

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 15, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
WALKING ON WATER
Matthew 14:22-33**

Last Sunday, in our Travels with Jesus, we looked at the miracle known as the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle of Jesus, other than His resurrection, that is recorded in all four of the New Testament Gospels. Today we turn to another miraculous episode in the life of Jesus, which immediately follows the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospels of Matthew (14:22-33), Mark (6:45-52), and John (6:16-21). Only Luke does not include this momentous happening in his Gospel.

We read today from Matthew 14:22-33. I invite you to turn to it in your Bible, one of the pew Bibles, or on your phone or other device. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Many of you know the story I am about to tell. Some of you may not have heard it before. It is a story everyone should know. It happened more than 65 years ago, in January of 1956. And it captured the attention of the nation.

After months of prayer and careful planning, five missionaries from America set out from their remote mission outpost deep in the heart of Ecuador. Their mission was to take the message of the gospel to a primitive tribe of South American natives known as the Waorani. They were also called the Aucas, a pejorative term that means "savages."

They were a violent, ruthless tribe who would kill anyone who encroached on their jungle territory. They had never heard the gospel. They didn't know about Jesus and His death on the cross. They were an unreached people. And these five missionaries, along with their wives, believed God wanted to use them to reach the Waorani for Christ.

For weeks, starting in the fall of 1955, the missionaries flew their Piper Cub airplane, piloted by Nate Saint, over the tribe's main village, dropping gifts to show their friendly intentions, trying to establish a rapport with the tribe. Finally, on January 3, 1956, they landed their small plane on the Curaray River at a place they named Palm Beach. They built a tree house and prepared to make personal contact with the Waorani who lived in the jungle.

A few days later, on January 6, three members of the tribe – two women and a man – came to the beach and spent several hours with the five missionaries. By gestures and other means, the missionaries tried to communicate their desire for friendship with the Waorani. It seemed to go well as they gave the natives food and gifts. They even gave the man a ride in the plane.

Just two days later, though, in the early afternoon of January 8, a group of ten Waorani came to the beach and attacked the missionaries with wooden spears, killing all five. Even though the missionaries had guns, they didn't use them to defend themselves. (I was less than three months old when it happened.)

When the wives of the five missionaries didn't receive radio communication from their husbands at the designated hours, they sent another plane to investigate. Finally, after hours of anxious waiting, they learned that their worst fears had been realized. All five missionaries – Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian – had been killed.

When Elisabeth Elliot heard the news of her husband's death, the first words that came to her were these words spoken by God in Isaiah 43:2-3:

When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
And when you pass through the rivers,
They will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
You will not be burned;
The flames will not scorch you.
For I am the LORD, your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

It reminds me of one of my favorite hymns: "How Firm a Foundation." (It is No. 275 in our Hymnal.) There is a stanza that is *not* in our Hymnal that goes like this:

"When through the deep waters I call you to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow.
For I will be near you, your troubles to bless,
And sanctify to you your deepest distress."

Our Hymnal *does* include this stanza:

"Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed,
For I am your God and will still give you aid.
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."

The hymn also contains these lines:

"When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply."

(Author unknown; first published by John Rippon in Rippon's *Selection of Hymns*, 1787.)

By God's grace, Elisabeth Elliot and the others believed God's promise. They took God at His Word. In their hour of piercing grief, with a ferocious storm beating against the boat of their lives, these missionary women found comfort and strength and hope in the reality of the Lord's presence with them.

You can read the story in Elisabeth Elliot's book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. Remarkably, Elisabeth and her three-year-old daughter Valerie, along with Nate Saint's sister Rachel, returned to Ecuador in 1958 to live among the Waorani and saw many members of the tribe come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Storms happen. Both literally and metaphorically. They are a fact of life. There is no way to get around it. I hope you have never experienced a storm of the same magnitude as this. But you have gone through storms of different kinds in your life. So have I. And you will. You may be going through a storm of some kind right now.

When the storms come into your life, whatever form they may take – when the winds of trouble blow on you with hurricane force, when the rains of pain or grief or loss pound you relentlessly, when the waves of disappointment or doubt or despair beat against you and threaten to overwhelm you – Jesus wants you to stand firm in your faith, knowing that He is with you and trusting that He will bring you safely through the storm you're facing.

Storms come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, and we all look for refuge from the storms that come. The nation of Haiti was rocked again yesterday with a 7.2 magnitude earthquake. We don't know yet how many lives were lost or how much damage was done by the quake.

The last 18 months have been especially stormy, haven't they, as we have lived through – and continue to live through – the COVID-19 pandemic? It is a storm we're all in together. Your storm may be a "thorn in the flesh" that just won't go away. Maybe it is an injury or illness that has knocked you to the ground and put you, temporarily or permanently, on the sidelines. Maybe it is the realization of how fragile and fleeting this life is, or the loss of a loved one you thought would always be there. Maybe it is a relationship. Maybe there is a storm raging in your marriage. Or your family. Maybe it is your job. Or your need for a job. Maybe it is the prospect of moving (or moving again) to a place where you don't know anyone. Maybe it is a failure of some kind, or the fear of failure. Maybe it is the fear of losing something or someone you love. Maybe you look at what is happening in our country, in our cities, in our schools, and you fear for the future. These may not be literal storms, but they are still real.

A family less than a mile from our home in West Springfield suffered an unspeakable tragedy this past week when their five-year-old son was accidentally left in the car for several hours and subsequently died from the heat. I cannot imagine the storm of guilt and grief they are experiencing. I don't know them, but I know they need to know that Jesus loves them, and that He is near to all who call on Him (Psalm 145:18).

It is good to acknowledge the storms. It does no good to live in denial. But today – and every day – Jesus wants you to shift your focus from the storm and fix your eyes on Him instead. That is at least one lesson we can take away from this miraculous event that took place in the middle of the night on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus wants you to know that you are not alone in the storms you encounter. He wants you to know that He has His eye on you. He wants you to know that He will not leave you alone in the storms. He wants you to know that He will come to you and will be with you, just as He came to His disciples out on the lake. He wants you to know that you can trust Him to be with you and to bring you through whatever storms you may have to face in your life. He wants you to know that He will never leave you, abandon you, or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5), but will always be with you (Matthew 28:20). In all kinds of weather. In every season and circumstance of life.

You are not alone when the storms of life come. You are not alone, no matter how alone you may feel. In the most extreme moments of your life, Jesus is there with you. Let's look at what happened that night on the Sea of Galilee. Earlier that day, as we saw last Sunday, Jesus used a few loaves of barley bread and a couple of fish to miraculously provide dinner for a crowd of thousands. Then, when evening came, Jesus sent His disciples down to their boat for the trip across the lake. They took off as He dismissed the crowd and then went off by Himself to pray.

It was not a long trip across the lake for the disciples, but it was one they would never forget. A storm came up, not unlike the one they had encountered earlier, when Jesus was with them, asleep in the back of the boat while they did everything they could to keep from going under, until they woke Jesus up and He calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-41).

On this occasion, though, Jesus was not with them. Once again, the disciples struggled against the storm as the boat was buffeted by wind and waves. During the fourth watch of the night, which means sometime between 3 and 6 AM, when they must have been exhausted and ready to give up, when their strength and hope were just about gone, Jesus came to them in the midst of the storm, walking on the water.

Really? Did Jesus really walk on water? Some people, of course, think it is utterly impossible and couldn't have happened. In a 2013 article in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik wrote: "We know ... that in the billions of years of the universe's existence" [some may argue with that] "there is no evidence of a single miraculous intervention with the laws of nature." He went on to assert: "We need not imagine there's no heaven" [like John Lennon]; "we know there is none, and we will search for angels in vain."

Eric Metaxas replies to these claims in his book *Miracles*: "The reason (Gopnik) makes these statements has to do with his presuppositions that this world is all there is. That way of seeing the world dismisses outright any possibility of anything beyond the material world of time and space. It can be summed up in the words of the late Carl Dagan, who (famously) intoned: "The Cosmos is all there is and ever will be" " (Eric Metaxas, *Miracles*, 3-4).

A materialist world view dismisses the possibility of miracles out of hand.

Another attempt to “explain” the miracle is the suggestion that Jesus was actually walking on a patch of ice. That is the theory proposed by Dr. Doron Nof, an expert in oceanography and limnology. Do you know what limnology is? It is the study of the biological, chemical, and physical features of lakes and other bodies of fresh water (www.Lexico.com). Dr. Nof and his co-authors speculate that an unusual combination of atmospheric conditions can cause rare patches of floating ice on the Sea of Galilee. According to their calculations, the chances of this floating ice phenomenon happening are less than once every thousand years (and there is no evidence of it ever happening). But it didn’t stop them from publishing an article in 2006 in *The Journal of Paleolimnology* advancing their theory.

Of this Mark Batterson says: “I’m not sure which one would be more amazing. Surfing a piece of floating ice across the Sea of Galilee would take miraculous balance. And if those patches of ice appear only once every thousand years, it would take miraculous timing, too.... Dr. Nof’s theory may reveal more about the human psyche than the circumstances behind Jesus’ miracle. We have a natural tendency to explain away what we cannot explain.” Which is why so many people “miss the miracle” (Batterson, *The Grave Robber*, 174-175).

There is at least one other possible explanation: Several years ago, the Coast Guard rescued a man attempting to “run” from Florida to Bermuda in an inflatable bubble. Seriously. (Source: Ralph Ellis, CNN, 10/4/2014; www.preachingtoday.com, “Running on Water.”) Maybe Jesus was in a bubble? ☺ I don’t think so.

The best explanation for this and the other miracles recounted in the Bible is that they really happened. Jesus really could and did walk on the water because He is, as the disciples exclaimed in their infant faith, “the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33). As with the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walked on the water to send a message to His disciples and to us: that He really is the Son of God. That He really is Sovereign over creation. That He controls the wind and the waves. That He makes things happen by the power of His word. That what is impossible for us is Himpossible with Jesus. And, as Peter found out, with Jesus we can do impossible things.

If you ask whether I believe Jesus actually walked on the water, the answer is: Yes! Absolutely, unequivocally, with all my heart and mind and soul, yes!

I think we will need to revisit this miracle in two weeks. Pastor Chris is scheduled to preach next Sunday. We will need to look at this from Peter’s perspective and think about what it might mean for us to walk on water.

Before I close, though, I want to share with you what Paul David Tripp wrote in his weekly devotional, “Wednesday’s Word,” this past week about storms:

Into my comfortable world,
 Where pleasures were many,
 Comfort was frequent,
 And smiles came easy,
 You sent a raging storm.
 Broken things,
 Uprooted things,
 Lost things,
 Left in its wake.
 Tears flowed,
 Hurts followed,
 Anger rushed in,
 Confusion enveloped,
 Questions haunted,
 Answers evaded,
 Peace crumbled.
 Ruins of hope piled up,
 Faith's foundations weakened.
 Broken buildings,
 A metaphor of the heart.
 You didn't send the storm
 To judge,
 To punish,
 To condemn,
 To forsake.
 The wind and the waves
 Didn't pound me with Your anger,
 But surrounded me with Your love.
 The tumult was Your rescue,
 A deeper storm had blown me
 Away from You.
 A storm of the heart,
 Broken things,
 Uprooted things,
 Lost things.
 Then You stormed in.
 Powerful grace restored me to You.
 May Your powerful storm of mercy
 Blow again.

(Paul David Tripp, "Wednesday's Word," 8/11/2021)

Storms in life come for different reasons. Warren Wiersbe says there are at least two kinds of storms: storms of *correction*, when God is disciplining us; and storms of *perfection*, when God is helping us to grow. The prophet Jonah was in a storm because he disobeyed God and needed to be corrected. The disciples of Jesus were in this storm

because they obeyed Jesus but needed to grow in their faith and understanding (Wiersbe, *Matthew: Be Loyal*, 96).

What Paul Tripp emphasizes, and what I want you to take hold of today, is the truth that every storm you experience in life is an occasion of grace and mercy. In every storm, in every season of your life, Jesus is with you. He will not leave you alone. Ever. And His grace changes everything.

As the old hymn says:

“Fear not, I am with you, O be not afraid,
For I am your God and will still give you aid.
I’ll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.”

Knowing this, like Elisabeth Elliot and a great cloud of witnesses, you can stand on the promises of God. Lord, let it be so, now and always. Amen.