

**Sermon:** Faith Over Fear  
**Text:** Matthew 14:22-33 NLT  
**God's Word:** Romans 10:5-15 NLT  
**Date:** Sunday, August 13, 2023  
**Preacher:** Rev. Becky Stephens

***Matthew 14:22-33 NLT***

*<sup>22</sup> Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. <sup>23</sup> After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone. <sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. <sup>25</sup> About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. <sup>26</sup> When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!" <sup>27</sup> But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!" <sup>28</sup> Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water." <sup>29</sup> "Yes, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted. <sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" <sup>32</sup> When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. <sup>33</sup> Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.*

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In Hebrew thought, water represents much more than a physical reality. Whether it's the sea with its great depths, a relentless river that is overflowing, or sudden flash-flooding there is something about the threat water poses to human life.

Throughout the Old Testament, though, the Lord is triumphant over the water...in the Creation of the world...in the covenant with Noah...in the deliverance from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea...and in the miraculous entry into the Promised Land through the rising Jordan River.

Job says that God tramples on the waves and walks "in the recesses of the deep." These are specific signs of God's sovereignty and transcendent power over all that threatens to stop God's good purposes.

And although the Sea of Galilee often looked beautiful and calm, many biblical writers described it as an abyss, a fearsome place of darkness and chaos. It was subject to sudden violent storms...storms that came up rather suddenly.

Add to this that few people could swim and even fishermen avoided deep water...it's not surprising that the disciples were terrified and then especially scared out of their minds when they saw Someone or Something walking on the water.

Even after Jesus speaks to the disciples, they are still not sure this is Jesus. And so Peter calls out: "Lord, if it's you tell me to come to you on the water." When Jesus tells him to "come," Peter steps out of the boat in faith and faithfulness. And having walked on the water a little way, Peter becomes frightened and he starts to sink. "Lord, save me!" Peter cries out. And the strong arm of Jesus lifts him up.

I think what the Lord is trying to get across to us this morning with this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are going to be faithful to Christ and fruitful in ministry.

Of course, stepping out in faith is not a guarantee we won't face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it does come with the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, He will not leave us—even in the midst of chaos. And that is the most important thing to know.

And through experiencing this, our faith grows stronger, as it must have for Peter on that stormy night 2,000 years ago. We are told that "those who were in the boat worshiped" Jesus saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

As Christians in the 21st Century we may not fear water, but we still face the stormy seas—those challenging situations that make us feel afraid—that tempt us to stay in our safe little boat. But there is a world outside that is broken and in chaos. And Jesus is calling us to step out into the world, into the community, into the neighborhood in mission for Him.

How can we be the Church that takes chances? How can we be God's agents of love in this world of violence, greed, arrogance and fear?

I once attended a conference where the speaker said: "The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." He was right. The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter's example

and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy and saving grace of God that we find in Jesus Christ.

Like I said, our world is messed up! We can't seem to go a day without a mass shooting. People are living in fear and without hope. And more people than ever are trying to survive the dangerous storms of life without the Church and without Jesus.

According to a Gallup Poll published in March, only 47% of Americans say they belong to a church. That's down from 50% in 2018 and from over 70% in the past six decades. It's an all-time low.

Now, there is no doubt that just attending a church doesn't make us much of a church if we are just sitting in the pew consuming, consuming, consuming. Being the Church is living our lives for Christ, demonstrating God's love by serving others—even when it's risky or not convenient—and sharing our faith with people. The Church is not somewhere that believers go to be served—but we are to go to serve. There's something deeply Scriptural about that.

Now, yes. We are to love and take care of one another. But we are also called out into the world that God created, loves and died to save. And there is no future for a church that is passionless, disengaged and apathetic in their love for God and reaching out to others. There is no future for a church that is more interested in arguing over politics than they are about God's Kingdom and serving others in humble love. And perhaps, that is why so many people are dropping out or see no need for the church in their lives.

So how do we become relevant in the eyes of a disinterested world? One thing is for sure, if we are to be the Church of Jesus Christ in this post-Christian world we must take Jesus' Words to heart and be prepared to be non-judgmental. And that is hard. It goes against our grain.

But “unchurched people” don't come “pre-converted.” Cleaning up one's behavior or messy life isn't a precondition for salvation. We can talk about radical hospitality until we are blue in the face, but if we are simply devoted to self-perpetuation and to a middle-class nuclear-family membership we aren't being the Church. If we are dismissive of persons and groups of people who don't fit into our pre-conceived idea of cultural norms, we will die.

Let's ask ourselves this question: "Would Jesus Christ, a single homeless man dependent on a motley group of lower-class followers for support, find a home in this church? Would greetings at the front door be forced or genuine? Would we ask Him to sign in so we could follow up?"

And how about really getting out of the boat, like Peter? Will we reach out to a community that is dismissive of the church at the very least, if not downright angry and antagonistic toward it? I think we will. We must.

Do you know that somewhere under 200 families were served this past Monday as we gave out new clothes and school supplies to 420 school age kids. If statistics can be believed, only 22 percent of folks in their generation consider themselves Christian.

We have a great mission field right here at our building!!! What are we doing about it? How are we reaching out? What more can we do to not just give a handout, but to reach out to these families? Can we invite them to church? Invite them to participate in Lifewise? Or Bucyrus Buddies Mentoring Program? Invite them to Bible School, Sunday School, and worship?

When they do show up, are we showing up to greet them and to offer help with whatever they are facing? Being loving? Being Christ?

Every week, during the school year, I try to be present as our LifeWise kids come into and leave the building. I wave and give high fives and every now and then, I get a hug. These children need to know that someone is excited to see them come into the church. In addition to the LifeWise kids, I'll be building a relationship with a child at the elementary school this year. I encourage you to do the same. Sign up to be a mentor in Wesley Hall.

Pastor Matt and I are also going to start a time of Coffee with the Pastors on a regular basis. You will also be hearing about special times for small groups to get together with both Matt and myself to dream and discern and listen and learn.

People are facing such storms in life. Single mothers are trying to navigate the chaotic waters of trying to raise young children on their own...single fathers are doing the same. What a scary predicament to face. People need the love and embrace of Christ's Church. They may not know it; but they do.

It's not about us. It's about reaching the community for Christ. It's about being the Kingdom of God on earth. Will we put in the effort to create safe places for those who do not know the Savior...for those who are lonely, lost and without hope? For the person considering suicide? Will we be Christ to them? Will we continue to meet together? Will we offer healing, salt and light in an otherwise cold, dark world.

Here are some of the latest statistics on unchurched people:

- 60% have never even been to or in a church
- They aren't sure what "Christian" means
- You know, there used to be something called "old school revivals," but we are on the 2nd to 5th generation of unchurched people. People can't be revived or called back to something they have never known.
- Many have tried church, even a little but because of a bad experience they left. Because they were judged or ignored or yelled at.
- They want US to be Christians—to authentically follow Christ.
- They don't like hypocrites and they can see one a mile away.
- They love transparency—that is when we show our weaknesses...but we must show our weaknesses with love, empathy, mercy, understanding.

Most of all, what these things tell us is that people are attracted to Christ when they see People Loving one another in His name.

We Serve Christ...When We Share Christ...and We Share Christ...When We Show Christ.

They don't expect us to be perfect—they expect us to love and be kind, merciful and full of grace. In other words, they are looking for what the world cannot and does not offer.

And that's what Jesus and His Church are to be about. It's the story of the Good Samaritan. It is the greatest commandment.

When we, instead, fight among ourselves about sin and who is in and who is out...and who lives what kind of lifestyle and I'm morally better than she...they want nothing to do with us.

That doesn't mean sin doesn't exist, but we all must look to take the log out of our own eyes—and that takes a lifetime. And we must take the log out of our own eye before attempting to take the speck of sawdust out of someone else's eye. In other

words, it's not our place to judge. Our job is to love. The Holy Spirit transforms lives, not us. Not me.

When Jesus walked through the storm to the frightened disciples in our Gospel Lesson for this morning, He immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"It is I"...this Greek phrase contains the same Words that the Old Testament uses to translate the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. And so, Jesus is saying: "I AM is here, trampling victoriously over the waves." In other words, Jesus is God-- the same God Who liberated and redeemed Israel, and is at the same time the Creator of the world and the Victor over Chaos!!!

These are powerful words. They are words that instill courage and banish fear. God uses similar words throughout the Bible accompanied by the words: "Do not be afraid."

Do not be afraid. Is this the Good News this world needs to hear more than just about anything? The God Who Created all that is—is on our Side!!! He loves us. He comes to us amidst the storms of life. And He bids us to "come" ...to get out of the boat and walk on the water of life. And when and if we do take avert our eyes from Him, as Peter did—He is right there to pull us up when we cry out to Him.

Will Willimon said in a sermon: "If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus." He goes on, "I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith."

The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove His promises through trusting His promises, through risk and adventure.

Does that describe your faith journey? Does that describe mine? Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest.

It's the Only Way to be the TRUE CHURCH. And Jesus invites us to be just that. Will we?

