

Rejoice! The River Is Here!
“Stepping Into the Stream”
Matthew 14:22-33

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When it comes to water, I am fundamentally afraid. It's my mother's fault. She was so concerned that one of her children might wade into a pond or fall into a creek that she put the fear of water into our psyche. So I was an adult before I learned to swim. When the water is deep and the waves are fierce, I can still find myself getting anxious.

Perhaps that is why I have never preached a sermon on this text about Peter walking on the water. It's just too personally intimidating. But, here it is, in three of the four gospels. On a particularly stormy night, Peter climbs out of the boat and walks on the water toward Jesus. It's one of those miracles that escapes explanation. The message, however, is clear. As John Ortberg puts it, “If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.”

WATER-WALKERS FACE THEIR FEARS. It was the middle of April when the moon was bright, somewhere around 3 a.m. in the morning. The disciples have been battling a storm at sea all night, but what scares the living daylights out of them is not the storm, but the image of somebody walking toward them on the water. The Bible says they were terrified. They were so scared that they cried out in fear, “*It's a ghost*” (verse 26). Jews believed in sea monsters. The devil was synonymous with the sea. It's one thing to endure a storm; it's something else to encounter the evil one.

Jesus immediately shouts, “*Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.*” We encounter one of the Bible's favorite words, **Fear Not**. Don't be afraid. It appears three hundred sixty-six times in the Bible, one for every day and an extra one for leap year.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil.”

“The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?”

“Surely it is God who saves us, let us trust in him and not be afraid.”

“Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all.”

“Fear not those who kill the body but cannot touch the soul.”

“It is I, do not be afraid.”

Could you use that word from the Lord today?

Fears and doubts too often bind us. One night during a storm a mother was tucking her small son in bed. Just as she was about to turn off the light, the boy asked, “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?” She gave him a big hug and

replied, "I can't, I have to sleep with Daddy." There was a long silence until a shaky little voice said, "Daddy's a big sissy, isn't he?"

"When the teacher called on me in class, I became tense and tongue-tied. My heart palpitated and my choice of words were awkward. I was so embarrassed that even if I knew the answer, I stated it so poorly that the effect was anything but outstanding." Can you guess who said that? Norman Vincent Peale, the most sought after public speaker of the 20th century.

While fear can be a friend to reindeer, rabbits, or people alerting us to danger ahead, it can also freeze us, frighten us and forbid us from living the life of faith God calls us to live.

Fear is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of evil.

WATER-WALKERS EXERCISE THEIR FAITH. In Verse 29 we read, "*Then Peter got down out of the boat and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.*" If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.

Are you a boat potato or a water-walker? My favorite piece of furniture in the house has become the La-Z-y Boy Recliner. It is the fancy kind with the built in massager and personal heater. It even has a secret place for my remote. It's not called a risk-boy or a work-boy; it's called a lazy-boy. From that secluded spot I watch golf on Sunday afternoons as if I were on the course. I've visited the Olympics this week enjoying the physical fitness of others. I watch the war in Iraq from the safety of my living room.

I said to Sandy the other day, "I've done about everything I ever wanted to do in life." This church is a dream come true. My first book will be on the market this week. We're only a few weeks from finishing my fourth and final building program. Pass out the cushions. It's comfortable on this boat.

We are not called to be comfortable; we are called to be faithful. What might God do with our financial resources if we trusted him enough to be generous? What might God do with our giftedness if we trusted him enough to be daring? What might God do with our relationships if we trusted him enough to be loving? What might God do with our character if we confessed our sin, acknowledged our temptation, and pursued holiness in thought, word and deed? What might God do with our time if we became passionate about rescuing the perishing, caring for the dying, and hearing the cry of the needy?

What is God calling you to be and do that cannot be done without God's intervention? Are you willing to attempt something big enough that failure is certain unless God steps in? What is the one thing that God wants to do through you in the time you have left on earth?

Getting out of the boat is an invitation not an impulse. Peter did plenty of impulsive things in his life that he later regretted. He bragged too much, acted

too quickly, boasted too often. Here he has enough sense to seek direction. Verse 28 says, “*Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.*” The Lord said, “*Come.*” Even Peter knew he could not walk on the water alone.

Stepping out in faith is more than bungee jumping or sky diving or eating worms on Fear Factor. It is hearing the invitation of our Savior and daring to go with him all the way.

John Wesley said, “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.” When I say yes, I set in motion an adventure that will leave me forever changed. If you want to walk on the water, you’ve got to get out of the boat.

WATER-WALKERS OVERCOME THEIR FAILURES.

Beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me” (Verse 30)! When it came to water-walking, Peter was a toddler, not a sprinter. He took only a few steps before that sinking feeling set in.

We have a new granddaughter in our family. She came as a special gift to us from Seoul, Korea. At seven months she is learning to crawl. She makes a few strides, then tumbles on her head and rolls over, but you know what? She never hesitates to try again.

I remember the first sermon I tried to preach. I was fifteen years old. It was Mother’s Day and Youth Sunday in our little church. I wrote everything I could think of saying down on two 3 X 5 cards. I stood up on trembling knees, gave the sermon three times in five minutes, then sat down and cried. I would rather fail in a cause that someday will triumph than win in a cause that will someday fail.

Even the greatest know the taste of failure. Michael Jordan once said, “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I’ve been entrusted to take the game winning shot and I missed. I have failed over and over again in my life. And that’s exactly why I succeeded.”

Did you watch Paul Hamm make a comeback the other night in the all around gymnastics? I didn’t. I went to bed when he faltered badly on the vault dropping to twelfth place. But he came back later that night to perform flawlessly on the parallel bars and high bar to become the first American male to ever win the all around championship. (This sermon was preached before the controversy.)

There is an old story about an Italian peasant who bumped into a monk who lived in a monastery high on the hill. The peasant seized the opportunity to question the monk about their daily routines at this holy shrine. “What do you men of God do up there on the mountain so close to God?” she asked. The monk replied, “We fall down and we get up, we fall down and we get up, we fall down and we get up.” Failure is not our ultimate enemy anymore than success is our ultimate goal.

WATER-WALKERS WORSHIP THEIR LORD. *Those in the boat*

worshiped him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Verse 33). When God has brought us through the storm, what can we do but worship?

Dallas Willard said, “Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is the wellspring of genuine gratitude—the kind that starts at our toes and blasts off from our diaphragm through the top of our head flinging our arms and our eyes and our voice upwards toward our good God.”

How big is your God? Our God is an awesome God; he reigns from heaven above. With wisdom, power and love, our God is an awesome God.

*If my lips could sing as many songs as there are waves in the sea,
If my tongue could sing as many hymns as there are ocean billows,
If my mouth filled the whole firmament with praise,
If my face shone like the sun and moon together.
If my hands were to hover in the sky like powerful eagles and my feet ran across
mountains as swiftly as the deer.
All that would not be enough to pay you fitting tribute,
O, Lord my God.*

Last week I asked you to **STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN**—to pay attention to the God who is closer than the air we breathe. Today, I want to ask you to **GET OUT OF THE BOAT AND WALK ON THE WATER**. Make a step of discipleship.

Where He leads me I will follow.
Give the winds your fears—embrace Christ as your Lord.
Rise from your failure—let him become your Savior.
Worship Him—Praise Him—Trust Him.
He who takes one step through doubting dim, God will advance a mile in blazing light to him.

Amen.

