

Do Not Be Afraid, Sermon August 9, 2026, by Rev. R. Randy Day

Scripture Reading: Romans 10:5-15 & Mathew 14:22-33

I'm going to be preaching from the text that goes just a little bit farther, but I can explain it very quickly. Jesus sat back and sent the disciples ahead in a boat. He was trying to get away from the crowds. He wanted to pray again, and then he went out into the middle of the sea. There was a great storm, and they were far from the edge of the shore, and this is the story where Jesus walked on the water. You remember that case.

I'm going to comment on the story a little bit because I was digging into it, and I think it's worth sharing. Both Mark and John tell the same story about this storm coming up on the water, and that Jesus walked on the water when they were so terrified. It's only in the Gospel of Matthew that we have the additional story inserted that Peter said, "Lord, I want to walk over to you. Give me the command." And Jesus said, "Come to me."

Remember, Peter gets out of the water and he walks over. He has faith. He takes a few steps. Then suddenly his faith is going like this, and he starts sinking. And he calls out in fear. And Jesus grabs his hand, pulls him into the boat.

Why did Mark and John leave out that part? I don't know. Maybe they didn't leave it out. Maybe Matthew added it for reasons. Okay, you're all very smart, so we're thinking a little bit here.

Matthew was written quite a while after these other two Gospels. At the time that Matthew was writing, Christians were being persecuted all over the place, and most scholars believe by the time his Gospel was finished, Peter had already been crucified. Peter's dead. So, the people in churches are pretty terrified. They're fearful of the authorities, Herod, and all these others. Right? They're fearful of what may happen to them.

So they took a lot of interest and a lot of faith from this particular passage, knowing that they too may suffer. They too may be persecuted, but they know that God will be with them during that persecution. So that's probably why this passage is in there.

Just a couple of other comments. It said Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. So, in biblical literature, going up on a mountain signifies this is something that's really, really important. We know Morgan's going to the beautiful Rocky Mountains. The mountains in Palestine are not anything like the Rockies or the Andes in South America, they're kind of what we call big hills in some places. But he went up on a big hill, small mountain, whatever, and that's where he prayed.

He had just really had a run-in with Herod, who was really out to get Jesus. That's in the passage of Matthew just before the feeding of 5,000, which we dealt with last week. Remember? And now here we have this story of walking on the water. In fact, when they saw him walking on the water, they were so terrified because they thought maybe it was a ghost. Some commentators are saying, yes, in their minds, these are smart folks, these disciples had been at sea for these several hours, maybe Herod killed Jesus, and maybe this is the ghost of Jesus walking on the water.

These guys—I may say, I know we have some sailors here—these disciples, when they said they were afraid, they weren't afraid of the sea. They'd have been in many. They weren't afraid of the storm. They'd been in

many, many storms before. What they were afraid of was what they had never seen before, and that is a person walking on the water.

Now, a word about—well, I just want to say, you know, those of you who dig into these things, I see Berk is here. That's a lot of Latin. I did some digging. A stadium ("stadion") is not a Latin word, but it's a Greek word, an ancient Greek unit of measurement, which is about 600 feet. They give these statistics in there, but when you analyze and put them all together, 600 feet—that's about 182 meters—tells us there were, well, there were 30 of these stadia. So when you put it all together, it equals about three miles.

They were three miles from the shore, and we're talking here when they say the sea. It's not the Mediterranean, certainly not the Atlantic. We're talking about the Sea of Galilee. It's a large lake, but can be very, very turbulent. (Some of you have been very turbulent in a storm, no doubt about that. And the whole Sea of Galilee, Lake Tiberias on maps today, is 13 miles one way long, and it's eight miles across. Eight miles across. So if you're three miles from the shore, you're pretty much in the middle of a lake, huh?

So they had reason. They had reason to be scared. I mean, if they tipped over or whatever, it's three miles a long way to the shore, especially in a storm. Now, something else I ran across, and that is, in biblical literature, the sea is a demonic place. Did you know that?

Now we all went to Sunday school, Bible school, all these things, and the pictures of the Sea of Galilee—you know, it's all very pastoral, right? It all looks very—you just want to go there and have a picnic. You want to sit down. You want to pray. You want to think about Jesus walking by the sea. But in a biblical sense, the ocean, the sea, as they call it, is a place for demonic forces hostile to God. Hostile to God. To have command over the sea is God's prerogative.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn that God, God, not Jesus, but God walked on the water in a number of places, in Isaiah, in Job. Also, my favorite one is in the Psalms. Just listen to this short, short passage from Psalms 77, verses 16 to 19.

"When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid. The very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water. The skies thundered. Your arrows flashed on every side, the crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind. Your lightnings lit up the world. The earth trembled and shook. The way—excuse me—your way was through the sea. Your path through the mighty waters. Yet your footprints were unseen."

If your footprints were unseen, it means that God was walking on the water. So here we have Jesus walking on the water, so many would say theologically, this is another one of those points where Jesus is seen as totally physical and totally spiritual. Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus says, "When you see me, you've seen the Father." Right? We talked about that during Lent. "You've seen me, you've seen the Father."

So here we have God directly responding through Jesus walking on the water.

Now, a lot of other people are going to go out of the way. Scholars over the years say, "Well, he probably wasn't walking on the water. You know, it was a sandbar."

Well, others look around and say, “No, I don’t think there are sandbars in the Sea of Galilee, and certainly not three miles from the shore.”

Others have come up with all kinds of other reasons. Oh, here’s one: this was probably a post-resurrection story that’s misplaced.

So we have a number—you know, we have half a dozen of these post-resurrection, after-Easter stories. Jesus is by the Sea of Galilee, cooking fish one morning when the guys are fishing and they come in. Remember all those different stories? This is probably one of them, but it got in the wrong place. Other scholars say, “No, I don’t think so. Don’t think it’s in the wrong place. You got to take it for what it is.”

If you start denying miracles, you’re on a slippery slope.

Now, I know I said three weeks ago and talked about Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson said he didn’t believe in any of the miracles at all. Some of you may be in that camp, others not. But as this one commentator says, if you start doubting the miracles, you’re on a slippery slope.

There’s a lot of fear. They certainly had a right to be afraid. So what I want to do is pick up on a couple points about fear, because last week I promised I would come back and talk about some of the issues around hunger here in the United States. There certainly is fear around not being able to feed your children, not being able to feed yourself.

There are tons of things written and all that, but I found really compelling one article by Nicholas Kristof, who’s won two Pulitzer Prizes. It’s called “Meet the Americans Who Can’t Afford Haircuts or Toilet Paper.” That’s the title of his article. He travels every year with one student, one college student, and he gets a scholarship, and they travel, and they write almost always overseas, and most of those in Africa, Sudan or whatever, and talking about abject poverty and all kinds of challenges. This year, he took the student on a road trip here in the United States, going through Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Oklahoma for quite some time, and interviewed a ton of people, as reporters tend to do. The one person that really stood out in his mind after all of that was a woman in Oklahoma City, Trinity Goodman. Nice name, huh? Trinity Goodman’s her name.

She had a bandage on her arm, and he asked—reporters, I don’t know. I’m not sure I would ask, but he’s a reporter—something about the bandage. He came up, well, it’s because she gets plasma, and she gets paid for that.

She’s doing that because she only has \$3.78 in her bank account. That’s it, and one penny in a savings account just to keep it open. He goes on to say that she’s on food stamps, \$298 a month. They sustain her, but you can’t use them, as we’ve been talking about in the Mission and Outreach Committee, you can’t use those to buy non-food items such as toilet paper, diapers, and all kinds of things like that. So how is she going to pay for those kinds of things? She’s not the only one. There are lots of people there doing exactly that.

And now the government’s about to cut off food stamps for 1.5 million children. I said 1.3 last week, but what do I know? I checked. It’s 1.5 million children about to lose food stamps.

So who’s going to feed them?

And when you talk about poverty and hunger here in the United States, the group that is impacted the most are the children two years and below, two years and below. And you know, it just boggles the mind to think that any of them are corrupt and are trying to mess up the system. These are kids under two, but they're not going to get the food stamps. They're not. And so what happens to them?

I remember studying on the issue of hunger years ago, early in my ministry. We did all kinds of things we're doing here. You know, collecting the food. We set up food centers and food banks and all kinds of things. But I also did some reading, and the one thing I remember is that like 80% or 85% of the brain is developed by the age of two. Now, that statistic's from back in the '70s or something. Maybe it's changed a little, but not too much.

You just think about it. The brain, most of the brain is going to be developed, at least 80 percent of it, by the time the kids are two.

The kid needs nourishment during those 24 months. If you deprive the child of nutrition and protein, et cetera, et cetera, the brain's not going to fully develop. And then later on, society is going to pick up the bill for these kids who are doing all kinds of crazy things, addicted, et cetera, et cetera. But we seldom think back like, "Geez, what did society do for them when they were growing up, trying to reach the age of two and be healthy?"

So, is there fear in the country? Yeah, there's a lot of fear among parents. How are we going to feed our kids? I know many of you sitting here. I see you. You've been involved with Meals on Wheels. A lot of us talking about Habitat for Humanity. We're cranking up our wheels to be part of that. The babysitter, et cetera, et cetera.

Plus the collection to help over at the Catholic Church for serving people in this whole part of the Cape. So we're trying to do our part. We're trying to take action, and at the same time, we want to be very careful about what's happening to so many of these families.

I want to switch to one more story about fear and what it can do to you, going to a larger picture.

Today is August the ninth. Ring any bells? August the ninth. It's the bombing of Nagasaki. 81 years ago, we bombed Hiroshima on August the 6th, and a lot of people kind of forget. Three days later, boom, we hit Nagasaki, which pretty much ended World War II.

So this has been debated for a long, long time. Had we not dropped the bombs, probably a million U.S. service people might have died invading Japan. The other side says no. These types of bombs never should have been dropped whatsoever, and so begins the whole arms race and opposing nuclear weapons.

These were atom bombs, but the whole thing opposed to nuclear weapons.

So when I was in my first year of college at Illinois Wesleyan University, they brought in students from Japan and Germany. I don't know who they were. I think it was the World Council of Churches. It had been 20, 30 years after World War II, but there were still all of these—you know, Germany's the enemy. Japan's the enemy. I don't know. That's what we were taught in school, right? We all fought the war.

And so here were these students. First time I met German students. First time I met Japanese students. They put us in little groups, whatever. Anyway, I ended up sitting next to a girl named Yuri, and she was from Nagasaki. Never saw her again, but for a couple of days we were all together. She taught me how to say hello in Japanese, Ohio, and you've been—you don't know a lot more about Japan than I do. She taught me how to count Itch Nisanji Go and count to five in Japanese. But I didn't know much about Nagasaki, and so that was the beginning. It was a personal connection that then led me to do more reading and understanding of what happened. So I read all these history books, you know, not purposely just that thing, but as I lived in Southeast Asia and I learned more of what happened.

Oh, Nagasaki!

Fast forward a few decades, I visited Nagasaki twice and Hiroshima three times in my capacity as general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. In Nagasaki, remember, it was a Saturday morning, and I went to a university. They were waiting to meet with me. The church gave some limited funds to this university. I think paying for a chaplain or something, but they wanted to meet me, and so I didn't know what it was. In the morning, I'm going there. I think of two or three guys. It was like the board of directors. It's a great big mahogany table, and there were like—I don't know—20, 20 people there, all Japanese male professors dressed up with ties.

Whoops! Early on a Saturday morning. So I do remember that. I also remember being very kind. It was great dialogue and all that. I also remember in Hiroshima, I was there a couple of times, and one time I was invited to preach in the church. And in advance, they asked me if I'd be willing to baptize a baby, which was a little—I mean, I love baptizing babies, but it was a little startling knowing that Japanese society—they're going to trust somebody who is not Japanese, who is just going to be there.

But I did. It was great. I was able to preach there, and I baptized the baby. So holding a baby in a city where so many people had been killed, just evaporated when the bomb went off, and I'd been through the Peace Park. I joined colleagues in ringing the big peace bell, and there's a big piece—I don't cut a wood; it's a great, big, enormous piece of wood, and it's suspended, and you pull it back, and then it goes. It hits the bell, boom! So everyone wants to ring the peace bell, and they put lanterns on the lake. All these exercises that happen—it's very, very moving. But for me, holding the baby in Hiroshima was always a very sacred moment. And think about the people living there, the survivors who still have fear that this could happen again. Many of them are dying off. It was 81 years ago.

Who's keeping these memories alive?

And I say this because it looks like we may be entering a new arms race. We're talking about giving all kinds of nuclear advice to Saudi Arabia, for instance. I mean, are other countries going to start building the bombs when we're talking about not letting Iran do that? Which that part's a good thing. So we need to be conscious of that, because it could be us the next time. It could be a dirty bomb. You don't have to have the perfect nuclear bomb. You don't. Not trying to scare you. You can have a dirty bomb. You can be in a cargo ship going into Baltimore and blowing Baltimore off the face of the earth, or Boston, or New York.

Are we afraid? We should be a little afraid about that. We should be a little afraid about the arms race, as well as being a little afraid about those who don't have enough food. So I don't want to end on such a down, down note. But I'm saying that Jesus knew the disciples had that fear when they saw him walking across the water.

And what did he say to them? He said, "Cheer up. It is I. Do not be afraid."

So, no matter what is overwhelming us, tying us down—global issues, national issues, personal issues—Jesus said, according to Matthew, "Cheer up! It is I." In other words, Jesus saying, "I am with you."

He didn't let Peter fall through the water. He grabbed his hand.

Do not be afraid.

Amen.