

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 14. The story we're looking at today contains the very first Christian worship service. It's the first time in the Bible that disciples of Jesus gather in his presence and praise his name. It's a momentous moment in Matthew's gospel. The disciples begin to profess that their master, their leader and their teacher, is no mere mortal. Together they declare that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he is not only worthy of their devotion, but also their adoration. And how did they come to that conclusion? Through revelation.

In this story, Jesus reveals his true nature through the amazing things that he does and one astonishing thing that he says. And as we watch him and listen to him here in these verses, I'm praying that we will be drawn to worship him as well. So, I want us to fix our eyes on Jesus this morning. At the same time, I want us to pay attention to the disciples. Because even though they are worshipping at the end of the story, they only get there after enduring some significant trials. And as we consider their experience, we'll find encouragement for times when Jesus feels far away from us, for times when fear overwhelms us, and for times when doubts assail us.

Maybe that captures a struggle you're facing today. Maybe you're finding it hard to worship because if you're honest, Christ feels so distant, or some fear so prevalent, or some doubt so troubling. You're not alone. The disciples faced the same things. And I want you to see how Jesus helped them because it's the way he will help you too. We'll structure our time in this passage around those three experiences. And we'll start with times...

1. When Jesus feels far away

Let's pick up the story in verse 22. Matthew writes, *Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds* (v. 22).

Jesus just turned a desolate wilderness into an abundant banquet, feeding thousands of people with the miraculous multiplication of a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. And after everyone has eaten, Jesus sends both the crowds and the disciples away. Now, why did he do that? Surely these well-fed people would have been interested in spending more time with him. And it's very unusual for Jesus to send the disciples away who almost always travel with him. The answer is found in John's account of this story. John tells us that the people were amazed at Jesus's miraculous provision. No surprise there. But John also tells us that some of the people made a decision to rally around Jesus and crown him as king. They were ready for a rebellion against Herod and Rome, with this miracle worker as their leader! But this was not Jesus's plan.

So, John writes, *Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself* (John 6:15). You see, Jesus knew that his destiny was not to sit on the throne of an earthly kingdom, but at the right hand of the Father in heaven. And Jesus knew that his path to this heavenly throne was not through political rebellion, but through death and resurrection. So, to prevent the disciples from getting caught up in these people's plot, he sent them away, he dismissed the crowds.

*And verse 23 says, after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray (v. 23). We don't know what Jesus prayed for. Maybe as he would later in Gethsemane, he prayed for strength to face his impending death. Maybe he prayed for the blessing and protection of his disciples. Maybe he simply praised his Father and enjoyed his presence. But whatever kind of prayer time Jesus was having on the mountain, the disciples were having a hard time in the boat. Verses 23-24 say, *When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them* (vv. 23-24).*

Try and put yourselves in the disciples' shoes. They are in this boat, out on the sea, and a storm has broken out. The waves are beating them up, the wind is pressing against them, and they are a long way from the land. And where is Jesus? He's back on shore, up on a mountain, alone in the presence of his Father. You can imagine the disciples saying to themselves, or perhaps to one another, "Why did Jesus send us out here? And why didn't he come with?" "Didn't he know we'd get into trouble? Didn't he know we'd need his help? Ah, but he's so far away now."

And we can relate to this. Life in this world has a way of beating us up. There are all kinds of pressure and all sorts of pain that presses against us, and sometimes we wonder, "Where is Jesus? Why is he letting this happen to me? What is he doing?" After all, we can't see him. He's up in heaven, in the Father's presence. We're down here in this tumultuous world, and that can make him feel very far away. And yet, there's an encouragement for us here. Again, Matthew tells us the disciples are a long way from the land. John tells us they had made it three or four miles, so they cannot see Jesus. But he can see them. Mark tells us that while Jesus prayed, ***He saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them*** (Mark 6:48). Whether the boat was visible from the mountaintop, or Jesus is using a supernatural kind of sight, he sees exactly what is happening to them. He knows the trouble they're facing.

Jesus never looks on as a passive observer. He looks at helpless people with a compassionate heart, ready to intervene in the right way at the right time. It makes me think of when our children were babies crying in their cribs. The way they cried, in their little minds they must have thought we'd abandoned them. We must have felt so far away. But what they couldn't understand was that we were watching them on the video monitor! And very soon, we would come to them and help them. And what we must understand is that even when life is beating us up, and we're hard pressed, and Jesus feels very far away, he has not lost sight of us. He knows the troubles we are facing, and his heart goes out to us.

Psalms 34:15 says, *The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry* (Psalm 34:15). Friend, whatever you're dealing with today, your Savior sees you, and he will come to help you. Psalm 34:17 says, *When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles* (Psalm 34:17). He will come in his way, in his time, but he will come. So, hang in there. He has not left you. He will never forsake you. This is good news when Jesus feels far away. And it's good news...

2. When fear overwhelms us

Look at verse 25: *And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea* (v. 25).

The fourth watch of the night refers to the time between 3 and 6 a.m. The disciples have been battling the wind and the waves all night. They must be frustrated. They must be exhausted. Then, perhaps as the pre-dawn light begins to brighten the sky and they can see further out into the water than they could in the dead of night, they see something. Or rather, they see someone. Jesus has come to them, walking on the sea. But they do not know it is him. So, verse 26 says, *But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear* (v. 26). These poor disciples, in their minds, this bad night on the water has taken a turn for the worse. Not only do they have to deal with the storm, now there's a ghost approaching them, and they are terrified!

I remember once in college getting together with a bunch of guys and watching a scary movie. And this film, which I'm sure I would not recommend, had our group of 20-year-old men screaming (in very high pitch voices). We were covering our eyes and holding on to one another for dear life. We were terrified. That's the disciples here. They're crying out in fear. That word "crying out" can be translated, "screaming," or even, "shrieking." They're really scared, because not only is it strange and unsettling to see someone approaching your boat walking on the sea, but also, in the ancient world, it was a common belief that the sea was home to all kinds of evil forces, including the ghosts of those who had drowned! It was a popular superstition that if one of these ghosts appeared to you, it was likely a sign of impending doom that you were next! They see this person walking on the water and they think he must be evil personified. But boy are they wrong! This is God personified!

In verse 27, Jesus makes that clear. Look at what he says. Matthew tells us, *But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid"* (v. 27). Notice, Jesus tells them three things. He says,

- "Do not be afraid."
- Instead, "Take heart."
- Why? Because "It is I."

That's the key phrase. *"It is I."* Those three little words are loaded with meaning. First, they mean that this is not a ghost on the water. It's Jesus, their master. They've already seen him calm a storm on the water once. They know if he's with them all will be well, so his presence is very comforting. But also, in this little phrase, Jesus is revealing something remarkable about his identity. The phrase "It is I," is a translation of two Greek words, which can also be translated, "I am." And if you know your Bible, you know the significance of those words. Back in Exodus 3, when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and called him to go back to Egypt and deliver Israel from slavery, do you remember what Moses asked God?

Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13). Do you remember how God replied? *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."* And he said,

"Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).

When Moses asked God to share his name, God replied, "I AM." And through the remainder of the Old Testament, the presence of the great I AM is the ultimate source of comfort and hope for God's people. If he is with them, they have nothing to fear! For example, in Isaiah 43 the Lord tells his people, *"Fear not... When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior"* (Isaiah 43:1-3).

You can see the parallel to our passage today. Here are the disciples, passing through the waters, full of fear. But Jesus approaches, and he tells them, 'Take heart! It is I! I Am!' He is telling them, "I am the Lord your God. And since I am with you, you have nothing to fear." And church, he says the same thing to us. When fear overwhelms us, when the evil we see in this world terrifies us, when storms arise and threaten us, our Lord Jesus tells us, "Fear not. For I am the Lord your God, and I will be with you." His presence is the ultimate source of peace. And we know that. But we also know how hard it can be to keep our eyes fixed on him, especially when fears overwhelm us, and doubts assail us. Let's talk about those times...

3. When doubts assail us

Look at verses 28-29: *And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus* (vv. 28-29).

I love Peter. He realizes it's Jesus walking on the water. His fears are dispelled, and now, he sounds like a kid saying, "Cool! Can I try?" And there are some who argue that this was a mistake. That Peter is being foolish. That he is even sinfully putting the Lord to the test. Yet, we know from other places in the Gospels that Jesus has no problem rebuking Peter, but there's no rebuke here. Jesus simply says, "Come." We might picture Jesus with a smile on his face saying, "You want to try, Peter? Come on out!" So, Peter climbs up and over the side of the boat, puts his feet on the water, and begins to walk. It's all a stunning demonstration of Jesus's power.

There are always people who scoff at these Bible stories and deride them for how unrealistic they are. After all, people can't walk on water! Well, that's true. But surely the God who made the water could walk on it if he wanted to. And couldn't he easily cause anyone else to do the same? You see, the real miracle you must grapple with is the miracle of the incarnation. If you come to believe that God took on human flesh, nothing he does in his earthly life will seem that farfetched.

So, here's Peter on the water walking to Jesus. It must have been so thrilling, so exhilarating! But before long, the whole thing starts unraveling. Look at verse 30-31: *But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"* (vv. 30-31).

I want you to notice what Peter did wrong, and then, what Peter did right. His mistake is

obvious: He saw the wind, stirring up the waves around him. And with his eyes on the waves, he got his eyes off Jesus, and he began to doubt. He failed to exercise his faith, to depend on his Lord, and he started to sink. We know what this is like. We look around at the things that scare us:

- We fear danger, disaster, and death.
- We fear for our kids, our country, our church.
- We fear job loss, financial pressure, and an inability to make ends meet.
- We fear relationships falling apart or someone we love not loving us in return.

Then, as these fears rise around us, we can start to sink into doubt. And doubt is not always intellectual, as our fears cause us to question God's existence or the truth of his word. That can happen! But doubt can also be something more experiential. As one author puts it, "[Doubt can manifest as] a practical hesitation, [a] wavering." The doubt might simply be a battle to believe that God will protect you or provide for you. It may be an experience of weak faith, or little faith, as Jesus calls it here. We all know what this is like. So, what do we do when it happens?

Well, this is where we can learn from Peter, because though he was wrong to doubt, he did precisely the right thing when he began to sink. He cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" He didn't try to swim back to the boat in his own strength. He didn't stay silent out of embarrassment or shame. No, he exercised his faith once again and called out for Jesus's help! And Jesus immediately reached out and rescued him. Friends, this is such good news. As J.C. Ryle says, "Let us learn...from this... how merciful our Lord Jesus Christ is to weak believers... He knows [our] feebleness and bears long with [us]. [And] he would have us know that doubting does not prove that someone has no faith, but only that their faith is small. And even when our faith is small the Lord is ready to help us." And then Ryle quotes from Psalm 94:18, which says, *When I thought, "My foot slips," your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up* (Psalm 94:18).

Do you feel like your foot is slipping today? Have you sunk down into some doubt? Have you been overwhelmed by some fear? Cry out to Jesus. Pray, "Lord, save me!" He will hold you up.

Conclusion

This is a great story. It's a reminder that though Jesus may feel far away, his eye is always upon us, and in his time and in his way he will come to us. It's a reminder that though this world is full of evil, if we know that the Lord—the great I AM—is with us, we have nothing to fear. And when we struggle to believe it, when doubts assail us, he is willing and able to rescue us. So, how do we respond to all of this? The way the disciples responded.

Look at verses 32-33: *And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God"* (vv. 32-33). They fall before him, proclaim his glory, and praise his name. And he doesn't stop them. He doesn't say, "Hey, don't do that! Remember, we worship God alone!" No, he receives their praise because he is their God. And church, he is worthy of our praise as well. This is one reason we prioritize this gathering each week, where we come together as disciples to worship our Lord! So, in a moment, when we begin to sing, let's lift our voices to the one whose eye is upon us, who is greater than all our

fears, who reaches down and delivers us from every doubt and every danger. And let's remember that every time we worship him in this life, we're getting a little preview of the life to come.

Here at the end of Matthew 14, we see the disciples worshipping Jesus in his immediate presence... and the wind has ceased. All the danger, all the frustration they faced, is over. All is calm. All is well. And this is our future and our hope. One day, all the danger and all the frustration, all the evil and all the sin, will be over. Because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the great I AM will come and put all things right, and we will dwell in the perfections of his presence, worshipping him forever and ever.