

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32 & Isaiah 43:1-4

September 28, 2014

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Matthew 14:22-36

**Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
DO NOT BE AFRAID**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our
redeemer. Amen.***

A Baptist preacher and a Methodist minister had been fishing buddies for years. When the new Presbyterian pastor moved to town, they invited him to go fishing with them so they could get to know one another. The Presbyterian minister didn't know much about fishing, but he eagerly accepted his colleagues' invitation.

Once they had launched the johnboat and anchored over the best fishing spot just a little ways offshore, the Baptist preacher said, "Oh no, I left my bait bucket on the shore." So, he jumped out of the boat and proceeded to walk across the water. He got his bait bucket, walked back, and jumped in the boat. The Methodist minister didn't bat an eye, but the Presbyterian minister couldn't believe his eyes! However, he was sort of intimidated, so he didn't say anything.

A few minutes later, the Methodist minister said, "Oh great, I left my tackle box on the shore." So, he also jumped out of the boat, walked across the water, got his tackle box, walked back across the water, and jumped back in the boat. The Baptist preacher didn't say a word, just kept on baiting his hook. But the Presbyterian preacher was almost beside himself. Still, he didn't say anything.

But he couldn't resist. His pride got the best of him. So, the Presbyterian minister said, "Oh no, I left my lunch on the shore. I think I'll go get it." So, he jumped out of the boat and immediately sank in the water. The Baptist preacher looked at the Methodist minister and said, "I guess we should have told him where the stumps are."

If you'd really like to "walk on water," why not travel to Orlando, Florida and visit The Holy Land Experience Theme Park? According to an ABC News Report, at The Holy Land Experience, "guests are treated to ten daily recreations of the Last Supper, a chance to mingle with Roman soldiers, and every day at noon and again at 5:00 p.m., Jesus is shackled in chains and whipped, before being dragged, bloodily, through the streets of old Jerusalem . . . There is a replica of the Church of the Nativity just around the corner from King Solomon's third temple, which doubles as one of the many performance stages. For those who want a more active role in the festivities, there's Christian Karaoke — 'sing for the King' a sign outside of the Theater of Life encourages. There's a children's area with a rock climbing wall, a theater dedicated to Noah and his ark and a spot where kids can walk into a stinky whale's mouth and see a trapped

Jonah. There's even a spot where you can pose for a photo of you walking on water with Jesus.”¹

Back in 1999, the BBC reported that the Israeli National Parks Authority had authorized a contractor to build a 13-foot wide, 328-foot long bridge in the Sea of Galilee to let tourists simulate Jesus walking on water. According to the report, “the crescent-shaped floating bridge will be positioned just below the surface, and will be able to accommodate up to 50 people.”² The “walk on water” bridge was one of many projects proposed for construction in anticipation of 4,000,000 pilgrims to the Holy Land at the turn of the millennium in 2000. Try as I might, I could not find any current verification that the bridge was actually built or is still offering pilgrims the chance to “walk on water.”

The BBC news report from February 1999 did have one line that might have some bearing on how we hear today’s story about Jesus and Peter walking on water. The report said, “[The bridge] will not have rails in order to enhance the ‘walking on water’ effect, and lifeguards and boats will be in attendance in case a walker slips off.

Do you think Peter wished there had been handrails or lifeguards or boats in attendance in the wee hours of the morning when he stepped out onto the stormy Sea of Galilee? Then again, he **did** have THE lifeguard who “immediately reached out his hand and caught him” when he cried out, “Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14:30-31)

Ah, Peter! He gets a bad rap so much of the time from us 21st Christians. We “tsk, tsk” how Peter always seems to act on the spur of the moment. Right after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, he took Jesus aside and rebuked him, because Jesus was telling them he was going to suffer and die (Mark 8:31-33). When Jesus was arrested in the garden, Peter drew his sword and cut off the high priest’s slave’s right ear (John 18:10). When Jesus was on trial for his life in the high priest’s house, Peter three times denied even knowing Jesus (Luke 22:54-62). After Jesus was raised from the dead, Peter told some of his fellow disciples, “I’m going fishing.” As they came back to shore in the early morning light, they saw Jesus standing on the shore (but they didn’t recognize him). When one of the disciples finally recognized Jesus and cried out, “It is the Lord!” Peter threw on his clothes and jumped into the water (John 21:3-8).

Ah, Peter! It’s easy to take potshots at this reckless, impetuous, shoot-from-the-hip, spur-of-the-moment, impulsive disciple, isn’t it? It’s easy to shake our heads at Peter’s antics, maybe in disbelief, maybe in amusement. But guess what? At least Peter **got out of the boat!** As a friend said this week, “You can’t go to Jesus without getting out of the boat.”

The popular Christian writer, John Ortberg, has a book called *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, based on this story about Jesus in Matthew 14. Here’s what the book jacket blurb says: “Peter may have been the first one out of the boat, but Jesus’ invitation to walk on water is for you as well. That’s where you’ll meet him: out where the sea is high and the footing impossible. As a follower of Jesus, you want to go where he calls you. But walk on water? What does that mean? Walking on water means facing your fears and choosing not to let fear have

the last word. Walking on water means discovering and embracing the unique calling of God on your life. Walking on water means experiencing the power of God in your life to do something you would not be capable of doing on your own. . .there is a storm. We will encounter problems. But if we're willing to get out of the boat, two things will happen. First, if we fail — and we will fail sometimes — Jesus will be there to pick us up. We will not fail alone. We will find he is wholly adequate to save us. And second, every once in a while, we will walk on water!"³

Our safety, our refuge, our security is not in the boat itself, but in the presence of the Lord who comes to us in the midst of the storm and says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And then he says, "Come." As we consider what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, as we struggle with how to live as Christians, do we trust the one who says, "Do not be afraid. Come"? Sometimes the Lord commands us to step out of the boat. What will we do? So many times, when we hear this story about Jesus and Peter walking on the water, Peter sinking into the sea is what is emphasized. But the only reason Peter was out on the water in the first place was because *he asked for it!* The heart of this story about Jesus is found in verses 27-29: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." "Come."

Peter stepped out at Jesus' command — he didn't know where the stumps were — he didn't have a platform floating two inches beneath the water — he didn't have handrails — he didn't have lifeguards and boats in attendance in case he slipped. Peter had the word of the Lord, "Come." At that moment, everything depended on Jesus' word. Peter didn't try anything spectacular or impossible on his own. He got out of the boat when Jesus said, "Come."

How often do we **ask** for a command from Jesus to do something seemingly impossible, much less step out in faith? We usually want to know where all of the stumps are. We want to feel the platform under our feet. We want to have all of the lifeguards and rescue boats lined up and waiting. **Then** we might consider leaving the safety of the boat — that is, if the waves aren't too rough and the wind isn't blowing too hard.

When Peter saw Jesus walking on water, he didn't decide on his own, "I can do that!" and then jump into the water. Peter asked for the Lord's command, put his trust in Jesus, and heard Jesus say, "Come." What if **we** ask for the Lord's command for our mission and ministry and Christian lives? Maybe we will be asked to do the seemingly impossible. But what if we **do** ask, receive the command of the Lord, and then step out of the boat in faith?

Every time I walk in my study I see a display board with a flip chart leaning against the wall across from the door. Nancy borrowed the board and chart a while back for someone to use at another church. I don't recognize the handwriting on the chart. I'm not sure exactly what the group was talking about, but can get an idea of the conversation based on the notes on the chart. Three questions are listed at the top: (1) Who are we? (2) Who is/might be our neighbor? (3) Why are we here? Along the right hand side of the page is written, "What might your community need from you?"

There are two statements in the lower, left-hand corner of the page: “We can’t do that.” and “We have to do it by ourselves.” But those two statements have one more — very important — addition: There is a red circle around them, with a red slash drawn through the circle. The message is pretty clear: When Jesus calls us and says, “Come,” if we immediately think, “We can’t do that” or “We have to do it by ourselves,” there’s no question we will find ourselves sinking in the waves — that’s if we even dare to get out of the boat!

If we get out of the boat, how often do we look at the waves and feel the strong winds blowing against us and wish for the (relative) safety of the boat? How often are we reluctant even to step out in the first place? What will people think? We would rather turn our sails into the prevailing winds and be carried along on smooth sailing. And if the storm does come up, we would rather batten down the hatches, huddle up, and try to ride out the storm.

But there stands Jesus, who says, “Do not be afraid. Come.” Even when we look around at the waves and the wind and begin to sink, even when we begin to doubt, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches us. Let us pray that in our daily Christian lives and especially in our ministry together as a congregation, we will put our trust in the one who says, “Do not be afraid. Come!” and that we will get out of the boat in faith.

A hymn in the old red hymnbook says:

*I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, him seeking me
It was not I that found, O Saviour true;
No, I was found of Thee.*

*Thou didst reach forth Thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold
As Thou, dear Lord, on me.⁴*

NOTES: ¹Scott Mayerowitz, “Orlando Theme Park Built for Jesus,” November 4, 2010, found at www.abc-news.go.com. ²“World: Middle East Pilgrims to ‘walk on water,’ BBC News, February 3, 1999, found at www.news.bbc.co.uk. ³John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001). ⁴*The Hymnbook* (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in the United States, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Reformed Church in America, 1995), Hymn #402, “I Sought the Lord, and Afterward I Knew.”

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you for your unfailing love and faithfulness, shown most clearly through your Son Jesus Christ. Open our eyes to recognize you here among us. Give us courage to step out in faith to meet you, and confidence to follow where you lead. For you are our God, and we are your people, called by your name; in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who calls to us, “Do not be afraid. Come.” Amen.