

## **“THE PERFECT STORM”**

*Matthew 14:22-33*

**Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor**

There is nothing quite like a storm to remind us of the power of nature. We are all aware of the damage storms can cause. The wind and the rain takes its toll on our roofs and walls, causing leaks that are problematic. After a powerful storm there are frequently limbs of trees on the streets and sidewalks. We survey the damage, hoping it is not too severe. A storm at sea can be even more threatening. Many a ship has gone down as the rain and the wind and the waves overcome it.

In the year 2000, a movie called *The Perfect Storm* was produced. It told the story of a group of New England fishermen who got caught in the storm of the century. What started out as a fishing trip turned into a nightmarish series of events both for those on board and for their families back home. Would they make it through the storm? Would they ever get back to port?

Today’s Gospel reading describes a similar scenario. The Gospel writer has just told the story of Jesus’ feeding the 5000. All are fed, and all are satisfied. Jesus has supplied the needs of the people both for food for their bodies and nourishment for their souls. Feeling the need to get away, Jesus sends the disciples on ahead of him in a boat while he retreats to the mountain to pray. While Jesus is praying, the disciples are paddling. It doesn’t take long for them to run headlong into a storm at sea. The wind blows against them as they struggle all night against the wind and the rain, paddling as hard as they can, trying their best to make it to the other side.

By four o’clock in the morning, they are cold, wet, exhausted, and afraid for their lives. It starts to look as if they might never make it to the other side. Theirs would not be the first boat to embark on the journey across the dark waters of the deep, never to be heard from again. Many a boat and many a sailor have met their fate in the chaotic waters. Although some of the disciples were fishermen by trade and had no doubt experienced storms at sea time and again, this one is more than they can handle. By four in the morning they have had about all they can take. They are weary, battered and seasick from the rough waves. Their hands are blistered from their struggle against the storm. Things are looking pretty bleak.

Some of us have been on boats when a storm came up at sea. Some of us watch nervously as the weather channel reports from the storm center this time of year on brewing storms that may become hurricanes. In Charleston, South Carolina, where my son and daughter-in-law live, folks are still talking about the damage from Hurricane Hugo, which occurred in 1989. Storms can be deadly, as all of us know.

The church has long compared the storm at sea to the perils of daily life. Drawing on the imagery of Noah and the Ark, the early church fathers referred to the church as “the ark of salvation.” The Latin word for ship, “navis,” from which we get our English words “navy” and “navigate,” is also the root of the word “nave,” which is the name for the main part of our

sanctuary, from the entrance of the building to the chancel area, where the altar is located. In a Gothic cathedral, such as Church of the Saviour, the ceiling is designed to look like the hull of an upside-down boat.

As we read the story of a boatload of straining, struggling disciples trying to paddle from one place to another against a fierce headwind and amidst tumultuous seas, we think of the church struggling to navigate sometimes dangerous waters, battered and beaten by temptation and persecution. In fact, the story of the disciples caught in the midst of a storm reminds me of many episodes in my own life when the challenges I face threaten to overwhelm me.

It was such a joy to spend time with our sons and their wives (and their dogs) last week. I am so thankful for their good health. My mind frequently races back to that day in February, not so long ago, it seems, when our second son was born in congestive heart failure and almost died. With Barb in a hospital room and Stephen in the neonatal intensive care unit, I was all alone, and I was going through a storm.

I love my work as a pastor, but there are times when the storm of the century, or so it seems, gathers at a meeting or in my office or in someone's home, and I begin to feel overwhelmed. I doubt that I am the only one who has experienced personal and professional crises of this magnitude. The storms of life threaten to overtake all of us. Not one of us is immune to the wind and the rain and the waves.

Just when it looks like the boat is going to go down for certain, one of the disciples looks up, and amidst the sea mist and the clouds he sees a figure coming closer on the dark water. As if the storm is not scary enough, now the disciples are terrified by what looks like a ghost walking on the white caps.

Sensing their fear, Jesus is quick to identify himself. *"Do not be afraid,"* he says. *"It's me, Jesus."* But they are still not sure. So Peter speaks up, *"Lord, if it is really you, then tell me to walk on the water to you."*

Now is it just me, or does that seem like a strange request? I would have expected Peter to say, "Lord, if it is you, then calm this storm!" After all, Jesus has already done that earlier in Matthew's Gospel (8:23-27). Remember the time the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat? A storm came out of nowhere. The disciples thought they were all going to die. But Jesus woke up, lifted his hands toward heaven and said, *"Peace. Be still."* And the wind calmed and the rain stopped. In that story, Jesus demonstrated the power of God over the forces of nature and chaos.

The disciples have been trying to steer a course in this storm all night. They're tired. They've cold. They're wet. I would think Peter would say, "Jesus, if that's really you, then make this storm stop." But he doesn't. Instead, he says, "Lord, if it is you, then tell me to walk on the water with you." Why would this be the thing Peter would ask of Jesus?

To understand Peter's request, we need to remember that Peter was Jesus' disciple. The word "disciple" means "student," but in the days of the New Testament teachers were more like what we would refer to as "mentors." You learned a profession by hanging out with someone who already had the skills and the knowledge that you wished to acquire. A disciple wanted to do what his teacher did. A disciple tried to talk like his teacher talked. A disciple wanted to walk like his teacher walked. A disciple devoted his entire life to being just like his rabbi.

So Peter is simply being a good disciple when he asks to walk on the water with Jesus. He wants to do what his rabbi is doing. Because Jesus is walking on the whitecaps, Peter wants

to do that, too.

Last week at Vacation Bible School I think some of the groups played “Follow the Leader.” When you play “Follow the Leader,” you do everything that the leader does. As Christians, we need continually to be reminded that people are watching and copying what we do. Occasionally a little child will make a comment or do something that seems far beyond his or her years. Where did he hear that? Where did she see that? Well, from us — the parents and teachers. “I want to be just like you when I grow up, Daddy,” I’ve heard more than one little child say. What kind of role models are we? What will happen if those we are teaching turn out to be just like us?

Well, Jesus doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t say, “No Peter, You know you can’t walk on water. You don’t know your limits. Stay there in the boat where at least you will have a solid surface under your feet while the storm is raging and the boat is being tossed about.” Instead he says, “Come. Walk to me on the water.”

Should we be surprised that Jesus invites Peter to do what Jesus himself is doing? We shouldn’t be. Jesus continually asks us to do things that seem impossible. He’s already asked his disciples to turn the other cheek if somebody walks up to them and hits them in the face. He’s already told his disciples to walk two miles if anybody asks them to walk one. He’s already called his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. He’s already called his disciples to be perfect, just like God in heaven is perfect. He’s already called his disciples to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. He’s already called his disciples to follow him wherever he goes — even to the cross. So it shouldn’t come as a surprise when Jesus honors Peter’s request and again calls him to do the impossible — to walk on water.

And so, good old impetuous, impulsive, gutsy Peter gets out of the boat and begins walking to Jesus on the water. To his credit, Peter is willing to take the risk, jump out of the boat, and try the impossible at Jesus’ command. He desperately wants to be like Jesus, no matter what, even if it means jumping into the unknown. Peter is a great example for us of what to do as followers of Jesus.

But, as is usually the case, Peter is also a good example of what not to do. The Bible says that he gets out of the boat and takes a few steps. But then he begins to feel the wind in his face. Whitecaps start breaking over his feet. Fear begins to overtake him. Peter loses his nerve and suddenly, he starts to sink. When Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, when he begins to lose his focus on God’s power and starts thinking about his own limitations and seeming inadequacies, he starts to go down.

But again, Peter demonstrates that he knows where his strength lies. He calls out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Jesus reaches out his hand and lifts Peter up. And Peter and the whole boatload of disciples breathe a sigh of relief and give thanks to God as Jesus stills the storm and helps Peter back into the boat.

This morning I want to ask you a question: Where are you in the story? Imagine that we have a series of panels, each representing a particular scene in the story: before the storm, the storm itself, seeing the ghost, walking on the water, sinking, being rescued, recognizing and worshiping Jesus. In which panel would you place yourself at this point in your life?

Maybe Jesus is calling you to do something impossible, but the wind has picked up and doubt has crept in, and you feel like you are sinking. Maybe you’ve jumped into the unknown,

and now you feel as if you are in over your head. Or maybe you are hearing the call of God to do some impossible thing, but you're afraid to get out of the boat. You may have already done some impossible things in your life, but now Jesus is inviting you to attempt something new, something more.

Wherever you are in the story, **Jesus is there, too.** He is there when the storm clouds gather, whether we realize it or not. He is there when the wind and the rain threaten to overtake us. He comes to us, as he came to the disciples of old, in our times of greatest need. He invites us to come to him, to walk on the uncertain waters of life, to do impossible things for him. He is rabbi, our teacher, our example, our mentor. He calls us to be like him.

Now, I know that being like Jesus sounds like an impossible challenge. Like Peter, we may make an attempt to get out of the boat, but we may also be overcome by the intensity of the wind and the waves. Yet I am convinced that this is not a story about us sinking under the weight of everyday responsibility and being rescued by Jesus. It is a story about claiming our ability to do what Jesus calls us to do. Remember Jesus said, "You didn't choose me, I chose you." A rabbi doesn't choose you unless he has faith in you. Yes, we are told to have faith in Jesus, but we need to remember that Jesus also has faith in us. He expects us to do what he does, for we are his disciples. He expects us to follow the leader.

Peter is our example. He walked on the water. When fear overtook him, he began to sink. But Peter got another chance. We, too, get another chance. Every day we awaken to one more opportunity to be like Jesus. The perfect storm may be brewing on the horizon. The wind and the waves may already be at work in your life. But Jesus is the master of the wind and the waves. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, the storms of life will not overtake us. In fact, with Jesus to guide us, we, too, can walk on the water. We, too, can overtake the sins that would keep us back, the forces that would throw us off course, and the problems that threaten to keep our lives in turmoil. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, we, too, can do what to the rest of the world seems impossible. We can turn the other cheek. We can love people and forgive people and affirm people and inspire people like Jesus did. We are his disciples. We can do impossible things. We can walk on water. We can be like Jesus.

*Prayer:* O God, you invite us to claim your risky joy. You invite us to meet you in all the impossible places you choose to reveal yourself. You invite us to wrestle with angels, to break out of slavery, to walk on water, and even to rise from the dead. You have promised that the fire will not destroy us, nor the flood overwhelm us. Grant us the courage to believe you, the determination to seek you, and the stamina to follow you without fear. Amen.