiful building and warm relationships here OR will we get out into the waves with Jesus? Will we go “all in” – will we step out into the chaos of the community around us where Jesus is and trust Him? What's it gonna be, church?

Because the only way to experience the miracle is to step out of our boats of security and safety and familiarity and comfort. If you're gonna wait until the storm quiets down, you will miss it. Only *after* Peter has trusted Jesus and stepped out into the wind and waves with Him does Jesus get into the boat and calm the sea. Peter was the only one of the disciples who got to do the impossible that night. Because he believed that Jesus could make the impossible possible.

My friends, you can – we can – walk on water. We can do the impossible. IF – and it's a big if – IF you will step out of the boat and keep your eyes on Jesus.