

## Called Over the Tumult

Matthew 14:22-33

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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*<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.*

Notice the unusual way this story starts: Jesus compelled his followers to get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side. Why force the disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side?

Well, we know that the reason Jesus had gone to that side of the sea in the first place was to have some time alone, to have some solitude.

Everybody needs some time alone every now and then—even Jesus. And if Jesus needs that, then you and I ought to give ourselves permission to need that as well.

Surely you've noticed, in reading the Gospels, how often Jesus went off by himself to pray. Over and over again...and he withdrew by himself to pray... and he went up the mountain by himself to pray... and he got up early in the morning and went off to pray.

We talked about this in one of my classes at Oxford. I of course just got back from spending two weeks at Oxford University in the UK. It is the Oxford Summer Programme in Theology. They admitted about 75 people from mostly the United States but also places like Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, and Jamaica to spend two weeks living on campus there and taking courses.

It was a great experience for me. The college where we were is called Christ Church. It was built in the 1500s by King Henry the VIII. It was great. I'm planning to tell about my experience and show pictures on Wednesday night, if you would like to come and hear more about it.

I was nearly killed almost every day attempting to cross the street as I kept forgetting to look to my right first and didn't always see that bus coming toward me on the left side of the street. But I survived.

I took four courses while I was there—two each week. One of the courses I took was called “Faith, Reason, and the Contemplative Way.” The “contemplative way” is an approach to being a Christian that we usually associated with those in a monastery—quiet, setting time for prayer and meditation, not being so busy, a focus on contemplation more than speaking or action.

A contemplative approach to Christianity is not limited to monks and nuns, of course. It's an approach or a “way” that is accessible to all of us.

My professor for this course was a man named Vincent Strudwick. He is what you might imagine an Oxford professor to be like. He is an older man, brilliant but very kind and polite. At one point he mentioned off-hand that he often read the Bible in Latin just to keep it fresh. He even wore this blazer that was kind of like a cape. He talked about “ringing

up” the Archbishop of Canterbury. The only thing he didn't have was a pipe.

Vincent Strudwick has lived the contemplative life. For 20 years—from 1950 to 1970—he was a member of an Anglican religious order living in a monastery. He finished his degrees, spent four years studying history, philosophy, and theology, and then was sent to work in the kitchen at the monastery. For a year he worked in the kitchen along with another monk named Dick who had also just gotten his doctorate, feeding 180 monks and seminarians every day. Get your doctorate...go to work in the kitchen.

And they lived in silence. They had what they called the “greater silence” and the “lesser silence.” Most of the day they lived in the “greater silence,” which means they couldn't speak at all.

Some of the time they operated in the “lesser silence,” which means they could speak if necessary—but not just for idle conversation. But they could speak in lectures or if it was important to communicate something. So Dr. Strudwick said that when working in the kitchen, they worked mostly in silence, but he

was allowed to say things like, *Hey Dick, the meat is burning.*

He lived this life for 20 years.

In our class we talked about different people in the history of Christianity who have modeled this contemplative life. We talked about Ignatius of Loyola who lived in the 1400s and founded the Society of Jesus—known as the Jesuits. The Jesuits were monks, but they didn't just close themselves up in the monastery. They were also missionaries.

Ignatius led his fellow monks to get out into the world and to immerse themselves in the alien cultures in which they were living and working. They did things like map the sewer systems in the places they lived. The Jesuits were out there in the world getting their hands dirty.

They were Christians who were engaged in hands on action in the world. They were the kind of Christians that many of us would admire for their engagement with the world. That's the kind Christianity that I'm

attracted to—a Christianity that is not withdrawn from the world around it but is engaged—immersed in it.

But as I learned about Ignatius and the Jesuits, I was hit with a very important insight. And that is this: Ignatius realized that if you're going to be *out there* in the world, you've got to have your heart on fire *in here*. You can't sustain a life of action on behalf of God without paying attention to your inner life in God and with God. You've got to have your eyes fixed on God, and then and only then can you immerse yourself in an alien culture and at the same time keep your faith.

The Jesuits were out there living among the people and doing practical work on behalf of the city in which they lived, but then periodically they would come back, they would withdraw, for a 40 day retreat. They knew they had to do that.

If we're going to immerse ourselves in our city and in work on behalf of our city, we've got to be serious about our inner life, our spiritual life. We have to take the time to tend to the fire of God in our hearts. You can't sustain a life of action on behalf of God without

paying attention to your inner life in God and with God. Do you hear that? I need to hear that.

Jesus knew this. Jesus knew that if he was going to give the kind of hands on love and compassion that he was called to give, that he needed to get away from time to time and be serious about tending to his spiritual life—to tend the fire of God in his heart.

So maybe that was why he compelled the disciples to get in a boat and go ahead of him to the other side. He needed some peace and quiet. *Get out of here*, he may have been saying. *I need some time with God*. So Jesus said, *Get in the boat and go on to the other side*. And they did. After sending the disciples off in the boat, Jesus went up onto the mountain to pray.

So here is the scene. The disciples are in the boat trying to make their way across the sea back to the western shore, and they are not having any luck. They are pulling hard at the oars, but the wind is blowing against them, and they move a few feet forward and a few feet back. They're not making much progress at all.

The wind is blowing, stirring up the waves, and the water is coming into the boat. Some of the disciples are bailing water, and some are rowing, but it's not looking good. It's not looking like they're going to make it. They're going to die here in the water at night.

Just before dawn, somewhere between three and six in the morning, Jesus comes to them.

Jesus comes in the storm on the sea and says, *Take heart, I am*. In our Bibles, these words are translated "It is I" or "I am he," but what Jesus actually says is "I am." I am. You remember from the Old Testament that's the name for God.

God has come to them in the storm. And what happens? They can't believe it. At first they say, *It's a ghost, it's a ghost!*

But Jesus gets closer, and Simon Peter says to him, *If you are. . . If you are, tell me to come to you on the water*. Do those words sound familiar? Does that question, "If you are. . .?" sound familiar? Do you remember hearing those words before?

When Jesus was tested and tempted in the wilderness, the devil said to him three times, *If you are the son of God. . . .*

The words of Simon Peter here are the words of the tempter. *I'm putting you to the test, Jesus. If you really are the son of God. . . .* It's no wonder that two chapters later Jesus says to Simon Peter, *Get behind me, Satan.*

I've heard the sermons that say that Peter tried to walk on the water but when he took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink, and that's kind of catchy, but we need to think about what is really happening here.

Simon Peter doesn't believe. He doubts. He wants to put Jesus to the test. And so he says, *If you really are the Lord, make me walk on the water too.* He wants to put Jesus to the test, and in the attempt to put Jesus to the test, he ends up getting tested himself, and he sinks. You don't test God.

[Fred B. Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 33-4]

And Jesus says, *Why did you doubt?*

We usually assume that when Jesus said, *You of little faith, why did you doubt?* he was talking about how Peter was walking on the water fine until he doubted then he sank.

But I think what Jesus was talking about was that Peter doubted

that it was really Jesus coming in the storm and that he would save them.

So Peter had to test Jesus.

If Peter had not doubted that that was Jesus and that he was on his way to take care of them, Peter wouldn't have had to go overboard and get all wet.

See, the funny thing is, after all that I said earlier about the importance of contemplation and withdrawing to be still with God, I was still planning on making this a sermon about action. I was going to talk about Jesus calling Peter out of the boat and into the stormy water, and I was going to quote the hymn, "Jesus Calls us O'er the Tumult" and say that Jesus calls us not just over the tumult but into the tumult.

I was going to quote Madeleine L'Engle who once said that God is always calling us to do that impossible.

I was going to talk about how Peter didn't recognize Jesus at first, but I was going to say how we can always know it's Jesus, because Jesus is the one who recklessly commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of. That's Jesus.

And that is Jesus. But I don't think that's what this story is really about. It was Peter who brought up the whole thing about getting out of the boat and walking on water—not Jesus. Jesus was just coming to them in the storm.

Maybe this will be of some comfort to you. When you are in the middle of a storm, you are not required to walk on water. Jesus is not asking you to prove your faith by some spectacular deed in the middle of the storm. Maybe you don't have to get out of the boat at all.

Jesus is not asking you to have faith so you can walk on water. Jesus is asking you to have faith in this statement, *Take heart, it is I; don't be afraid.* Sometimes, in the middle of a terrible storm of life, it is enough for you to just stay in the boat and let Jesus come walking over and bring peace.

Jesus said to Peter, *Why'd you ever doubt that I would come and that it would be alright?*

In essence Jesus is saying, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it, *Peter, I was headed straight for you. I told you who I was. If you had sat still just a few minutes more, I would have been sitting right next to you, and all the others, with no need for that silly stunt out on the water.*

Madeleine L'Engle is right: God is always calling on us to do the impossible. But we may think the impossible is always some kind of heroic, Olympian feat, balancing on a high wire or a balance beam or walking on water all by ourselves. But maybe, just maybe, the impossible, in this case, is to simply be still and have the faith to trust that Jesus will come to you in the storm.

Be still. And being still requires tremendous faith.

One of my favorite images for the Christian life is given in a scene in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. There is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat sails along the rough ocean in pursuit of the great, white whale, Moby Dick. The sailors are laboring fiercely, throwing all their attention and energy into the task.

It is the conflict between good and evil, the chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab.

In this boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar; he doesn't strain; and doesn't shout. He is still amid the crash of waves and the furious activity of the sailors. The man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting.

And then Melville writes this sentence: *To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil.*

You could set that sentence alongside Matthew's *And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.*

There are a thousand good things that need to be done in our world. And we as Christians are called to be a people of action; we have much to do. We're not called to just sit here and make ourselves comfortable.

But if the harpooner is rowing and not ready with his dart, he'll never complete his task. If the harpooner is exhausted, running around frantically on the deck of the ship, or trying to walk on water, he won't be ready and accurate when it's his time to do his thing.

In other words, don't get so pulled into the tumult of activity that you never get still enough to be ready when the time comes for you to do something significant. You never go off to a quiet place, and you're not ready when the time for your significant task comes.

You're not ready—you don't have the capacity— to respond to God's call because you're never still. And there are no resources being developed on the inside.

*[Eugene Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor, p.24-5]*

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He didn't go to pray because he didn't have anything important to do. He went to pray because he had so much important work to do he had to be ready.

Do you trust God enough to be still—even when there is a storm all around?