

March 8, 2015

Peter

Peter Walks on Water

Matthew 14:22-33

Opening words: This is sermon number three in my five-part sermon series on *Peter*. The reason is simple. The amount of information on Peter is impressive. It is hard to look at a single page of the Gospels and not find his name. Within those stories, we find Peter's spiritual progress. During this season of Lent, I hope you are making some spiritual progress too.

Today, we find ourselves in Matthew's gospel. The early church believed Matthew was written by the disciple of the same name. The name Matthew means "gift of God." It was written about the year 70. Of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it is the most Jewish. He is preoccupied with the fulfillment of the Old Testament and his extensive genealogies show his Jewish roots. The reason he wrote it was to prove to the Jewish world that Jesus was the Messiah. Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 14:22-33. Let me call this message *Peter Walks on Water*.

Matthew 14:22-33 ²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Do you remember the name George Patton? During World War II, he commanded the Seventh United States Army in the Mediterranean and European Theaters. However, he is best known for his leadership of the Third United States Army in Europe in France and Germany following the Allied invasion of Normandy. The story goes, he was once speaking to a military governor in Sicily. When he praised Patton highly for his courage and bravery, the general replied, "Sir, I am not a brave man. . . The truth is, I am an utter craven coward.

I have never been within the sound of gunshot or in sight of battle in my whole life that I wasn't so scared that I had sweat in the palms of my hands." Years later, in his autobiography he added, "I learned very early in my life never to take counsel of my fears." How influential are your fears? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves this morning in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew. The chapter begins with the sad news of the death of John the Baptist. It was difficult news for Jesus to accept. Remember, Jesus and John the Baptist were both relatives and colleagues. Trying to get his mind and emotions around the death of John, Jesus gets into a boat and tries to find a place to be alone. This would not be an easy task. The crowd follows him everywhere. Everyone wanted a healing. When he exited the boat, he looked at the faces of all the people and was moved. The scriptures tell us he had compassion on them and healed their sick. By the end of the day, he would have fed that crowd of five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fishes. Jesus must have been physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Once again, Jesus tries to find a solitary place to be alone. He dismisses the crowd and puts the disciples into a boat to sail to the other side.

This time he finds solitude in the mountains to pray. When the prayer ends, he decides to reunite with the disciples. That would not be easy. The scriptures tells us two things. First, the scriptures tell us it was the "fourth watch". That means it was between 3:00 - 6:00 in the morning. Second, the scriptures tell us the disciples are far off-shore. This means Jesus is going to have to think outside of the box. Breaking natural law, Jesus begins to walk on the water toward the disciples. As he nears the disciples, the disciples are caught off guard. Not expecting Jesus, they expect the worse. They thought Jesus was a ghost. Their culture believed a ghost always appeared before a death. In other words, they thought they were going to die. In order to comfort them, Jesus identified himself. The disciples must have been relieved and impressed. Jesus has the power to break natural law. Then, it happens. Peter requests to walk on the water too. It is a sign of faith. You know the story. At first, he does great. He takes a few precious steps on the water. Then, reality settled in. He realizes the insanity of what he is doing. Peter begins to sink, but Jesus proves to be the ultimate lifeguard. The Master reached out his hand and saved him. Once everyone was back in the boat, worship began.

The story of Peter walking on the water is a wonderful story because there are so many aspects to it. I have been reading it for years. There is Jesus's power over natural law. There is Peter's ability to walk on water. There is Peter's faltering faith. There is the humanness of Jesus's exhaustion. There is the worship once everyone gets into the boat. Like I said, I have been reading this story for years, but this time I noticed something new. There is a fear factor that runs throughout the entire story. The disciples are afraid of the storm and Peter is afraid he is going to drown.

Fear is one of those things that connects the generations. However, every generation fears something differently.

When I was very young, I feared the attic in my family's home. Then I turned the light on and it wasn't so bad. When I was a teenager, I feared death. Then I accepted Jesus and I discovered death has no hold on me. When I was a young adult, I feared failure. Then I experienced some success and grew to like myself. Now I fear the death of my wife and the death of immediate family members. That is why I communicate with each one of them every day. Everyone fears something.

What do you fear? In order to answer that question, I turned to our old friend the internet highway. I googled the question, what do people fear? Listverse was on top of the list of websites. This is their list of the top ten strongest human fears. (It came from the internet so you know it is true!) Like David Letterman, I will read them in reverse order.

10. Losing your freedom
9. The Unknown
8. Pain
7. Disappointment
6. Misery
5. Loneliness
4. Ridicule
3. Rejection
2. Death
1. Failure

You don't have to play the part of John Wayne in an old movie. You can admit that there are things that frighten you. How many of those fears have you experienced in your life? One of the reasons we come to church is to have Jesus say to us, "Take courage! Don't be afraid!" Have you ever wanted Jesus to reach out and save you? You can admit it. We all fear something. What frightens you? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Look at the story one more time with me and listen to this next line.

Jesus was not speaking to the general population, Jesus was speaking to the twelve disciples. There is a great difference. Who were the twelve disciples? They were the seeds of what would become the church. This story reminds us that the disciples didn't just struggle with understanding, they also struggled with fear. Never forget, these are pre-Pentecost disciples. Their humanness is obvious. Like the rest of society, fear has been part of the church from the very beginning. I am not talking about building issues, the roof leaking or the boiler exploding. I am not talking about budget issues, paying the bills or raising money for the mission trip. I am not talking about funding our next improvement, the organ. I am talking about real ministry. I am talking about leaving this little piece of property and getting involved in the world's problems, offering the hungry food, the person in rags clothes, the diseased medicine, the spiritually lost, Jesus. The chances of them coming to 4580 Canfield Road is zero. We must go to them, but we don't because we are afraid.

Today, I want to examine our fears so we can control them. There is an internal and an external side of fear. George Patton never took counsel from his fears. Do you? If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Internal

There is a part of fear that is internal. There is something in your heart or head that grabs your attention. One of the great preoccupations in our lives is safety. Ours is not the first generation to be concerned with security. People have worried about their safety for a long time. The disciples in this morning's story were concerned with their safety. Look at the text with me. Jesus put the disciples into the boat. The water was rough because they were sailing against the wind. The experienced fisherman knew they were in trouble. They were afraid for their own safety. They didn't want to die. No one wants to die. Does anyone here want to die? How much of your safety are you willing to risk to serve God? That is a difficult question.

The name Kayla Mueller is well known in our society. Originally from Prescott, Arizona, the 26-year-old human rights activist was taken hostage by ISIS in August 2013. They murdered her last month. It is a sad testimony of our time. She really did nothing wrong, and truly believed she had found her purpose in life. She reminds us that there are many suffering people in this world, and she reminds us that the world is not always a safe place. Many have criticized her for being in the Middle East. They say she would be alive today if she had stayed in the United States. They may be right. Can I be honest with you? I am not sure what I think about Kayla Mueller's story. Jesus never told us to play it safe. Bad things happen everywhere. We have our share of bad things right here in the Mahoning Valley. It is impossible to be 100% safe 100% of the time.

Everyone must decide how big of a risk they will take to serve God. Some will risk very little. Some wouldn't travel to downtown Youngstown for a million dollars. They tell me the city is dangerous. Some will risk a great deal. Missionaries in Central America live in harm's way daily. Danger is part of their lives. I am somewhere between a little risk taker and big risk taker. Where are you? Peter was a bigger risk taker than the other eleven. I would never ask you to risk beyond your comfort zone. Everyone must decide for themselves. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

External

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonizing silence followed, as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why." Peer pressure is a powerful influence on our lives.

There is a part of fear that is external. Look at the story one more time with me. Only one out of the twelve got out of the boat, Peter. Not only did he have to fight his internal fear, he had to fight his external fear. The external fear was the other disciples. We all want to be accepted by our friends. As Peter was climbing out of the boat, no one was saying, "Go for it!" I believe they were saying, "Are you crazy?" Peter was deaf to their advice and kept his eyes on Jesus. I would advise you to do the same. I would never ask you to leave your comfort zone, but I would ask you not to discourage someone else.

Several years ago, I stood at the back door and shook everyone's hands. It was like every other Sunday, except for one thing. I was going to be gone the next Sunday and everyone knew it. In the next forty-eight hours, Kathryn and I would be traveling to Russia. Everyone told me to be careful. One person said, "I don't like it when you go to Russia." She told me about something she had heard on the news. Her concern fell on deaf ears, and we traveled an hour and a half north of Moscow to the city of Dmitrov, the home of the Renewal Orphanage, the home of Vlad and Kolya, the boys who came to America to get their prosthetic legs. I don't remember the details of that particular trip, but they were all special. However, I do remember sitting in the dining room when the security guard walked in. He was the Russian version of Barney Fife. He look at our group and asked, "Where are you from? We said America. He said, "I know you are from America. Where are you from? We answered, the northern part of the United States, between New York City and Chicago. He said, "Where are you from? What state are you from?" We said Ohio. He asked, "Where in Ohio? We told him we were between Cleveland and Pittsburgh, near Youngstown. He said, "It was just reported on the news that there was an earthquake near Youngstown, Ohio in America. You need to call home and make sure your families are safe." We soon discovered everyone at home was fine. Someone laughed later and said, "It is good we are in Russia where we safe. Bad things happen in Youngstown."

Safety is no laughing matter. Everyone must decide for themselves how big of a risk you are going to take for God. However, you are not going to relieve most human suffering from under your bed. Remember the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, "*We have nothing to fear but fear itself.*" How big of a risk are you willing to take for God? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"