

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

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.

On Thursday, May 6, 1954, a humble 25 year-old medical student from London named Roger Bannister made sports history. As a member of an amateur track team competing against Oxford University, Bannister was the first person to run a mile under four minutes — 3:59:4.

Bannister's world record — and previously unthinkable feat — stood for six weeks. On June 21, John Landy, a runner from Australia, set a new world record of 3:57:9 (rounded up to 3:58) at an international meet in Finland.

Bannister and Landy raced against one another on August 7, 1954 at the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada. The race was dubbed “The Miracle Mile,” “The Race of the Century,” and “The Dream Race.” Fairly quickly, the race turned into a two-man event. Landy led most of the way and opened a pretty sizable lead over Bannister. However, beginning on the third lap, Bannister began to close the gap. As the two runners started to make the turn for the home stretch, Bannister pulled even then passed Landy. Landy turned his head to see where Bannister was and, in doing so, interrupted his pace. Bannister took the lead and broke the tape ahead of Landy. Although both runners finished under four minutes, Landy said, “I would have won the race if I hadn’t looked back: if I hadn’t taken my eyes off the goal.”

Hebrews 12:1-2 says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Matthew 14:28-30 says, “So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

What are you looking at?

On Wednesday, May 9, Nick Baker and I met and talked about plans for the fall Stewardship emphasis. Nick wanted to bend my ear a bit before I began my sabbatical on June 1. The Stewardship and Finance Ministry Team asked if I would be willing to preach a series of sermons in October and November based on the theme “Step up. Step out.” I wanted to go ahead and select my sermon texts for October 14 - November 18 before I started my sabbatical, so I would be ahead of the game when I returned on October 1.

On Wednesday, October 3, Nick Baker and I met and talked about plans for the fall Stewardship emphasis. I wanted to bend Nick's ear a bit in light of the situation we find ourselves in as a church and community post-Florence. Nick told me he wanted to talk with me about the very same topic. As I shared my thoughts with Nick, I told him I needed to think about my preaching for the next few weeks. Nick agreed. I told Nick, "Let me look over my notes and the scripture texts I picked out in May. I'll give it some thought, and I'll get back to you."

Here are the notes I wrote to myself back in May about my preaching in October and November:

"I used the 'Step Up and Step Out' idea to guide my thinking. The first story that immediately came to mind is Jesus walking on water and Peter asking to do the same. I know of at least one book with the title 'If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat.'" There aren't many instances of the word 'step' in the Old and New Testaments, but the Bible (especially the New Testament) uses 'walk' to mean our manner of living.

"That made me think about Confucius' statement, 'A journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step.' [not that I'm going to preach from Confucius!] So, I think where I'm headed with my stewardship sermons is to use 'Step Up — Step Out' as the intro into 'walking in the light, walking according to his commandments, walking in the truth, walking by faith, walking in the Spirit, walking on water. This isn't written in stone, but I think this is how I'll proceed:

October 14: Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus and Peter walk on water

October 21: 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 We walk by faith, not by sight.

October 28: Romans 8:1-8 walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit

November 4: 2 John 4-6 And this is love, that we walk according to the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning

November 11: 3 John 2-8 Walking in the truth leads to showing hospitality

November 18: Colossians 1:3-14 Lead lives/walk worthy of the Lord/bear fruit in every good work because we have redemption/the forgiveness of sins

I called Nick the other day and said, "I'm going to stick with the scripture texts I picked out in May. They seem particularly relevant to our situation right now, when we all really need to walk by faith and not by sight." So, our Stewardship theme — "Step up. Step out." — is presented in the context of the challenges of living in a post-Florence community and the call from Jesus to "Come" and to be faithful stewards of all that God has given us for our service and ministry in this place, at this time.

About the story in Matthew's gospel, we tend to remember that "when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and began to sink." But before he noticed the strong wind and became frightened and cried out, he stepped up and stepped out. David Johnson and I have had many conversations about this gospel story. Every time we talk about Peter, David says, with great excitement in his voice, "But Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water! I don't know if I could have done that."

It must have been quite a storm out there on the Sea of Galilee. The wind was blowing, the boat was being battered and tossed about by the waves, and the disciples were already far out from the shoreline. Peter didn't step up and step out when the sea was smooth as glass, there wasn't even a breeze blowing, the sky was blue, and the sun was shining. Peter stepped up and stepped out during the fourth watch of the night, between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. in the dark, as the boat was being battered by the waves, with the wind against him, far from the safety of the land. Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water toward Jesus.

The first thing Peter did was get out of the boat. For centuries, the boat has been a symbol for the church. To this day we still call the main part of a sanctuary the "nave" from the Latin word for "boat." The symbolism is based on the story of Noah's ark and stories such as today's gospel story. The boat represents a safe harbor from the raging seas of the world around us. But, you know, sometimes you have to get out of the boat, and that can be really hard to do.

John Ortberg wrote a book called *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. Chapter One is "On Water-Walking," in which Rev. Ortberg talks about the choice between the water or the boat. Here's what he writes:

"Put yourself in Peter's place for a moment. You have a sudden insight into what Jesus is doing — the Lord is passing by. He's inviting you to go on the adventure of your life. But at the same time, you're scared to death. What would you choose — the water or the boat?

"The boat is safe, secure, and comfortable.

"On the other hand, the water is rough. The waves are high. The wind is strong. There's a storm out there. And if you get out of the boat — whatever your boat might happen to be — there's a good chance you might sink.

"But if you don't get out of the boat, there's a guaranteed certainty that you will never walk on the water. This is an immutable law of nature.

"If you want to walk on the water, you've got to get out of the boat.

"So let me ask you a very important question: What's your boat?

"Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up even if it's keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves. Your boat is whatever pulls you away from the high adventure of extreme discipleship.

"Want to know what your boat is? Your fear will tell you. Just ask yourself this: *What is it that produces fear in me — especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith?*"¹

Jesus and Peter have an interesting conversation exchange in this story. When the disciples see what they think is a ghost and are terrified, Jesus calls out to them, "Take courage! It is I; don't be afraid." "It is I — I am!" This is the same promise with which Matthew begins and ends his gospel — "and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us,' (Matthew 1:23) and "And remember, I am with you

always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). "I am — I am with you — don't be afraid." Peter has a most interesting response — "Lord, *if you are you*, command me to come to you upon the waters." And Jesus says, "Come."

Notice that Peter didn't ask Jesus to still the storm (that's another story, although the wind did stop when they got back in the boat). Jesus didn't call out, "Peter, stay in the boat and let me come to you. It's kind of scary out here!" Peter stepped up, stepped out, and went to Jesus when

Jesus called, "Come!" even in the midst of the strong winds that battered the boat.

In 1967, Vancouver sculptor Jack Harman created a larger-than-life bronze sculpture based on a photograph by a Vancouver newspaper photographer named Charlie Warner. The photo was taken when John Landy turned his head to see where Roger Bannister was in the famous Miracle Mile race of August 7, 1954. The statue stood for many years at the entrance to Empire Stadium, the site of the famous race. When the stadium was demolished, the statue was relocated to Hastings Park, near where the race took place. Despite running a sub-four-minute mile, Landy came in second because he turned his head from the goal. He commented about the statue, "While Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one ever turned into bronze for looking back."²

What are you looking at? What are we looking at? The strong wind — the waves battering the boat — the competition gaining on us?

What is our boat? What keeps us from stepping up and stepping out to join Jesus in the adventure of faith?

Maybe Peter deserves more credit than he has been given over the years. After all, at least he stepped up and stepped out of the boat and was doing pretty well as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But even when he took his eyes off of Jesus and noticed the frightening waves and began to sink, Jesus didn't let him go under. Jesus stretched out his hand and grabbed onto him.

One devotional writer says, "Just as Landy took his eyes off the goal and faltered, so can/do we. It wasn't the end for Landy. He continued to run, to break records and set new ones. Neither is it the end for us. When we lose sight of our goal and falter, it isn't the end either. Our gracious God forgives us and uses the experience to teach us and to increase our faith and to keep us on the right path, with our focus on Him — and He works in us to achieve more and more in His service."³

As a church and as individual believers, we have important decisions to make about what we will do and how we will do it in our mission and ministry and outreach as the Wallace Presbyterian Church, in response to Jesus' call, "Come!" It's tempting to stay in the boat, to look around, to look back, to look everywhere but where we're called to keep our focus — looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

What are you looking at? It's a good question.

How will we answer?

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 Gods, and we are your people, called by your name. Amen.

NOTES

¹John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 17.

²Information about the statue is taken from “Fil: Bannister and Landy.jpg,” at www.no.wikipedia.org.”

³ “LOST FOCUS: John Landy LOOKS Back,” November 2, 2011 at www.meetingintheclouds.wordpress.com.