

FIRST LESSON: I Kings 19: 9-18  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 14: 22-33  
August 9, 2020

***“Faith and Fear”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A boy from Wisconsin named Joe had been told stories all his life about his father, grandfather and great-grandfather all walking on water on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays. So when his birthday came, he was determined to be part of this honored tradition. He and his best friend Brian rented a boat and paddled out to the middle of a lake near his home. When they got to the middle he boldly stepped out of the boat, and promptly sank. As Brian helped drag him back in the boat Joe was furious and embarrassed. As soon as he got home he went over to his grandmother’s house to tell her what happened and ask if she had an explanation. “Grandmom,” he asked, “Why can’t I walk on water like my father, my grandfather and my great grandfather did on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthdays?” “Sweetheart,” his grandmother gently explained, “That’s because they were all born in January. You were born in July.”

Have you ever been really brave for a period of time, and then when reality set in, gone into total panic? I know I have. Elijah from our Old Testament reading today had been extraordinarily bold in calling out the prophets of Ba’al, challenging them in a duel of sorts. He proclaimed that if Ba’al was the real God then Ba’al could send down fire to burn up an offering, but after days of praying and self-injuring the prophets of Ba’al had no response. Elijah then poured water all over the offering and asked God to send down fire to burn it up, and God did. It was a mountaintop moment. It was also a bloody moment, because these were brutal times and Elijah proceeded to kill a lot of the prophets of Ba’al. Where we find him in our reading today is afterward. Elijah’s courage had fled. Jezebel was out to get him, and he had convinced himself that there was no one left in Israel who was faithful. He ran for his life and hid in a cave. It took God seeking him out and speaking in a still small voice to convince him to come back into the world and get back on track.

In our New Testament reading the story picks up right where we left off last week. It is after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus still wanted some time alone to pray and regroup, so he sent the crowds away and the disciples ahead of him in the boat. Then he went up on the mountainside to be with God. It was the fourth watch of the night, which is sometime between 3 and 6 am when the encounter happened. The disciples were about 3 miles from shore and they saw what looked like an apparition walking on the water. They should have been much farther along than this. The lake was only 7-8 miles wide, but the Sea of

Galilee could become a wind tunnel and they were fighting heavy wind and waves the whole way. By this point they would have been exhausted. When they saw the figure coming towards them they thought it was a ghost. What else could it be? They were terrified. WE would be terrified. The wind was blowing, the waves were high, it was dark, and a figure appeared in the distance moving towards them across the water. But Jesus cried out to them reassuring them not to be afraid, that it was him. He must have been near enough the boat for Peter to actually see him when Peter got the brilliant idea to ask if he could walk out on the water to him. Why would he ask a thing like this? I wouldn't ask a thing like this! But with Jesus' permission he stepped out of the boat. He was fearless. Until he looked down and realized what he had done. Then he began to sink and cried out to Jesus to save him.

We're always brave, until we're not.

Faith and fear seem to go together. And there is much in this world to be fearful about. Both Elijah and Peter were afraid of imminent death, and that was a realistic fear. Some are critical of Peter for even wanting to get out of the boat to go be with Jesus, but if his request was wrong, Jesus would not have granted it. The sea was an unpredictable and chaotic force, and yet Jesus was able to conquer it. Peter wanted to be part of the transcendent reality Jesus lived in. When he stepped out of the boat he didn't do so in calm waters in a controlled setting. He stepped out into breaking waves and fierce wind. It was the wind, in fact, that distracted him causing him to take his eyes off Jesus and start to sink.

Most of us, myself included, have little fondness for danger. We're not thrill-seekers. I don't even like scary movies. But if we're not careful we can let our fears rather than our faith rule our lives. God is often found to be at work in the unpredictable places where the normal rules don't apply. God worked through Elijah dramatically, and afterward when Elijah's fear took over God gently restored him. Even great prophets are not immune to fear. Jesus walked on water, and for a short time Peter did too. When fear overcame Peter, Jesus rescued him, and gently chided him to not lose his faith.

We don't know when we will be called upon to take bold action or to step out in faith, but the only way we can prepare ourselves to be faithful when the time comes is to keep our eyes on Jesus. When we lose focus, when we think that it all depends upon us, then fear moves in. But "it", whatever the "it" is at the moment, does not all depend upon us. I like to think of it this way. I'm just staff. God's the boss. So when there is a crisis, the first thing I need to do, is consult the boss, because God will always have a way through whatever it is that is facing us. It may not always be easy, but it will always be possible with God's grace.

Like it or not, we seem to be committed to walking on water these days at Penn Wynne Presbyterian Church. As most of you know by now, we've just experienced major storm damage in the form of water. The architect did us no favors by designing a building sitting in what amounts to a moat. As more homes were built in Penn Wynne the water table rose. And then we added global warming. Now, whenever we're walking downstairs in Williams Auditorium, we are literally walking on water. At least it's not that far beneath our feet. When the storm brought torrential rains the water table rose and

water literally came up through the floor and into the walls. The new sump pump helped a great deal, but we have a lot of water-soaked plaster that needs to come down and floors that need to be dried out. It's in process, but insurance will only cover a fraction of the cost. We're "walking on water" in many ways now, trusting God to provide. The good news is that we have an endowment. The bad news is we need that endowment to pay the bills every month. We are still too small to be fully self-supporting. Should we panic? How about hiding in a cave? Or cowering from the wind and sinking? No. We're going to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and keep walking. God has got this. There are many, many people worse off than us. We have set up a fund on the website for people to give specifically towards repairing the flood damage. We will pray. We will seek God's guidance, and we will trust.

Life is messy. It's stormy sometimes, and unpredictable. We can have great successes and then collapse. We can have great faith and suddenly lose it. But God is faithful, and God will always reach out and rescue us. Regardless of our current struggles with our building, the turmoil in our nation over issues of race, the economic crisis because of the coronavirus, the pandemic itself and the political race that is only going to get nastier, we worship the one who can walk on water in the middle of a storm. When we belong to Christ the storm will never overwhelm us, because God will always be there. Amen.

I Kings 19: 9-18

**9** There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**10** He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

**11** The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. **12** After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. **13** When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**14** He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

**15** The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. **16** Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat

from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. **17** Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. **18** Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Matthew 14: 22-33

**22** Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. **23** After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone,**24** and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

**25** Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. **26** When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

**27** But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

**28** “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

**29** “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. **30** But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

**31** Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

**32** And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. **33** Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”