

January 22, 2017

Authentic Christianity
How Hopeful are You?
Matthew 14:22-33

Opening words: Webster defines "authentic" as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a fraud. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the life of the church. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. We must be authentic Christians.

Today, I continue my sermon series, *Authentic Christianity*. True Christianity is life-altering. It should be affecting your behavior and opinions. Each week we will look at a different Christian characteristic that should be present in your life. Last week, I asked you the question, *How compassionate are you?* The question you must answer today is, *How hopeful are You?* Our Gospel lesson is Matthew 14:22-33.

Matthew 14:22-33 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."

I love this story. It came from *Parade* magazine. Self-made millionaire Eugene Land arranged to visit a sixth-grade class in East Harlem. He didn't want them to waste their lives. He wanted to inspire the students to do something positive with their lives. He didn't want them to be just another drop-out. Scrapping his notes, he decided to speak to them from his heart. "Stay in school," he admonished, "and I'll help you pay your college tuition." At that moment, the lives of those fifty-nine students suddenly changed. For the first time, they had hope. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to, something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Six years later, 90% of

those sixth graders graduated from high school. The millionaire changed their lives with one word, hope! That leads us to our question of the day.

How hopeful are you? Desmond Tutu said, "*Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.*" That is an important quote to remember, because we live in such a dark world. If you find some value in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew. It is a well-known story because it is so easy to imagine. In the previous story, Jesus has just fed the 5,000. It is important that you know Jesus is physically, emotionally and spiritually spent. For this reason, he needed some alone time. He puts the disciples into a boat on the Sea of Galilee and tells them he will reunite with them later. If the truth be known, the Sea of Galilee isn't much of a sea. It is only four and one half miles wide and seven miles long. Much like shallow Lake Erie, it is notorious for her violent and sudden storms. That is exactly what happens to the twelve. A great storm swept over the sea about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. The disciples cry out for help, but help seems impossible. Then, the impossible happens. Looking over the waves of the storm, they see someone walking toward them. At first some believe it is a ghost, a sure sign of death. Then, they recognize the image. It is Jesus! It is Jesus who is doing the impossible. Jesus sees the panic on the boat and calls to them. The Master said, "*Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.*" All twelve of the disciples are relieved, but only one gets out of the boat. Peter walks on the water too, and takes a few sacred steps before needing to be saved. When Peter gets back in the boat, the storm calms and all the disciples worship Jesus. They were reminded of the divine truth they already knew, "*Jesus is the Son of God.*"

It is a great story because it is the story of our lives. Like the disciples, we too are on a great journey. We call our journey "life". Each one of us is on a different journey, but each one of us is on a journey. As we travel along our journey we have different experiences, yet we all experience storms. How many storms have you experienced along the way? The number is large. I know your number is large, because I am your pastor and I have a hard time remembering all of your storms. Has anyone here endured the storm of illness? Has anyone here endured the storm of mental illness? Has anyone here endured the storm of unemployment? Has anyone here endured the storm of underemployment? Has anyone here endured the storm called divorce? It may be your own or it may be a loved one. Has anyone here endured the storm of depression or anxiety? Has anyone here endured the storm of death? It has been years, but you still can't believe he or she is gone. Has anyone here ever endured the storm of drugs and alcohol addiction? It is painfully obvious to me. There is no way to escape the storms of life. Everyone endures the storms.

On this inauguration weekend, let me remind you of one of our great patriots, John Quincy Adams. He did so much with his life. Consider this list: He served as an ambassador to Russia, Prussia and the Netherlands. He served as both a Congressman and a Senator from Massachusetts. He served as our country's Secretary of State

under James Monroe. He was our sixth President. He was sworn in on March 4, 1825. He had a great life, but in 1846, fifteen years after leaving the White House, he found himself in the middle of a great storm. He suffered a stroke. When he returned to Congress the following year, his health was clearly failing. Daniel Webster described his last meeting with Adams: "Someone, a friend of his, came in and made particular inquiry of his health. Adams answered, 'I inhabit a weak, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds and broken in upon by the storms, and from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair.'" He died a year later, in 1848. John Quincy Adams knew about the storms.

One of my clearest memories of my father was his love for ice cream. On cue, at 9:00 every evening, my dad would walk into the kitchen and scoop out a large bowl of ice cream. The flavor didn't matter. He loved them all. When my father was in his seventies he discovered he was a diabetic. My mother was a dietician and put my dad on a strict diet. Suddenly the ice cream was gone. My dad always missed his daily bowl of ice cream. When my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer, my sister and I took turns caring for him. We knew the end was near. On one of my days, I asked my dad, on his death bed, if he wanted anything. He said, "Russ, I would like a bowl of ice cream. Get me a bowl of ice cream." I went in the kitchen and took the ice cream out of the freezer. My mother asked me, "What are you doing? I said, "He wants a bowl of ice cream." My mother snapped back, "He can't have ice cream. He is a diabetic!" I said, "He is dying." It was only at that moment my mother had to admit the seriousness of the storm. My mother wiped the tears from her eyes and gave him another scoop. Everyone must endure the storm. The question is how. If you agree we all experience different storms, say, "**Amen!**" Let me ask you the question of the day one more time. How hopeful are you?

The secret of enduring life's storms is found in our scripture lesson. The disciples were sure they were going to perish, until they saw Jesus. At the moment they saw Jesus they understood they did have a future. The same thing holds true with us. We must look through the storm and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is the one who will give us strength to endure. He is the one who offers us hope. Church people seem to understand that fact. I think the unchurched know it too, but they just don't want to admit it.

One of the best parts of my job is hospital visitation. I don't know how many hospital visits I have made through the years. I like hospital visits because I like being one-on-one with people. I judge the success or the failure of each visit based on one thing. It is not the amount of time I spend with the person. It is not if I made the person laugh. It is not that I impress them with my good looks 😊. The only thing that really matters in a pastoral visit is prayer. If I get to pray with the patient, it is a successful visit. If for some reason I don't get to pray with the patient, it is an unsuccessful visit. Do you know why prayer in hospital visitation is so important? The answer is simple. In prayer, you lift the patient's eyes above the storm in their life and place those eyes on Jesus,

who gives them hope. Church people get it. Unchurched people don't want to admit it, but they get it too.

Several months ago, I was driving home late. I was hungry, so I stopped for a sandwich. It was midweek, so the restaurant was empty. As a matter of fact, the only one in the restaurant was the bartender. I don't want to shock you, but I sat at the bar so I could talk to someone, the bartender. He asked me what I wanted to drink and I made my selection. He asked me what I wanted to eat, so I ordered a chicken sandwich and a cup of wedding soup. As I waited for my food, we began to talk. We talked about America's favorite topic, sports. When that topic grew stale, he asked me the worst question in the universe, "What do you do?" I said, "I am a minister." He apologized by saying, "I am sorry if I have sworn since you have been here." I responded, "It's OK, I went to Harding. I have heard worse." Then, he asked, "Is being a minister like being a priest?" I said, "In general, yes; we are both Christian clergy." He went on and told me he used to go to Mass every week with his grandmother. When she died, he never returned. When he served my food, he said, "As a priest, are you ever tempted by women?" I said, "I have been married for almost thirty years and I have two adult daughters. I work with women regularly. I am not tempted by women, but I am terrified of women!" Then, I turned the tables and asked him, "Are you ever tempted by women?" Then, he told me his story. He was married once but it ended because he cheated on his wife. He lives with his girlfriend now, but their relationship is rocky because he had cheated on her, too. He ended by saying, he really does care for his girlfriend. I asked, "So why did you cheat on her?" He said, "After a few drinks, the women who come in here look really interesting to me. Sometimes, I slip out with one." I said, "There is a simple answer. Stop drinking so much." He just smiled and shook his head no. I said, "How about if I just pray for you?" He nodded his head yes. Quickly, our discussion went in another direction. When I got up to leave, he shook my hand and said bluntly, "Don't forget to pray for me. I need Jesus to help me." I left by saying, "I promise." And, I have. It isn't just true of the bartender. It is true of each one of us.

Like the disciples in the boat, like the bartender, like every hospital patient, we all need Jesus to help us survive the storms of life. When was the last time Jesus helped you? He is the source of our hope. Without Jesus, we have no hope. Let me ask you the question one more time. How hopeful are you? Desmond Tutu said, *"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**