



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“ON CALMER SEAS”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 23; Matthew 14:22-33

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 9, 2020
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Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Having a sense of the fuller breadth and scope of Peter’s life has always been influential for me in terms of helping me understand who Peter was and what made him tick...what it was that compelled him to get out of that boat in the first place. I’m reminded of another time when Peter and his friends were fishing. Just after daybreak, Jesus appeared to them on the shoreline, but the disciples didn’t know that it was him.

Jesus said, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” And they responded, “No.” Jesus continued, “Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” As they did, we are told that the result was an overwhelming catch of fish. John was the first disciple to realize who it was on the shore, and he turned to Peter and said: “It’s the Lord!” And upon hearing that it was Jesus, Peter gathers himself and jumps into the sea, leaving everyone else to deal with the abundance of food that had been caught.

It seems like we have a bit of a pattern developing here for this larger than life character – this saint of God - this man whom Jesus calls the “Rock.” Faith / conviction / passion...are words which can be used to describe Peter, so can the word impulsive. I can say that because this is not the only time that Peter would quickly and boldly act without fully assessing the situation or perhaps counting the cost. He would respond in a similar way on another occasion when he affirmed his eternal and undying loyalty to Jesus when he says, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” Even when Jesus foretells Peter’s denial, Peter even more boldly says, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you;” however, we all know how that ended up...before the cock had crowed the next morning, Peter had denied Jesus three times.

Those are simply two of the many stories that come to us from the Bible about Peter – about his life and witness - and, I dare say, the more we take into account the whole of Peter’s life, the more we realize just how wonderfully human he was...and I say that, by no means to diminish Peter, but rather to give us hope! Oh, that Peter was fully human; that’s a good thing! In fact, one of the greatest attributes of this man of God is that he was continually ruled by his heart! He was passionate, and, at times, as we have seen, he was impulsive.

In this morning’s New Testament Lesson, we witness, yet again, a kind of unbridled enthusiasm. On the one hand, Peter genuinely wants to be with Jesus. On the other hand, it was as if Peter was wearing blinders that kept him from recognizing the perils of his actions. In verse 28, Peter says, “Command me to come to you on the water.” Now whether Peter realizes it or not, he is asking to come alone...to be singled out. He doesn’t say, “Jesus, call ‘us’ out.” He doesn’t say, “Let ‘us’ come to you.” No, Peter is, in a way, pushing to the front. “Command me to come to you on the water.”

But why should Peter be called first? Why not John? Ah, Peter’s eagerness need not be overstated, but neither should it be understated, because it gives us a very concrete example of how even the most sincere faith and religious emotion needs to be sobered and steadied by reflection. Imagine the awe and the wonder of the other disciples when they saw what Peter was doing? There he was, hopping over the side of the boat, and when his feet touched the water...he didn’t sink. Amazing! Miraculous!

But let’s back up just a little bit and consider what has brought us to this moment in time. Remember Jesus’ response to Peter’s initial request. Jesus didn’t give Peter explicit instructions on how to go about walking on water. When Peter asks Jesus to tell him to come to him on the water, Jesus simply says, “Come.” And that single-word answer is hardly a command. It is more like an invitation – an invitation to try. And we might wonder if it wasn’t an invitation for Peter to try in order that he might begin to learn of his own limitations – his own weaknesses. You see, Jesus was always honest with Peter. There was a cost to being a disciple. It was at times difficult to follow him. Walking on water does not come easy!

So why then did Peter begin to sink? There are a lot of answers to that question and the Bible never tells us exactly, though it does describe for us Peter’s experience which itself sheds significant light on what was happening. The Bible lets us know that when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened. It doesn’t say that the wind was blowing any harder than it

was before. It doesn't say that the waves were crashing any higher than they were when Peter had first said, "Command me to come to you on the water." But as life has taught all of us - looking at the waves from a distance and experiencing the wind from the safety of a boat is one thing, actually being blown by the wind and being surrounded by the swells...well that is another matter entirely.

It is no surprise that Peter was afraid at the close sight of danger...it is no surprise that his faith began to falter...it is no surprise that he began to sink. What I'm trying to say is that it happens to the best of us! We talk about a global pandemic and as it happens, the statistics jump off the pages, and a friend or a loved one contracts the disease, or we have to make a different decision about a child's education, or we are forced to have to continue to deal with this issue of isolation! Oh, we pray for calmer seas but they don't come fast enough, and all the while, the spray of such a tumultuous environment, it hits us in the face and we squint our eyes and sometimes we lose our focus, and our faith begins to falter, and we begin to sink. But let us never forget that it was in the midst of his fear and anguish, that he was scared and he was honest and Peter's faith guided him once again. He cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" You see, deep down inside Peter believed in Jesus' ability to make a difference, and that belief manifested itself in a sinking hand that was outstretched to the only one who could save him.

Alexander McLaren has made such a point in saying that, "The very thing that had broken Peter's faith mended it again. Fear had sunk him by making him falter in his confidence; yet, as he was sinking, the very desperation of his terror drove him back to his faith, and he cried with a shrill, loud voice, [a voice that was] heard above the roar of the boisterous wind, "Lord, save me!" McLaren goes on to say that that brief cry for help singularly blends faith and fear. There is faith in it, else Peter would not have appealed to Jesus to save him, but there is also mortal terror in it, lest he would not have felt the need to cry.

Notice how quickly and mercifully Jesus answers Peter's cry for help. Scripture tells us that Jesus, "immediately" reached out his hand and caught him. Here we have a Jesus who loves Peter and encourages Peter; he encourages his faith to be stronger. Jesus doesn't get mad at Peter for getting out of the boat. He doesn't blame him for venturing too much. Jesus' concern is that Peter believed too little.

And this brings us to another important aspect of Peter's life, because every time he proved to be utterly and completely human, every time Peter fell in his life...by God's grace, he was enabled to get back up again. And such is the case with our lives as well. For our lives are filled with faith and fear, pleasure and pain, hope and despair. In fact, more than just like priceless works of art, they are not perfect. It is a portion of our lives. They are more than just flawed because they tell a human story.

But as Dave Branon once said, "The validity of Christianity is not based on imperfect Christians, but on the perfect Christ," and that's good news for us as well! When Jesus got in the boat- whenever Jesus gets into the boat...even the wildest and fiercest storms can become calm.

In the book, *Consider Him*, there is a quote from the letters of St. Francis of Sales. St. Francis had noticed a custom of the country districts in which he lived. He had often noticed a farm servant

going across a farmyard to draw water at the well; he also noticed that, before she lifted the brimming pail, the young girl always put a piece of wood into it. One day he went out to the girl and asked her, "Why do you do that?" She looked surprised and answered, as if it were a matter of course, "Why? To keep the water from spilling...to keep it steady." Writing to a friend later he told that story and then added, "So when your heart is distressed and agitated, put the cross into the center of your heart...to keep it steady!"

I love that image. Especially given the fact that we are too prone to falter – so prone to fix our eyes on things other than the deep and saving love of Jesus Christ – so prone to be overwhelmed by the wind and the waves of life. And yet, "in every high and stormy gale" as the great hymn puts it – in every time of fear and anguish, the presence of Jesus, and the love which flows from the cross – when it enters our lives, when it comes into our presence...when Jesus gets into the boat, as it were, there is courage and there is peace and there is healing. Ah, when we do struggle...and we will...may we remember this in that cry, "Lord, save me!" While there is undoubtedly fear, there is also faith...and there is always the hand of God!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.