

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, August 9, 2020

“Get Out Of That Boat!”

Matthew 14:22-33

Gerald Hill, a Baptist pastor in Powderly, Texas, tells about a friend of his who was serving a mission church in Alaska. The water was so bad in that Alaskan community that a thick red scum would appear over the top of it. This little mission congregation was in the process of building a new church building. Since this was a Baptist church, the baptistery (a small pool in the sanctuary) was installed and being used even though the building was not complete.

On one occasion, the baptistery had been filled, and the red scum had appeared. It would be skimmed off on Sunday morning before the service began. The building inspector happened to show up and began to inspect the premises. “What is this red rug doing back here?” he asked as he stepped onto the red scum, and immediately he went out of sight into the baptistery! True story. I guess the message is that people can’t walk on water! Not ordinary people anyway!

And that is exactly the point of this story from Matthew’s gospel: JESUS WAS NO ORDINARY MAN, AND THE EFFECT HE CAN HAVE ON THE LIVES OF THOSE WHO TRUST HIM IS DRAMATIC.

Consider the setting. The disciples are out in a boat. A storm has come up suddenly and unexpectedly, and the disciples are afraid. This is a critical element of the story. JESUS COMES TO US TOO WHEN WE ARE TROUBLED AND FEELING HELPLESS.

Fear is a terrible thing, isn’t it? Max Anders in his book THE GOOD LIFE tells about watching a television program when he was a kid, in which a huckster went from town to town with a huge rattlesnake in a glass cage. The man would cover the glass with a blanket, and take it into a saloon. There he would tell the people what was under the blanket in the cage and would bet that the toughest, bravest man in town would not be able to hold his hand against the glass without jerking it back when the rattlesnake struck.

Well, the townspeople went wild with excitement. After deciding who they thought was the toughest, bravest man in town, they went to tell him about the bet. Of course, having everyone choose him as the toughest, bravest man in town made it impossible for the guy to resist the challenge. So he went to the saloon where all the folks bet on him.

After all bets were taken, the huckster tore the blanket off to reveal the biggest most menacing, evil-eyed reptile ever seen by man. Annoyed by the light and noise, the snake coiled to strike, his rattles buzzing nervously.

The toughest, bravest man broke out in a cold sweat. But prodded by the townspeople, he moved his hand toward the glass. The snake coiled even tighter. Slowly, the man inched his hand toward the glass and finally touched it. As he did, the snake struck with fury. And reflexively, the toughest, bravest man jerked his hand away. A stunned silence fell over the saloon. No one could believe it. The man looked around in anguish and humiliation, then stormed from the saloon. The huckster collected his money and left town before the defeated man had a chance to collect his courage, and come after him. Then the con artist moved on to the next town to repeat the scene and, once again, win the bet. He almost always won.

Why? Because no matter how big and brave and tough the frontiersmen were, the threat of that striking reptile through the invisible glass was a fearsome thing. The only thing between them and certain death was a

thin pane of glass. The huckster knew it would hold, they did not trust it. The huckster knew there was nothing to fear except fear itself, and he played on that fear to make his living.

Yes, fear is a terrible thing. And sometimes it is so subtle. In his book *THE COMMON TABLE*, John Cowan tells about a young priest friend of his who took over temporary responsibility for the most affluent Episcopal church in the state of Minnesota. But, he was puzzled about church meetings. On the surface, all was well: a perfectly fine group of well-to-do people doing their best to do what was best. But he had the feeling something was going on, that he didn't understand. Unable to bear the ambiguity any longer, he asked an older priest who had been associated with the parish for several years what he was sensing, but could not name. The older priest said, "Try the word fear."

That was it! Everything made sense if he took as his basic assumption that most of these folks were scared out of their wits. Sure, they were well-to-do. They were presidents of this and vice presidents of that, leading politicians, income-producing brokers, insurance agents, restaurateurs. They owned expensive cars, homes with pools, club memberships, condos in Aspen, and homes in Florida, and they were all scared silly because they lived on the edge of the cliff. One mistake, one change in management, one recessionary cycle, and the paycheck that supported all that wealth could slip away, causing them to lose their lifestyle, and along with that, their right to belong to their community of friends. Frayed collars, and secondhand dresses weren't appreciated at this church. And what it was, was fear.

To be sure, fear is a terrible thing. And if statistics compiled by the American Kennel Club are any indication, fear is becoming more pervasive all the time. Yes, I said The American Kennel Club. According to their records in 1975, cuddly poodles were the most popular purebred dog in America. There were only 952 registered Rottweilers, a fierce breed often used as a guard dog. By 1994, the poodle population had been cut in half while Rottweilers had increased 100 times. I guess we could say that America is not only going to the dogs—but mean dogs at that!

We are a fearful people—fear of crime, fear of losing our jobs, our health, etc. How we need the reassurance that comes from knowing when our hearts are troubled and we feel most helpless that Christ comes to us. **CHRIST COMES ACROSS THE TROUBLED WATER AND SAYS TO US, "DON'T BE AFRAID, IT IS I." AND HE BECKONS US TO LEAVE THE SECURITY OF THE BOAT AND WALK ON THE WATER.**

I don't know what walking on the water would mean for you. It means different things to different people. A mother wrote in to *READERS DIGEST* sometime back to tell about her son, Nathaniel, who was a freshman in high school. Nathaniel was discussing the upcoming "Military Ball" with his friend Jason. Since both boys were JROTC cadets, their attendance was mandatory, but taking a date was optional. When Nathaniel asked Jason if he planned to invite anyone, the would-be military officer replied, "Look, Nat, I could go to war. But I could never ask a girl for a date." For Nathaniel, getting out of the boat and walking on the water might mean asking a girl for a date.

For Elizabeth Blackwell, it meant something entirely different. Elizabeth wanted to become a doctor in the 1840's. At that time, medical schools were just for men. Elizabeth Blackwell had to fight just to get in. Finally, at one school, Geneva College of Medicine in New York, the students voted to let her in as a joke. But the head of the school didn't know it was supposed to be a joke, and he let her in.

When she got there, the students made fun of her. They refused to share their notes with her. Some professors even tried to keep her out of their classes. She refused to give up. In 1849, she graduated at the head of her class. When no hospital would allow her to practice, she opened her own hospital. Then she

opened a medical school to train women. Elizabeth Blackwell “got out of the boat” and walked on the water, you could say.

In the book, A 2<sup>ND</sup> HELPING OF CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL, Bill Sanders writes of a young neighbor named Nikki who learned to walk on the water. When Nikki was in the seventh grade, she was diagnosed with leukemia. Nikki went through the necessary chemotherapy and the resulting loss of hair. To be different as a seventh grader is a kind of death.

Without hair, Nikki was very different from her peers. She was a generally popular girl, but still she faced hurdles. Kids would sneak up behind her and snatch her wig off. People would stare and laugh. No one would sit with her in the cafeteria or in math class, and the lockers on either side of hers had been vacated. Nikki told her neighbor, Bill, that she could handle losing her hair. And with her faith in God, she could handle losing her life. But the hardest part of her illness was losing her friends.

Nikki’s parents had given her permission to stay out of school, but then Nikki changed her mind. She had heard a story about a seventh grader in Arkansas who was bullied for bringing his Bible to school. The boy handed his Bible to his biggest tormentor, and he said, “Here, see if you’ve got enough courage to carry this around school just one day.” Those three bullies became his three friends.

Another story that affected Nikki was of a boy from Ohio named Jimmy. Ohio didn’t have a state motto, so Jimmy wrote a proposed state motto, then set up a petition to get the motto approved by the state. Jimmy got enough signatures to take his petition to the State Legislature. Because of Jimmy, Ohio’s official motto is, “All things are possible with God.” Anyway...

Nikki set out for school the next Monday as usual. Her parents drove her. When she got to school, Nikki hugged and kissed both her parents. Then she said, “Mom and Dad, guess what I’m doing to do today?” Her eyes began to tear up. “Today, I’m going to find out who my best friend is. Today, I’m going to find out who my real friends are.”

Then Nikki took off her wig and set it on the car seat. “They take me for who I am, Daddy, or they don’t take me at all. I don’t have much time left. I’ve got to find out who they are today.” Then Nikki asked for her parent’s prayers, and she walked into the school. Not a single person bullied her, or taunted her.

I don’t know what walking on water would be for you. Going back to school? Asking for that promotion? Inviting your next door neighbor to come to a Bible study or church with you? All I’m saying is, don’t let fear defeat you. You have a friend, who comes to you in your hour of greatest need and says, “Don’t be afraid, you can do it. Step out of the boat, and walk on the water with me.”

AMEN

“S.D.G.”