



Keep Walking

TEXT
Isaiah 6:1–8
Matthew 14:22–33

November 25, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This entire series is found in this passage in Isaiah: sin, grace and calling.

It begins as Isaiah comes into God's presence and becomes aware of his sin. We may not use the word "sin" as much as prior generations, but we know what it is to mess things up. Isaiah is our teacher here: "Woe is me, for I am lost." He confesses the truth of himself.

Yet, the gospel news is that when we fall, there is grace. An angel brings a coal from the altar of God and touches Isaiah's lips. "Your sin is blotted out. You are clean." Grace is not some sweet attribute of God. Grace is the relentless persistence of God to hold on to us in the very moment we give God reason to let go of us. But grace is not just something that flows from God; grace is something that calls us to respond to God. The life of faithfulness is not lived so that God will be gracious; the life of faithfulness is lived because God has already been gracious.

God asks, "Whom shall I send?"

Isaiah, the lost one, now made clean by grace, responds, "Here am I. Send me."

That's the whole series: Isaiah the lost one, now made clean,

is called. And the call of God may be the most extravagant expression of grace we ever know.

I say that because the call of God does not come to the righteous, but to those who have been touched by grace. God consistently calls us, even when God knows better than we that we fail, stumble, that we sink. God still calls us. It's not just that grace is followed by calling. The call of God is grace.

Jesus said to Peter, "Come, follow me." Immediately Peter dropped his nets and followed him. That's what a disciple does. When Jesus went up the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter followed him. When Jesus walked by the sea, Peter followed him. When Jesus walked toward the cross, Peter followed him, even if at a distance. And when Jesus walks on the sea, even there, Peter follows him. When it comes to walking on water, Peter is not great at it, but he's better at it than I am.

Now this text is not to be read literally. If this were a story about Jesus having the power to defy the laws of gravity, or Peter sharing the same powers, it's impressive, but it really doesn't matter. Even if you could walk across the Missouri River, it's not going to address any major

need in your life — or anyone else's. You may grab a headline in *The Kansas City Star* — "Presbyterian Aqua-batics" — but it's not going to speak to anything significant in the world.

No, this is not a story about defying the laws of nature; it's a story about discipleship. It's a story about following Jesus, no matter where he goes. It's about walking where he walks, even if the rest of the world says you can't walk that way and survive.

Peter says, "I want to come to you. I know what the world says about walking on water, but I would rather be out there with you. Tell me to come to you on the water."

Now you might think 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 had 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. To let our lives be defined by the life of Christ requires courage.

There was a man who attended the church that I grew up in in Atlanta. His name was Porter Halyburton. He graduated

from Davidson College and went to Vietnam. In 1965, he was shot down and presumed dead. His wife and children had a funeral service for him. There was a grave marker with his name.

But he survived and lived as a POW. They put him in a small prison cell with another POW. The Vietnamese assumed this would be torture for the two men because Porter was a white man from Carolina and Fred was black. Even the Vietnamese knew about American racism. Most believed for them to live together in cramped quarters would be about as easy as walking on water.

But Porter said putting him in that cell with Fred Cherry is what saved his life. They discovered not only that they needed each other; they discovered that they couldn't make it without each other. It changed them. It took courage to see that assumptions of prejudice carried all of his life were wrong, and he could walk in a different way.¹

Peter said, "Tell me to come to you on the water." I imagine the other disciples thought he was crazy. But don't miss this part of the story. This is the most important part. When Peter says, "I want to come out there with you," Jesus, instead of saying, "Seriously, Peter, you can't do this. We know your track record. You are JV material. Sit down. Don't try this at home," says, "Come."

Jesus is good at that. He is good at calling us to do that which we cannot do. Even knowing our tendency to mess things up, he still calls us to do that

which we cannot do. You know what I mean: *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 and the homeless, not as some condition or circumstance, but rather as our family. He stands out there in the middle of this chaotic world and says, "Come on. Live this way." But his way is about as easy as walking on water.

And most surprisingly, he knows us. He knows we will likely sink. So, why does he call us?

It's worth pondering what Jesus thought might happen. I mean Peter did sink. Jesus did have to save him before it was all over. Did Jesus really think Peter would do any better? I don't know.

But I know this: Jesus keeps calling ordinary folks like you and me. He stands in the midst of the chaos and calls us to get out of the boat and to keep walking.

He calls us to feed the hungry, to visit the prisoner, to welcome the alien in our midst. He keeps calling us to live a life that others might think makes as much sense as walking on water. He knows we are a people of belief and unbelief, but he keeps calling us: "Come on, keep walking."

I love Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal Dreams*. It's about two sisters in the 1980s. Codi lives in Arizona, and Hallie goes off to Nicaragua during the Contra War. Codi says she's gone off to save the world. But Hallie sees it differently. She says this:

Codi, you're thinking of revolution as a great all-or-nothing. I think of it as one more morning in a muggy cotton field, checking the undersides of leaves to see what's been there, figuring out what to do that won't clear a path for worse problems next week. Right now that's what I do. Wars and elections are both too big and too small to matter in the long run. The daily work — that goes on, it adds up. It goes into the ground, into crops, into children's bellies and their bright eyes. Good things don't get lost.

Codi, here's what I've decided: The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. ... What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I can't tell you how good it feels.²

I think following Jesus is the call to live inside his hope for the world. To go the second mile, and to trust forgiveness even when it's risky. To repay evil with grace and fear with hope. To be a grown-up in a culture that worships adolescence. To keep telling the truth when those around you celebrate truth decay. To hope while we live in storms of fear.

He calls us, and we stumble. We sink like a stone sometimes, but perhaps the most dramatic

aspect of grace is that Jesus still calls us to keep walking.

Why do you suppose he doesn't give up on us?

When I was a boy, my father told me if I sprinkled salt on a bird's tail, the bird would not be able to fly, and I could scoop it up and keep it as a pet. I believed him. There is a flaw in this system. The birds seldom make their tails available for salting. I killed most of the grass in the backyard chasing the birds with a salt shaker.

So I changed tactics. I made a trap. I got a box. I propped it up with a stick. Underneath the box, I put peanut butter, and Twinkies, and Kool-Aid. I tied a string around the stick and hid behind the garage. I waited. Several birds flew down and hopped around, and finally a blue jay stepped under the box.

I pulled the string, the stick came out, the box came down. I had a bird. The box was on top of a window screen I removed from my sister's window. I flipped the whole thing over, and I had the box, the bird in the box, the screen on top of the box, and I was standing there with a whole box of "When it rains it pours." I got salt on that bird's tail. I got it on his wings, his head, his back. I just chased him around the box. By the time I finished, that bird was knee-deep in salt.

I opened the screen, just that much. My daddy lied to me. When you are seven years old, and your daddy says with salt on his tail, he can't fly, you think it's true. Even if it wasn't true before it's true now, just because he said it. But here's the

thing: God made the bird to fly. That's his purpose. There's no salt, no daddy, no power in the world that can change the fact that the bird was created to fly.

You and me, we were created to walk like Jesus walks in this world. That is what you are for. Now, we are going to sink every now and then. But he's not going to give up on us. He's going to keep calling, and that may be the most extravagant expression of grace the world has ever known. He's going to keep calling us to keep walking.

And who knows, maybe every now and then we will stay on top of the waves for a while. Peter did. Maybe we will too.

¹The story of Porter Halyburton and Fred Cherry is told in James Hirsch's *Two Souls Indivisible* (2004).

²Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams* (1990), p. 299

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>.