

“Keep Your Eye On The Prize”

Matthew 14:22-36

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Do you ever watch the TV show *Monk*? Monk is an ex-detective for the San Francisco Police Department who struggles with anxiety. In one show this season he's called as a witness to a murder trial. Monk does terribly on the stand as the defense attorney exploits all his fears and weaknesses. When the man accused of murder is acquitted, Monk's assistant says, "Mr. Monk, next time it might help if you don't keep yelling 'Mayday! Mayday!' from the stand."

Of course, that's the signal for when you're in trouble, and your ship is going down. In the story we look at today, it's what's going on when Jesus comes onto the scene.

The questions keep coming about Jesus:

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount,

The crowds were *amazed* at his teaching, because he taught as one who had *authority*.
(Matthew 7:28-29a)

When Jesus calmed another storm,

The [disciples] were *amazed* and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves *obey* him!" (8:27)

When he came to his hometown,

The people in their synagogue...were *amazed*. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. (Matthew 13:54-56)

And from our story this morning,

Then those who were in the boat *worshiped* him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
(Matthew 14:33)

It's amazing to realize who this Jesus is. He's not just supposed to inspire, not just impress. He's supposed to be *worshiped*, and that's why one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In John's gospel Jesus says,

"Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.
(John 13:31)

When Jesus is worshiped, God is glorified, because Jesus is God. At the end of Matthew, Jesus announces,

“All authority in heaven and earth is given to me” (28:18)

And the disciples fall down and worship him! That's where the Gospel of Matthew is headed.

Let's pick up the text for today.

The story's pretty straightforward: Jesus sends the disciples on their way, and then he says goodbye to the crowd. Then he goes alone to the mountain to pray. A strong storm comes up over the lake, so Jesus goes to them. He calms their fears and comforts them. Peter walks to Jesus right on top of the waves, then falters. Jesus saves him, the wind stops, and the disciples express their faith.

So this is another miracle story, like so many we've seen in Mathew to this point. It's a story about Jesus, and also about Peter, a picture of Jesus and his church. Just like the story of calming the storm in Matthew 8, this reminds us that the church will have trouble in the world. But when Jesus is with his church, that's okay. We're going to make it.

Jesus walking on the water shows that God does miracles. (14:25)

A lot of people might have a hard time taking this parable at face value. But God is in the business of miracles, and we see that by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That's the central miracle of history. So what is it for God to do a miracle on the water for Jesus? Or for Peter? Sure, the story has something important to say beyond walking on water. God's help comes to us in times of trouble. Jesus obeyed God in all things. He only did what the Father told him to do, only said what the Father told him to say.

What's the lesson in Peter walking on the water? It means we have to keep our eyes on Jesus in a troubled and dangerous world. But the bottom line is, we wouldn't have any spiritual lessons out of the story if the miracle didn't actually happen.

Our God is an awesome God, and he can work miracles.

Jesus walking on the water shows he is the God of Israel and of his church. (14:27)

When Jesus walks on the water, it's to come to him disciples. I think Matthew is saying, when the church is in trouble, Jesus is there with power to calm the storms. He comes to the disciples and says,

“Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.” (14:27)

This is a very interesting phrase, and I need to talk about the phrase in Greek to really see what Jesus is saying here. Don't worry, you can get it if you try!

The literal phrase to translate what Jesus says is simply, “Courage! *I am*. Don't be afraid.” In Greek, *ego eimi*, “I am.”

That's the same phrase Jesus uses when he argues with the Pharisees in John 8:58, and it makes them want to stone him to death. Why? They understand what Jesus means by it. That little phrase comes from the Old Testament as the name for the Lord God Almighty. When Moses asked God, “Who shall I say sent me?”,

God said to Moses, "*I am who I am*. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

This isn't just a random encounter. It's a divine encounter, an appearance of God. In other words, Jesus isn't simply saying, "Don't sweat it, your friend is here." He's saying, "This is the I AM, the Holy One of Israel, the one who's in charge of the wind and the waves, the one who created the heavens and the earth—that one is here for you!"

If he's the God of Israel, the God of Creation, he is also God of the church, *your* God who always has you in his hand, no matter what the storms of life.

We get in trouble when we take our eyes off Jesus. (14:28-30)

The story-within-the-story is about what Peter does when he meets Jesus on the lake. It's an important story of its own, because it shows the saving power of Jesus. Why would Peter ask such a strange thing? What was the purpose in telling Jesus to command him to come to him?

Maybe Peter wanted to be a part of the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, just like he was a part of the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000.

Maybe Peter was just being impulsive. We know from the Gospel that Peter is an impulsive guy. At the last Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples, he warned them that they were all going to desert him. Peter said, Not me. "Even if everyone else does, I never will." (Matthew 26:33) Then Jesus answered, that, well, as a matter of fact,

"This very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." (Matthew 26:34)

Peter still wasn't convinced. He answered,

"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." (Matthew 26:35)

Maybe Peter just wanted excitement. Walking on the water would be a real rush, the experience of a lifetime. That means he really had faith. He never would have gotten out of the boat without it.

So, Jesus called him. He called Peter to walk on the water so he would experience the power of God, and also know his own weakness. When God gives us what we want, it's often to make clear his own power and grace, and our own need.

What was the problem? Why did Peter sink? It was just a lack of concentration. He got distracted by the wind, and so his circumstances impacted him more than his faith. That happens whenever we get our eyes off Jesus. Has that ever happened to you? Get your eyes on your problems, on the wind and the storms of your life, and you sink. It's going to happen sometimes.

So Peter had faith, he was distracted, and he knew where to go for help. As he begins to sink he cries out, "Lord, save me!" When we're desperate, there's just one thing to do, one person to cry out to, one way we're going to be saved.

We get real help when we cry out to Jesus.

Matthew says, “Immediately, Jesus reached out.” (14:31) Help comes as soon as he cries out. And as Jesus grabs Peter’s hand, he says, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?” (14:31b) Another way of saying doubt is to have a “divided mind.” That’s what Peter had—he had faith to get out of the boat, and he had fears that made him sink.

I think we’re like that in the church. We trust God, but we’re scared. We have faith, but we keep getting our eyes off Jesus and onto ourselves or our circumstances. We call to him for help, but we wonder if he’s really able. We’re saints, born again, justified in the eyes of a holy God, but we’re also sinners. We care about God’s kingdom and want to make it first priority, but we also get distracted and think about our own comfort, and the church as a club where we get to be safe from the troubles of the world.

But there’s always help. Even in the storms, Jesus is present to help us. The story last week showed us only the Creator could make bread multiply, and now that only the King of the Universe can walk on water and command the elements.

And the wind stopped. It wasn’t even that Jesus commanded it, but just that he was present in the boat. The disciples couldn’t help respond by worshiping him. That’s the very best response.

- Like the wise men that came to worship him at the manger. (Matthew 2:11)
- Like the leper that came and knelt before him and said, “If you’re willing, you can make me clean.” (Matthew 8:2)
- Like the ruler that bowed before him and asked for Jesus to raise his dead daughter. (Matthew 9:18)
- Like the Canaanite woman that bowed before him and begged, “Lord, help me.” (Matthew 15:25)
- Like his the two Marys, when they met him after his resurrection and they “clasped his feet and worshiped him.” (Matthew 28:9)

Psalm 107 voices praise to God for his sovereignty over nature—that is, that he is God and expresses his mighty control for our good. The psalm goes this way:

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.

He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men.

Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders. (Psalm 107:28-32)

The same Jesus who multiplied the bread and fish, who came to his disciples walking on the water, who saved Peter from sinking, this same Jesus is Lord of the church, and he’s ready to save you. Even when you doubt. Because he’s the Son of God, he’s our treasure, our pearl of great price, our prize. So keep your eye on the prize.