



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Can't Avoid Chaos

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 14:
22-33

March 12, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Just before the pandemic, I was reading a book that humbled me a bit. It was written by Mark Labberton, who is a pastor. He says a young person came to his church one Sunday. Mark recognized he was new to the community, so he struck up a conversation with him. He learned that he was a grad student at the University of California and was new both to California and to church. Mark asked him, “What brings you to this church?” The young man said he had been asking some significant questions about life and that had led him to church. He said, “I’ve been to a number of churches and they talk a lot about Jesus and about the world. I’ve appreciated that. But what I want to know is, if I hang around your church, will I meet folks who are actually like Jesus?”¹

Wow. What would you say? It’s a humbling question. It seems like we ought to be able to say, “Well, sure. We are all followers of Jesus here. If you hang around here, you will meet people like Jesus.”

But there’s another part of me that says, “No way. I love Jesus, but I’m not much like him. I’m too ordinary in my faith. I’m a ‘we believe, help my unbelief’ kind of guy.” Were someone to ask you that question about Village, what would you say? Are there people like Jesus here?

Peter was the first disciple to follow Jesus. The invitation of Jesus was to follow him and get a life—the life that God intends. “Come and follow me,” Jesus said. In following Jesus, Peter witnessed Jesus heal Peter’s mother-in-law and then cure countless others.

It would be to Peter that Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” But it would also be to Peter that Jesus would say, “On this rock I will build my church.” Peter’s name means ‘rock.’

It would be Peter who stood slack-jawed, begging to build three booths on the mount of transfigura-

tion. It would be Peter who would draw a sword to defend Jesus from Roman soldiers, only to be told that’s not how the love of God works in this world. Peter would have his feet washed and his eyes opened. And his mouth filled with bread and wine. It would be Peter who, by the fireside, would say, “You’ve got it all wrong. I don’t know that man.” And Peter would say, “Lord command me to come to you on the water.”

The disciples are at sea. The wind and the waves are beating against them. In the midst of this storm, Jesus walks to them on the water. The disciples react as they should: They are terrified. People can’t do that. The man they see has powers that are beyond human capacities. Of course they are terrified.

But Peter says, “I want to come out there with you—in the midst of the storm, out of the safety of the boat. I want to walk on the waves like you.” The other disciples, I assume, join in a group eye-roll, knowing what Peter is suggesting is impossible. Nobody can walk on water. But Jesus says, “Come on. You can do it. Get out of the boat.” And Peter does. He steps out of the boat, and just like that first day when he dropped his nets to follow Jesus by the sea, he leaves the boat to follow Jesus. And for a moment, Peter walks on water. And for a moment, it might have been hard to tell which one was Peter and which one was Jesus.

Ok, what is this about? How many of you would’ve tried walking on water? I doubt many of you would raise your hands. This is not a story about having the power to defy the laws of nature. If it were about that, it would have no relevance to your life or mine. No one is going to say, “Now, if you really have faith, you can walk across the Missouri River.” That’s ridiculous. Christian faith is not about circus tricks and to reduce this story to a circus trick belittles its real message. How else do we read this?

1 Mark Labberton, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today* (2014) p. 26.

If you read scripture with a careful eye, then you recognize that water is often a symbol or a metaphor. Water can be a metaphor for chaos. The storms of life, the messiness of the world. No life avoids chaos.

Remember the creation story. It says the Spirit hovered over the waters—a formless void, chaos. Life was not possible. It would take an act of God to push back the chaos just enough to make life possible.

The book of Revelation says on God’s promised day “the sea will be no more.” John is not writing as a travel agent, declaring that there is no ocean in heaven. That’s not his point nor his knowledge. He is saying when God’s promised day comes in all its fullness, the chaos that rules our lives will be destroyed.

If I understand it, walking on water isn’t about aquatics. It is about following Jesus through the chaos of this life. Choosing to walk as he walks—even when the whole world says you can’t walk that way and survive.

When Peter walks on the water, he looks like Jesus. He follows close enough that it’s hard to tell one from the other. After a bit, Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus and notices the wind and waves and then he begins to sink. But for a moment, Peter was walking like Jesus walks.

Life is chaotic. I think Jesus shows us who to be in the midst of the chaos. I learned a bit about the chaos of life and a bit about myself in the midst of it at an early age.

Dave Davis was the cool kid in 4th grade. He was handsome, although we would not have used that word. He was funny. At recess, people would gather around Dave, throwing their heads back and laughing, others asking, “What did he say? What did he say?” He was athletic. He was cool. Everybody wanted to be Dave Davis.

Robert was also in my class. Robert was awkward. He was a little overweight and not very comfortable with himself. He had glasses that kept sliding down his nose. He was good at math, but he couldn’t catch a ball to save his life. In kickball, you could throw him out at first, even from the outfield.

And then there was me. I was never cool. Not by a long shot. I wasn’t particularly awkward. I was excessively bland. I was one of the crowd. One who could boast no reason at all to be remembered.

It was my turn to pick someone for our kickball team at recess. Dave Davis was picking for the other team. He picked Frank Chambless and then looked at me and said, “So, Are, what are you going to do?” There were three kids left: Robert and two girls. In 4th grade, no guy wanted a girl to be chosen ahead of him for a team. Dave Davis was just waiting to pounce on Robert for being picked after a girl, or on me for picking Robert. I looked right at Robert and said, “I choose Carla.”

I knew Dave would ridicule one of us, so I chose Carla and threw Robert under the bus. I would like to tell you that I chose Carla out of some sense of empowering women, but that wouldn’t be true. I would like to tell you that I didn’t know that I hurt Robert, but I’m sure I knew exactly what was happening. I just didn’t care. Or better said: I cared about my discomfort, my insecurity, my fears, more than I cared about Robert. Now, I was a kid and had a lot of learning to do, but the chaos of life starts early and it never ends. And it often grows more complicated.

These are chaotic moments; when we have to choose to love our neighbor or not. It’s there, in the midst of the wind and the waves, that we have to decide: Are our choices going to be shaped by our fears and our insecurities or are our choices going to be shaped by Jesus. Am I making any sense to you?

That’s why I was a bit unsettled when I came across that young man’s question, “If I hang around your church, will I meet people like Jesus?” “No, you are more likely to meet people like... well, like me. And I threw Robert under the bus.”

Peter makes a seemingly unreasonable request when he asks, “Tell me to come to you. In the midst of the chaos of this world, I want to walk like you.”

I think: Come on man, he’s Jesus and you are not Jesus! You can’t walk on water. That’s absolutely true. But then tell me, why did Jesus say, “Come. You can do it.” Jesus could have said, “Are you kidding me? Kids, don’t try this at home. You can’t do this.”

But no, Jesus says, “I’ve been waiting for you to ask. Come on. I’ve got you.” I know it’s impossible, but I also know that Jesus is really good at calling us to do that which we cannot do. Go the second mile. Forgive 70 times seven. Turn the other cheek. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. These make about

as much sense as walking on water.

We may think it's not in us to live like this, to walk in this chaotic world the way he does. But we have to at least admit: Jesus keeps calling us. For he continues to call us to do that which we don't believe we can do—to walk on water.

But then this is also true: From time to time, I look at you and you look just like Jesus. I know we mess it up sometimes. Often, in fact. But I have seen you love with a generosity that is inspiring. I have seen you take risks of compassion that some folks would deem unreasonable. I have seen you care for one another, refusing to let go of hope even in the darkest hours.

Our students are in the Dominican Republic today.

They are with people of deep faith and people so impoverished it would challenge anything you have ever seen. And they will see Jesus in each other.

“If I hang around your church, will I meet people who are like Jesus?” This is what I would say, “Yes, you will. They are also sinners. But their failings do not define them, just like your failings do not define you. We are not defined by the worst in us, but by the best in God. The clearest way I have ever seen Jesus is in people at church. And from time to time, you will see them forgive 70 times seven, you will see them turn the other cheek, you will see them love friend and even enemy. From time to time, you will see them live as if they are walking on water.”