

“Keep Your Eyes On Jesus”

Date: August 7, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Occasion: Pentecost 8, Year A

Themes: Fear, Trust, Faith

The lesson of this parable is abundantly clear, but what actually happened is not. First, let us set the scene. After the feeding of the multitude, Jesus sent his disciples away. Matthew says that he *compelled* them to get on the boat and go ahead.

Now if you remember from last week, Jesus was dealing with the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. And his time of prayer and grief had been interrupted. Jesus needed that time alone with God, now more than ever. Jesus sent his disciples away so that he could pray. When he was finally alone, he went up onto the mountain to pray.

By this time, night had come. The disciples had set out, back across the lake. One of the sudden storms, for which the lake was notorious, had come upon them. And they were struggling against the wind and the waves, and making little progress.

As the night wore on, Jesus began to walk around the head of the lake to reach the other side. Matthew has already told us that when Jesus fed the crowds, he made them sit down on the *green* grass. By that we know that it must have been springtime. Very likely it was near the Passover time, which was in the middle of April.

If that was so, the moon would be full. In ancient times the night was divided into four *watches*: 6pm to 9pm; 9pm to 12 midnight; midnight to 3am; and 3m to 6am. According to the text, at three o'clock in the morning, Jesus was walking on the high ground at the north end of the lake, clearly saw the boat fighting with the

waves, and he came down to the shore to help.

William Barclay tells us, that this is where it gets difficult to know what happened, exactly. There are different Greek words used in the text, which could mean different things. One translation could mean, “Jesus walked *towards the sea.*” The other interpretation could be “Jesus walked *on the sea.*” The truth is, there are two possible and legitimate interpretations of this passage, so far as the actual Greek goes.

It may describe a miracle in which Jesus actually walked on the water. Or, it may equally mean that the disciples boat was driven by the wind to the northern shore of the lake, that Jesus came down from the mountain, and that he came walking *through* the surf and the waves, towards the boat. And he came so suddenly upon them that they were terrified when they saw him.

Both of these interpretations of the Greek text are equally valid. Some will prefer one, and some will prefer the other. But, whatever interpretation we choose, the significance is perfectly clear. **In the time of the disciples need, Jesus came to them.**

When the wind was contrary, and life was a struggle, Jesus was there to help. No sooner had a need arisen, than Jesus was there to help and to save.

In life, the wind is often contrary. There are times when we are up against it, and life is a desperate struggle - with ourselves, with our circumstances, with our temptations, with our sorrows, with our decisions. At such a time, nobody has to struggle alone, for Jesus comes to us across the storms of life, with hand outstretched to save, and with his calm, clear voice bidding us to take heart, and have no fear.

In point of fact, it really doesn't matter how we take this incident, because it

is far more than just the story of what Jesus once did in a storm 2,000 years ago. It is the sign and symbol of what he always does for his people, when the wind is contrary and we are in danger of being overwhelmed by the storms of life. He comes to us!

My friends, I don't know what storms of life will come your way this week, or what storm you may be enduring at this very moment. But I do know this - even as the storm rages around you, if you will listen very carefully with your heart, you will hear a gentle voice calling to you, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." And in time, the storm will pass, and Jesus will still be there. (2nd service - end here - "Let us pray")

But the story does not end here. Impulsive Peter cries out, "Lord, if it's you, bid me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." Peter starts off pretty good. He gets out of the boat - that in itself took a lot of faith. He starts walking on the water, and maybe was feeling pretty giddy. "Hey look at me! I'm walking on water."

But the text tells us, "When he saw the wind, he was afraid, and he began to sink." Immediately Jesus responds, reaches out his hand and catches him. "You of little faith," he says, "why did you doubt?"

Peter reveals just how human he really is. You and I can identify with him. He is like us. He begins the journey with lots of enthusiasm, and part way into it he gets scared and begins to doubt. Peter is both courageous and cowardly, he begins well, but when he sees the storm, he is overcome with terror.

Why did Peter fail? Because he took his eyes off of Jesus. When Jesus first called to him, "Come," Peter was full of confidence, maybe even a little pride. But the further he went, and he took his eyes off the Master, and he began to notice the

storm around him, he was afraid.

I've heard it said, "Unbelief puts our circumstance between us and God. But faith puts God between us and our circumstances." (Repeat) Faith is the ability to keep our eyes on Jesus, even in the midst of the storm. When the stock market plunges yet again, when the doctor says the word *cancer*, when the company you work for lays you off, when your wife files for divorce, keep your eyes upon Jesus.

Peter represents the Church. He is the symbol of all of us. He lives between fear and faith. He walks, he sinks, he trusts, he fears. How like we. At times we can be persons of great faith. And at others we can let the smallest things cause us to sink.

But notice how Jesus responds to Peter.

There is a small rebuke. "O ye of little faith." I think we need to hear that word from Jesus from time to time. To remind us that we have stopped trusting Him, that we have put our faith in ourselves, and if we continue we shall surely fall. But Jesus also reaches out his hand, showing love and compassion and grace.

Jesus did not let Peter perish. Jesus raised him up. Although Peter's faith wavered, Jesus lifted him up and strengthened him, *before* it was too late. Peter is the model of the person who responds in faith, and of how Jesus helps his faltering faith.

Beloved, we do not have to be perfect disciples for Jesus to show us His love.

But it is important that we keep our eyes on Him. For if we don't, too easily are we distracted and the storm will consume us. Turn if you will in your hymnal, this was not originally planned, but I think it an appropriate ending to our message, to page 349.

"Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." page 349

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.

Amen!