

No One Like Jesus: Faith 201
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 7:9b; Hebrews 11:5-6; Matthew 14:22-36

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 14:22-36. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.”

What makes impossible things impossible? Logic makes some things impossible. For example, if God is all-knowing, then it is impossible for God to miss something, to be unaware of something going on. Logically, you can't have both an unstoppable force and an immovable object – one of the two has to be false. Then there are impossibilities due to the laws of our universe. Human bodies fall through air because of gravity, unless we have a parachute, which catches the air and makes air and gravity our friends. You can't breathe water – there's plenty of oxygen in water, but we have no way to convert it like a fish does to what our body needs. There are thousands upon thousands of natural laws and constants in the way God set up the universe.

The events in today's passage defy those constants, which is why at the end of the adventure, the disciples kneel down in the boat and worship Jesus as the Son of God. This is a huge moment in Matthew's gospel because it's the first time the disciples acknowledge His divine origin. Yet for Jesus, walking on the water isn't much different than coming to Earth as a baby and growing up just like we all do.

As the One through whom God the Father made the universe, as the creator of nature, nothing is beyond nature for Him. He shapes reality. By His word, storms die down, the sick are healed, and the dead come back to life. Impossibilities? Yes, for us; that's why they are miracles. Miracles defy logical explanation. But God's stock and trade is miracles. This isn't the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus has done something that defies what we consider to be “nature's laws.” But the creator of nature has every right to define how nature works, and how it works for Him does not have to be the way it works for us.

I'm not downplaying the miracle, which is one of the most stunning things Jesus ever does. Yet if we focus exclusively on the "how" of Jesus walking on the water, we miss out on why He did it, and why the why still matters. This miracle focuses us on Jesus Himself. We see Him here both as God and our friend. We'll learn the secret to how the disciples did miracles, and how we can too – and I'll give you one hint: we can only do them when the focus isn't on us.

Where we left off last week, Jesus had fed 5,000 men – maybe double that counting women and children. The miracle showed Jesus' power and saw Jesus creating a new Israel under the Kingdom of God – an Israel based not on birth but on becoming a disciple of Jesus. Then, suddenly, He dismisses the crowds. Matthew doesn't say why, but other gospel writers report that the crowd thought about crowning Him king by force – starting a revolution. Jesus nips that in the bud by walking away from it all. Not only that, He sends His disciples away too so He can pray. Jesus had received word of John the Baptist's death and planned to get away to commune with the Father. Now He is taking the opportunity at the right time.

This is the first point today that I hope you'll keep in mind as you take your bulletin home and put it on your refrigerator and look at it during the week. It's this: *as busy as Jesus was, He stayed in constant contact with His Father.* Jesus' excursion to the mountaintop floors me. He just got done ministering to people in the midst of His deep grief over the loss of John the Baptist. He had planned to get away for a while, and instead He takes care of huge crowds.

Finally when it's over, His first thought isn't sleep – that would have been my first thought, you know, get a nap. His first thought isn't food, which is what I would have been searching for after my nap. His first thought is, "How soon can I spend time with my Father?" He even sends the disciples away first, before the crowds are gone, so that there aren't interruptions. I'm sure the disciples had a lot of questions – I would. "How did you feed all those people?" "Where did you get that power?" "How do we do that?" "Why don't you take your rightful place as Israel's Messiah?" Jesus makes sure that doesn't happen. He rids Himself of every distraction, even going onto the mountain to make certain He's not disturbed.

The first reason we don't pray or dig into our Bibles or engage God in some way is that "we're too busy." We have other reasons, too – we might feel guilty that we haven't checked in with God for a while, or angry that things haven't gone the way we expected, or confused at Bible passages that don't immediately make sense to us. But our main excuse is that we're busy.

But how busy are we? Jesus was constantly working – training, healing, teaching. He was traveling throughout Israel at a solid clip. When Peter describes Jesus' ministry in the gospel of Mark, the word he used more than any other was "immediately." There was never a point where Jesus wasn't in demand; He had to physically remove Himself often from the crowds that wanted His attention. It's not as if Jesus didn't know what it was to be busy!

There's no doubt we are busy. But busyness isn't our chief problem. People have always been busy just keeping themselves alive. What we are is distracted. Modern life is distracting. Restaurants have TV sets; minivans have TV sets; telephones are miniature TV sets! Emails, texts, tweets, posts, all want our attention all the time. Our work, family, and friends expect we are instantly available all the time and worry when we aren't.

And what are we distracted by? Almost always something unimportant. Most of what we watch would have been tabloid fodder a decade or two ago. I don't need cute kitten videos or endless recipes or do it yourself projects. I don't need to compare myself with friends I haven't seen or talked to in twenty years. I need a relationship with the living God made possible through the blood of His Son and the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit.

I encourage us to make the time to meet God each day. Don't look at Jesus' example of spending seven hours on the mountain as your next step. Jesus didn't do that every day either. The quickest way to quit meeting with God is to set a huge expectation and then feel guilty when you miss. Instead, set a goal to spend a little more time with Him this week than you did last. In your time with God, ask Him to put a fire in your heart to want more time next week.

Perhaps the biggest thing is this: don't expect results. Expect relationship. *We* want prayer to *work*. We judge the effectiveness of our prayers – did it get answered the way I wanted or not? As if we always knew what was best for us! But prayer isn't primarily about getting things we want, whether healing or material things. Don't even expect that you'll *feel* closer to God because of prayer. When you pray, you will be closer to God, whether or not you have an *experience* of it. Rely on the promise made in James 4:8 – “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” Prayer always works in that way, no matter if we receive anything we ask for. He will come closer to you when you pray.

So Jesus prays on the mountainside. He's up there most of the night. Then sometime between 3am and 6am, Jesus goes out to the disciples on the lake. What struck me is that the miracle is necessary because of the storm. The disciples are in the middle of the lake. It isn't that big - thirteen miles long and eight miles wide. It shouldn't have been hard for the disciples to pick up Jesus. But storms come up suddenly and unpredictably on the Sea of Galilee. Back in Matthew 8, Jesus calmed a storm the disciples were sure was going to kill them all. This time, the disciples are stuck out there for hours and hours, rowing just to stay where they are rather than being blown to the other side of the lake entirely.

Jesus, in His divinity, knew the disciples would face this storm. Why does He put them in harm's way? Is it cruel for Him to make the disciples face a scary, sleepless night? I would suggest the opposite – Jesus has blessed them, preparing everything for them to see a special miracle, one proving that He is the Son of God. Here's our second take-home thought: *Jesus is less likely to take away our troubles than He is to meet us in the middle of them.*

In my mind's eye, for some reason, I imagine clear skies and Jesus kind of skimming across the surface of the lake. I don't know why. (When I look at the picture on the front of our bulletin, that doesn't look much like a raging storm to me!) But this is like something out of a horror movie. The storm is so intimidating that when Jesus comes to the disciples, they think a spirit is after them. Can you imagine a cloaked being coming at you at four in the morning after you've fought the sea for hours? How tall are the waves Jesus crosses? They are terrified! Jesus tells them not to be afraid for good reason!

Yet it's in the huge storm that Jesus comes to them. Had there been no storm, there would have been no miracle. The disciples would have simply come and picked Jesus up. And the storm itself heightens the miracle – Jesus navigates to the boat as the wind and water rages around Him. Someone might try and explain away feeding 5,000 people through some trick – but you can't explain this miracle away. One can deny it happened, but to explain it away takes more faith than to believe it. For the disciples, it is proof that the Son of God is among them.

Do we want our troubles taken away? Sure we do, every last one of us, whatever troubles we have. Our default desire is to be happy. And that desire is not wrong. Whatever we might think, God desires our happiness too. The problem is not the desire for happiness. It's that we look for happiness in all the wrong places. What we miss is that there is no true, lasting happiness that does not come from holiness – from God's likeness, found in Him and reflected in us when we follow Him and the Holy Spirit reshapes us to be more like Him.

God forms us through struggle. We are not shaped so much by our successes as we are by our failures. It is in those places where we are humbled and brought to our knees that we look up and see God there. Job lost everything, but it's after losing everything that God answers him. Jacob heads back to meet his brother Esau after years and years, certain that his death awaits him, and he meets God along the way. Peter loses everything when he denies Jesus, yet after he is humbled by his failure, Jesus restores him to lead his church.

The Bible is full of stories of God's people meeting God at the ragged edge. Some are rescued in this life; others only receive their blessing on the other side of eternity. But in the midst of it all, God comes to them. Notice that the mere presence of Jesus doesn't stop the storm; the storm doesn't end until Jesus gets into the boat. The promise isn't that your boat will stop sinking; the promise is that Jesus is there even as it appears all hands might be lost.

Are you looking for God in the midst of your storm, or are you trying to row your way out of it and bailing water out of your boat? Do you want to be saved from your troubles, or do you want Jesus no matter what the troubles are? Because Jesus is salvation in and of Himself. We've got to determine whether we just want safety, or if we want Jesus. We will never truly be safe without Jesus. But whether we live or we die, whether we sink or swim or walk on the water, if we know Jesus as Savior and Lord, He will save us for all eternity.

There's one last idea I want to focus on together as we finish up today: *miracles happen in and through us when we are so focused on Jesus that we forget the idea of the impossible.* When Peter knows it's Jesus coming, he asks Jesus to command him to come to Him on the water. The wording is ambiguous; Peter is not asking Jesus to prove Himself. Peter is as much saying, "*Since* it's you, command me to come." Peter is *incredibly* bold! Remember, he's been out battling this storm for hours too. But for a brief, shining moment, Peter is so happy that Jesus is there that his entire attention is on Him, and he asks Jesus, "Will you let me join you out there?" And Jesus says, "Sure!"

And you know what? Peter is really successful! He is so close to Jesus that when he has his lapse, Jesus' hand can immediately snatch him from danger. Peter experiences the miraculous. He walks on water. No one else in the history of mankind ever does this again. It's fantastic! What's even more interesting is that he never thinks twice about the water. He never says, "I can't do this." He does not sink because it *is* impossible, and he doesn't sink because he *thinks* it is impossible.

So why does Peter finally fail? He takes his eyes off of Jesus. He sees the storm and the fear rises in him again. Suddenly, his feet are soaked and the fringe of his cloak is going under. Isn't it funny that he doesn't immediately drop through the water like a stone? He's losing his focus on Jesus; he's hit by doubt. That's why he starts to sink.

That's also why Jesus gives him a gentle scolding. Every time I read this passage, my first thought is, "Gosh, Jesus, give him some credit! That was incredible faith!" So why doesn't Jesus give Peter a high five and say, "Good job! You did your best!"? It's this: *the kind of faith Peter displays for that brief moment is what God made us to always experience.* The faith Peter has momentarily is supposed to be our normal mode of operation.

Talking about faith in Luke 17:9-10, Jesus says a master doesn't have to thank a servant who is only doing his job. The servant shouldn't expect it. In fact, He says, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Jesus wants us to live with this kind of faith in Him all the time – not to look at the storms of life and grow afraid, but to keep our eyes right on Him. When we focus on Him and He becomes the center of who we are, not only do we delight in Him, not only do we find comfort in Him, not only do we bring Him glory, but the miraculous and unexpected becomes more and more of a reality in our lives.

When we turn to the book of Acts, as we read about the first twenty-five years of Jesus' church, we see miracles all the time – the sick healed, the dead raised. And it's because through the Holy Spirit, the apostles are no longer focused on themselves, their position or rank in the Kingdom of God. They are all about spreading the joy of Jesus. Miracles happen because God is working through them, and God is working through them because their hearts are on Him. They aren't stunned by miracles. They do miracles because servants of the King of creation can do what He does, acting as His ambassadors, focused on lifting Him up. Don't think that miracles can't happen today. Keep your gaze on Jesus, and they'll happen in ways seen and unseen.

Jesus' walk upon the water led the disciples to worship Him, glorifying Him as God's own Son. May we do the same today, determined to stay close to God, looking for Him in amidst our storms, and focusing on Him that we might enjoy His presence and have His Spirit work His wonders within and through us.