

# Sermon for August 27, 2017 – “Get Out of the Boat”

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Matthew 14:22-33

## Westwood First Presbyterian Church ~ Rev. Jeff Colarossi

One day, a priest, a minister, and a rabbi go fishing. They rent a boat and row out into the middle of a local lake. After a while, the priest said, “I’m thirsty.” Realizing they’d left their cooler on the dock, he steps out of the boat. He then walks on water, across the surface of the lake, gets to the dock, and grabs a drink from their cooler. A little later, the minister said, “I’m thirsty.” He too steps out of the boat, and walks on water to grab a drink from the cooler. Later, still, the rabbi says, “I’m thirsty.” But as soon as he steps out of the boat, he sinks into the lake. The minister looked at the priest and said, “do you think we should’ve told him where the rocks were?” As is the case throughout scripture. There are several levels to our gospel reading this morning. The first is the one in which we see Jesus as the one who calms the raging sea. The bringer of peace to those who encounter rough waters as they sail through life in the boat called the church. Here is Jesus the comforter, the one who speaks to His disciples in their fear saying: **“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”**

A second, according to my seminary NT professor, asks the question: “Why did Jesus and the disciples cross the sea?” And the answer is, of course, to get to the other side to minister to those people there. Thus, says my professor, we should leave the walking on water to Jesus. The ship, the church, is where we want to be. A way for us to get to other places so that we might spread the good news. There is, however, a third level that I’d like us to consider today. The one in which we see Jesus as the one who bestows power. The one who calls to His followers. Those who are willing to step out of the safety of the boat. Those who are willing to take a chance. Think about this episode of Peter and his trip out on the water. Think about how he was willing to risk all, all on the word of Jesus.

In our reading, Jesus commands the disciples to take a boat and go ahead of Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He stays behind to dismiss the crowds that’d gathered to listen to Him. By evening Jesus was alone, praying, and the disciples were far from shore, being battered by wind and waves. They struggle all night against the storm crashing down on them. All is relatively well, until dawn when they see an apparition. Someone, or something, is walking across the water and headed right for them! As you might imagine they’re terrified. And, not surprisingly, they cry out in fear. But it’s Jesus and He responds to the disciple’s fear with the words: **“Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.”** Peter answers Jesus first, saying: **“Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”** And Jesus answers by saying, **“Come.”** And Peter climbs over the edge of the boat, puts his feet upon the water and begins to walk towards Jesus.

Some people dismiss the miracles in the bible as being merely **symbolic**. I don’t. But even though I can’t say exactly **how**, I’ve come to believe miracles are possible and actually do happen. But even so, most of the miracle stories in the Bible **are** symbolic in that they offer lessons on life and faith even as they tell us about the marvelous things that Jesus did. Our gospel story today is a great example. It shows us what can happen when we respond to the call of Jesus. It shows us how we can triumph over the forces of chaos, over that which we fear, that which threatens to sink our boats and drown us. It shows us when we trust in Jesus how His power lifts us up allowing us to weather the storms of life and do something **new**.

I know that sounds clichéd, but think about it. Peter didn't **need** to get out of the boat. I mean, why would he **want** to? After all, there was a storm going on? Who in his/her right mind gets out of a perfectly good boat for heaven's sake? He could've simply stayed put and waited for Jesus to come to him. Quite frankly, that's what anyone with half a brain would've done! He could've stayed in his comfort zone, in the safety of the boat. As the text tells us Jesus was walking towards them, all Peter had to do was wait knowing that everything would be okay now that the Lord was coming to him and the other disciples. But he didn't (after all, this is Peter we're talking about). He took a chance. He asked the Lord to bid him to come to Him. He asked for the power to meet him in the middle of a raging sea. That's courage indeed. Courage to venture forth into danger. Courage to do what the Lord has said can be done. Courage to risk taking a step that doesn't really need to be taken simply because the Lord tells him it **can** be taken. It seems to me, based on my experience, that lots of people suffer from a lack of boldness. A lack of courage born of previous failure and the resultant lack of self-esteem. Even Christians. And the sad truth is, that given the choice between:

- a) continuing in a situation where there's a reasonable degree of safety (despite the apparent dangers) and
- b) venturing out into a new and unknown situation (where the dangers seem even greater with no apparent safety net)

most people will elect to stay put. They'll choose to stay where they are. They'll say that the devil that they know is better than the devil that they don't know. Thus, it is that women will stay in a home where they and their children are being abused rather than leave and find a new life. Thus, it is that men will work for years in a job that's slowly destroying their health and happiness rather than risk their security by finding a new job, starting their own business, or returning to school. Thus, it is that young people will not do what they know deep within them to be right fearing that others will deem them 'un-cool' or stupid, afraid of failure, or being ridiculed and rejected. Thus it is, that people who have dreams of doing something special will stay where they are allowing their dreams to wither and die. Thus it is that so many in so many churches, so many sitting on the sidelines.

Here's my question: What about us? What've we been afraid to do? What've we postponed, or dismissed entirely, because we dreaded the possible consequences? Who've we avoided because we didn't know what to say to them? Where've we refused to go because we feared getting lost? What've we hidden from because we felt inadequate? What victory escaped us because we were afraid of losing? What dream have we let wither and die? What are we so afraid of?

You may be familiar with a quote from Henry David Thoreau, I think I've used it before, it's from his famous book "Walden" where Thoreau shares his belief that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." The rest of the quote reads "What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city, you go into the desperate country, a stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed. Even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things." Similarly, poet Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. once said that "many people die with their music still in them". "Why is this so?" "Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it time runs out." I think what they and, of course, Jesus are trying to tell is this. Sometimes we need to get out of the boat, no matter who we are. We need to say: **"Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you."**

I'm not saying we need to go out and be reckless, what I **am** saying is that if you have a dream don't let it die...Live it! If you're in a situation where wholeness and happiness are elusive and you hear the master calling to you to take a chance...Take it! If you see that you can do something to help someone else or simply feel that God is calling you to do something in your life that seems impossible...For heaven's sake...do it!

But I'm fine the way I am; Well, so was Peter! Peter did not need to accept Jesus' invitation. He was fine right where he was! But nevertheless, he tried. God love him, he tried! He started off well enough keeping his eyes on Jesus! His faith in Jesus' power was holding him up. Then, for some unknown reason, he takes his eyes off Jesus and in short order finds himself treading water until Jesus can lift him back up again. The lesson here is that when we take a risk, when we respond to God's call, we must remain focused on Christ. We must, as I said back in June, keep our "eyes on the prize". We must make sure that the "main thing" is the "main thing." It's crucial that we maintain our trust in God to see us through no matter what's happening around us. That's what people who live by faith do. They remember that looks can be deceiving, that even feelings can be misleading, but that God's word is truth; reliable, trustworthy, consistent.

When we believe and act on that truth we eventually break through the fog and experience the fulfillment of divine promise. Peter, as he is overcome by fear, walking by sight, rather than faith, begins to sink. His risk looks as if it's failed. But, as our story shows, doesn't. Pete sinks, but he remembers from whence his help comes. He cries out: "**Lord! Save me!**" And Jesus does by simply holding out His hand.

I'm going to risk stating the obvious here and say that the Lord does the same for us when we step out. Whether individually or as a church When we risk coming closer to God and then falter the hand of Jesus reaches out to us and lifts us up. All we have to do is **remember** and focus on Him once again. Jesus says to Peter after reaching out to him to save him (gently, I'd imagine) "**you of little faith, why did you doubt?**" In doubting, Peter did what Thomas would eventually do, that which so many do today...doubt. And the sad truth is that doubt will always undermine faith. Now, it's certainly not bad thing to doubt, it's not a sin to ask questions, to wrestle with our faith. But to do so repeatedly, to do so over and over without ever giving God the slightest benefit of the doubt, without ever making that "leap of faith" to see what's possible, well, that's where the problem lies! When these things happen our faith won't ever reach its fullest potential. We'll never become the people God calls us to be. When that happens, we'll never grow spiritually. If we let doubt rule, we'll never know if we can walk on water! The seas we find ourselves adrift on may be the waves of trial, pain, adversity, calamity, troubles, cares, and so on. The things we face in the world on a regular basis whether by our own choice, chance or circumstance. They may be the constant, insistent voices of the world we live in. Voices telling us "no," or "you can't," or "that's impossible." Too often, these voices keep people from even trying which is an even greater tragedy than trying and failing.

This all puts me in mind of a song that helped get me through the early days of seminary, with all the self-doubt borne of countless previous failures and bad decisions. It's a song by the Christian group Casting Crowns and it uses our gospel reading in its lyrics..."Oh, what I would do to have, the kind of faith it takes to climb out of this boat I'm in onto the crashing waves..."To step out of my comfort zone – into the realm of the unknown where Jesus is..."And He's holding out his hand. "But the waves are calling out my name and they laugh at me..."Reminding me of all the times I've tried before and failed..."The waves they keep on telling me – time and time again: "'Boy, you'll never

win! You'll never win!' Then the chorus: "But the voice of truth tells me a different story..." "The voice of truth says, 'Do not be afraid!' "And the voice of truth says, 'This is for My glory!' "Out of all the voices calling out to me..." "I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth!"

So, which voice will we listen to? How we answer that makes a difference because when we take a risk for the Lord, for **His** glory, when we dare to do what's right He's near to us to help us. We needn't doubt the outcome, nor fear adversity.

Think of the story of David and Goliath. In God's name, David confronted someone he otherwise didn't stand a chance of defeating with just a sling and a relatively small stone. But the stone was just the right size to put the giant on the ground and the waves that we face don't seem so high from the top of them looking down. All we need to do is keep focused on Jesus, to look to where our help comes from. All we need to do is ask for the help we need and trust that it will come...Because it will!

And here's the thing, maybe Peter's faith was weak, maybe he allowed himself to be momentarily distracted, but at least he had the courage to take that first step! And unless **we** do the same we'll never know what it's to walk by faith, we'll never know what miracles might occur. So, do yourself, the church, and the world a favor...And get out of the boat! Whatever doubts and fears hold you back respond to the Lord who bids us come to Him. When we do, marvelous things happen. When we do, we discover new things about ourselves and the world. And remember, remember that we can risk because we have someone who watches over us. Remember that we can trust because we have someone who cares for us. Remember that we can step out because we have someone to catch us when we fall!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.