



Walking With Jesus

TEXT
Psalm 131
Matthew 14:22-33

October 29, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Last week we learned from Naaman. He walked with holy ground sprinkled in his shoes. Naaman discovered that hope was demanding. Hope in God is complicated because we live in a world defined by fear more than hope. That means we make compromises; we all compromise.

Today we find Peter in the boat — Peter the rock; Peter the first among the disciples; Peter who would follow Jesus closer to the cross than any of the others, but still deny him. Peter is now caught in the storm. The boat is tossed. They are afraid. And then they spot Jesus walking on the water. That frightens them even more. But Peter said, *I want to come out there with you.* And Peter walks on the water. He's not great at it, but he's better at it than I am.

Naaman walks with holy ground. Peter walks on water. Being a disciple, a person of faith, has something to do with walking. It's a journey.

The first thing to say about this story is that it is not one to read literally. If this is a story about Jesus having the power to defy the laws of gravity, or Peter sharing the same powers, even if only for a moment, it's

impressive, but it really doesn't matter in our lives. Even if you could walk across the Missouri River, it's not going to address any major need in your life.

It reminds me of David LaMotte, who was here last year. He sings a song about watching the movie *Peter Pan*. He learned you can fly if you only believe. So David went up on the roof, jumped off and flew ... until he broke his collarbone.

Maybe you can walk on water ... until you drown. But I don't think this story calls us to walk on water or jump off the roof. So what is this story really about?

If I understand it, it's about following Jesus. It's about walking where he walks, even in the midst of the storm, even if the world says you can't walk that way and survive. It's not about magic; it's about discipleship.

I want to come out there with you, Peter says. *I want to walk where you walk.*

I have often assumed that Peter was impulsive here — talking before he had thought this all the way through; the rest of the disciples looking at him like he has lost his mind; half of them thinking, “No, Peter, sit down; you will kill yourself.” And the

other half thinking, “Hey y'all, watch this!”

But I don't think Peter was impulsive. I think he was courageous. Somewhere he managed the courage to hope: *Let me walk like you walk.*

Hope requires courage — particularly in the storm. It says the winds were against them, and they were battered by the waves.

You know what it's like to be in the storm. We had Dr. John Smol here yesterday. He is a paleolimnologist. He studies lake bottoms. You know how archeologists dig to uncover how life was in the past? He studies the mud in lake bottoms to learn about the climate through the centuries. Evidently the bottom of a lake is like a library of history regarding life through the years. The evidence is quite compelling that the climate is changing. I know that is not the conviction of some political positions, but he wasn't making a political statement. He is a scientist. The science is pretty overwhelming. The earth is running a fever and is getting sicker.

We are in the storm; the winds are against us.

And if that is not enough, Puerto Rico is still largely in the dark, and someone hired an electrical company with two em-

ployees to fix that problem. They are still in the storm.

And if that is not enough, from Bill Cosby to Bill O'Reilly to Harvey Weinstein — and the list goes on — it seems we need to do some serious thinking about how we treat our wives, our sisters, our daughters in the workplace. They are in the storm. And if that isn't enough, there's North Korea.

It's enough to make you want to just close your door and close out the world. Do you ever feel like that?

I had someone say to me, "Tom, I wish you wouldn't spend so much time talking about the world. When I come to church, I want to get away from that. I need some sanctuary. I need some peace. I need some space from all the bad news."

I get that. Don't you feel that way? Don't you ever wish you could just get some peace?

Psalm 131 is honest about that.

"My heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me."

Peace. I just want some peace. Just quiet my soul. That's all I want.

I imagine that is how the disciples felt. The storm was raging around them, and they crawled down into the hull of the boat and hoped the chaos would pass them by, just get some peace.

When the storm comes, I just want to quiet my soul.

But then the psalm says, "Hope in the Lord." Hope doesn't allow us to seek the shelter of the boat. I think hope gets us out of the boat and walking in a way Jesus would walk. And that kind of hope requires courage.

Jonathan Sacks says there is a difference between optimism and hope. "Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. It takes no courage to be an optimist. But it takes a great deal of courage to have hope."¹

I don't think Jesus was an optimist. But I do think he was defined by hope and, in this moment, so was Peter. There, in the midst of the storm, they spot Jesus. We almost never find him sunning himself by the pool; he is almost always in the midst of the storm.

Peter says, *I want to come out there with you*. That's what hope looks like. Hope requires courage.

When my mother was in her mid-50s, she had a cerebral bleed, and it left her disabled. She lived alone, so even before Carol and I had children, we had the care of my mother. A few years after her stroke, she started having seizures. They couldn't get the seizures under control. She had them almost daily. She took a cocktail of meds — so many it was hard to keep count — but the seizures just kept getting worse. This went on for years.

My mother's sister, my aunt who lived in upstate New York, called and said she knew of an

alternative treatment that could help my mother.

You may think I am a horrible son, but I had been to so many doctors and faced disappointment so many times, I couldn't put hope in some alternative treatment. I told my aunt, "If you want to take her there, I am fine with that, but don't ask me to hope again." I had been schooled by disappointment, and I didn't have it in me to hope.

My mother went, and I can't explain it, but she hasn't had a seizure since. And I am profoundly grateful. But to hope that would be the case required more courage than I had at the time.

Hope, enough hope to get out of the boat, takes courage.

Peter said, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water."

And don't miss this part. Jesus said, "Come." Echoing the first thing that Jesus ever said to Peter, "Come and follow me," Jesus says this again: "Come."

It's impossible to walk on water, but Jesus is good at asking us to do what we simply cannot do.

Go the second mile.

Forgive 70 times 70.

Turn the other cheek.

Love the neighbor.

Love the enemy.

See the poor and the prisoner, the abused and the abuser, the helpless, the hopeless and the homeless, not as some condition or circumstance, but rather as our family.

That's about as easy as walking on water.

He is good at asking us to do what we simply cannot do. At

least that's the way it seems in the boat. But Peter got out of the boat, and for a while he walked just like Jesus walked. For a while he looked just like Jesus.

We are talking about hope because we are in our stewardship season. It takes courage to be generous ... to really be generous. But our generosity is the most concrete way we can express our hope. We give to invest in what God will do tomorrow.

Because we take those dollars ...

And we turn them into meals people prepare from the groceries they get at our food pantry.

And we turn those dollars into visits, as we show up when the doctor says, "I'm sorry, there's nothing we can do."

And we turn them into trips to change the lives of our youth.

We turn them into classes that seek the truth and practice friendship when we disagree.

And we turn those dollars into resurrection, building a church where the church had died.

And we turn them into the worship of God, so that on weeks when the news is bad, we might have courage to get out of the boat.

My aunt called me and said, "I think there is a chance."

I said, "I don't want to get in the way, but I am afraid to hope for this. My hopes have been dashed so many times."

I can't imagine how many times Precious Stargell Cushman has had that same conversation with children who are growing up on our streets and have known nothing but disappoint-

ment. They have known nothing but hardship. They have had no reason to trust tomorrow can be a new day.

And yet, with our help, she will tell those little ones, "We are going to hold your hope for you until you can carry it yourself. We are going to get you out of the boat of poverty. We are going to get you out of the boat of homelessness. We are going to get you out of the boat of hopelessness." She says it over and over and over again.

Hope is faith with the long view. We know the earth has a fever and is getting sicker by the day, and we know that women are being mistreated and degraded. We know that poverty is claiming too many lives and that racism is still as American as the flag. We know that the tendons that hold our communities together are torn, and our connection to others is fragile.

We live in stormy times. The winds are strong, and the waves are against us. And I don't blame you one bit if you think, "I just want peace. My heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high ... I have calmed and quieted my soul."

We are all there sometimes. But remember, hope in the Lord. Hope will require courage, but it will get us out of the boat.

The hope is faith with the long view. Like Martin Luther King said, "I may not get there with you, but we as a people will get to the promised land."

Hope is faith that tomorrow can be a new day, not just yesterday lived over again — but only

if we get out of the boat and take the step we can take today.

If you are needing peace today, if you are needing to close it all out and just calm your soul, seek that, embrace that. But remember, he is always out there in the storm, and he will keep calling us. He is good at that. He's going to keep calling us.

¹Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), p. 206

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.