

Eyes on Me

July 5, 2020

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Part 1

I don't know about you, but Peter has got to be my favorite disciple. All throughout the Gospels we see this guy who so desperately wants to follow Jesus, but time and time again Peter keeps messing things up. He's constantly putting his foot in his mouth, he's impulsive, and he keeps failing to see and understand the bigger picture. I think the reason why I like him so much is because he's so relatable. We can clearly see that Peter's heart beats for Jesus, but he's human and he makes mistakes and falls short – just like us. And in our passage this morning we see Peter do something remarkable, and then fumbles with it.

Starting in Matthew 14:22, Jesus had just finished feeding the 5000 and told His disciples to get in the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the people and spent some time alone praying. Later in the evening, when the boat was far from shore, the wind and the waves started beating against it. Even for experienced fisherman, this would have been a rough night. Then, as dawn approached (somewhere between 3-6am), the disciples spot a mysterious figure out on the waves. Immediately they jump to the conclusion that it's a ghost and start to panic. But Jesus' words powerfully transcend the noise of the wind, the waves, and the disciple's panicked cries. "Take Courage, It is I, Don't be afraid." ~~In other words: "relax, don't be scared. I'm here"~~

Almost predictably, Peter pipes up and says "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." This sounds like a very "Peter" thing to say doesn't it – and I've wondered where this request came from. Maybe Peter was thinking back to the time in Matthew 8 when they were on their boat in the middle of storm and Jesus demonstrated His power over nature by calming the storm. Perhaps being unsure, Peter wanted some sort of assurance that it was in-fact Jesus (and not a ghost) by asking something seemingly impossible. Or maybe Peter (in a way that reminds me of something one of JR highs would do) saw an opportunity to try something really cool and didn't want to miss out – but in any case, Jesus tells Peter to come.

Imagine with me Peter scrambling out of the boat and putting one foot on the water... then the other... and there he is standing there in the middle of the lake. With the waves swelling at his feet and the wind swirling around him, Peter begins to walk towards Jesus. How Incredible! I can only imagine the thoughts going through Peter's mind...through the disciple's minds! If this were to happen today, you can be sure the disciples would have their phones out recording this for YouTube or TikTok And for Peter's sake it's a good thing they didn't, because things quick started to go south. Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus and starts to focus on the wind and the waves and, again almost predictably, Peter starts to sink ... and cries out for Jesus to save him. Immediately, and also predictably, Jesus reaches out His hand and grabs Peter. "You of little faith," Jesus says, "why did you doubt?"

Now at first reading, Jesus' words almost seem to be a tone of reprimand to them, don't they? It seems like Jesus may be condemning Peter for his lack of faith, for his doubt, and for... well you guessed it... messing up again. Something I think many of us may assume that Jesus says to us when we fall into sin and come to him again and again and again for forgiveness...But is that what Jesus is meaning here?

In my research into this passage I couldn't find a conclusive answer to the tone and inflection of Jesus' words, so I would like to offer my own thoughts on what I think Jesus may have meant

First, Jesus said Peter had little faith, but let's not mistake this as Jesus saying Peter had no faith. After all, Peter was the only one who had the boldness, the courage, and the indeed faith to step out of the boat in the middle of a rough sea. Further, it was Peter himself who made the request. Peter had faith, but it was still small and fickle at this point.

Jesus also asks Peter "why did you doubt?" – and I don't think Jesus was asking that question so much for his own edification, as I'm pretty sure Jesus knew what exactly happened. Peter had a small amount of faith as he made his big request, and as Jesus saw firsthand, Peter took his eyes off of Him, started to focus on the wind and the waves, and he began to sink as fear replaced his faith. It seems to me then that Jesus was asking this question more for Peter to reflect on. Working with youth I've learned that one of the best ways to teach is not to just lecture or give the answers but to ask good questions that help them think through the material. And I think that's perhaps what Jesus was doing here – and I think Peter would have spent the rest of the trip thinking through that question – why did I doubt? Why did I take my eyes off Jesus?

Was Jesus frustrated with Peter? Possibly. But I don't think Jesus was raking Peter over the coals though. I also think that despite sinking, Jesus probably admired Peter's desire to attempt this to begin with. Remember, Jesus called Simon to become Peter – the rock on which he would build His church. He didn't take Simon on as a disciple because of who he currently was but because he knew who Peter would *become* through the empowering of the Spirit. And such a process would take time, patience, understanding, and an occasional drying off 😊

The passage ends by mentioning that those in boat worshipped Jesus and remarked "truly you are the Son of God!" As a result of this experience, the disciple's faith increased, God was glorified, and Peter learned a valuable lesson he'd never forget.

Part 2

Now I mentioned that Peter is my favorite disciple – and I think this is probably my favorite story of his - in part because in my own way I lived a version this story when I was in my late teens and want to share that story with you as kind of a case study. And since this part of the sermon has to do with my calling to youth ministry, I thought it fitting to record this here in the youth room.

When I was in high school, I really had no idea what I wanted to do after I graduated. And if you were to ask me what my plans were, I would have likely given you a different answer each time.

It was a very challenging time in my life, I had this enormous decision to make, and I was feeling a lot of pressure. I was also filled with uncertainty, stress, and doubt – what if I can't figure it out? What if I can't find anything? What if God doesn't have a plan for my life? It was kind of like being the with disciples in the boat when the wind and waves were battering them (Matt 14:24)

Graduation came and went, and I was still not sure what I was supposed to do. So after a lot of thought and prayer (and for lack of any better options) I got a retail job so I could start making money, I went back to school to do some upgrading, and I started volunteering at my church's youth group.

During that year I also started to investigate some of the career choices I entertained in high school – and for various reasons, none of them worked out. And quickly my year off turned to two, and then three. Then late one night I was talking with my mom and was once again lamenting about not knowing what I was supposed to do and sharing my fear and frustration. And she told me something I will never forget: “You know you seem to be your happiest when you are working with the youth, and you seem to be good at it, have you ever thought about becoming a youth pastor?” At that moment it was light bulb went on – it was literally my AHA moment and I started to feel a bit excited! It was like I was seeing Jesus out on the waves and there was hope for the first time in a long while. However, like the disciples, I had some fear and doubt: was this really Jesus (cf. Matt 14:25-26,28) or was this going to be just another failed option in a long list of potential careers?

Over the coming weeks, I started to look into what being a youth pastor involved and what training and education I'd need. More and more I felt like this is what I was supposed to do so I took a big step of faith and committed to pursuing this calling. Like Peter, I had stepped out of the boat and was on the water (Matt 14:29). It was exciting and exhilarating, but also like Peter, there was some trouble ahead.

I ended up applying at Rocky Mountain College in Calgary as it seemed like a good fit. I thought I was doing the right thing but then I got a letter...from the government – and you know nothing good ever comes from a letter from the government...it was about my student loans... and right there in black and white they told me I wasn't going to get the money I needed for school – that they'd only give me about ½ the amount I needed. I didn't know what I was going to do or how I was going to afford this. I spent weeks praying and trying to figure out where I'd get the money. And I couldn't... and I had to withdraw my application. It was incredibly discouraging... here I thought God was leading me to be in youth ministry and now that dream was fading. Then came the doubts...maybe I wasn't meant to be a youth pastor...maybe I misunderstood what God was trying to say to me...maybe I wasn't going to find a meaningful career and be stuck in retail for the rest of my life. Like Peter, I was focusing on the wind and the waves in my life, and I started sinking in the water (Matt 14:30)

Fall was approaching and I was at a loss at what to do. Then one fateful Friday night, I showed up early to youth group and while hanging out I happened to notice this Christian newspaper sitting there... it was their fall bible school edition. I started looking through it and landed on

the page for Briercrest Bible College, which happened to offer a full degree through distance learning...for almost half the cost as in-person. Not only would this allow me to pursue my calling, but I could live at home for free, I could keep working the job I had, and I could keep serving at the youth group I was at. It all sounded really good so I decided to apply.

Again I found myself excited but that excitement started to wane when I saw the application package – there was a lot to it, I needed more references than I had, I needed to get the church board to sponsor me, oh... and I only had TWO weeks to get it done! I started to feel like I was sinking...again, but once more God spoke through my mom when she said “if this is what you are meant to do, God will make it happen.” So I stepped out in faith again and over those couple weeks everything (and I mean everything) fell into place. It was honestly amazing watching it happen and that September I started classes. It was like Jesus had pulled me out of the water and was saying “where was your faith? I had it all figured out, you just had to trust me” (cf. Matt 14:31)

Over the years, this passage and the story of my calling has been an anchor for me as I face new situations and challenges. In particular the phrase “eyes on me” has taken on special meaning and has stayed with me as a reminder when I’m stressed or worried or faltering – for me to keep my eyes on Jesus – who I know is with me in my storms and is asking me to focus on Him and trust Him.

Part 3

As you can see, I’m back at home. I wanted to record the final part of my sermon here as we’re going to be discussing four things we learn about God from this passage that we’ll be living out at home in our day to day lives

God comes to us in the storms of life

Matthew 28:20 has always been my go-to verse when things get tiugh. I find great peace in knowing that Jesus is always with us – even, and *especially*, during the storms of life. In the passage we read we saw that Jesus came to the disciples as they were in the battered boat; in my story I can see how Jesus was at work at each turn. Its good for us to know and to remember that Jesus doesn’t send us off into the void to fend for ourselves – He is powerfully and faithfully present – and as Paul reminds us, nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love. So let’s remember Jesus’s words in v. 27: “Don’t be afraid...take courage, I am here” (NLT)

God sometimes asks us to step out in faith

There are times in life when we encounter times of fear and uncertainty – something we’ve all recently experienced with the covid situation – and God asks us to trust him as we walk on those stormy waters. There are other times we may sense a call from God to try something new, to leave what’s known to head towards something unknown, or to journey with Him only seeing one step at a time. In such times, we need to trust in the faithfulness and goodness of our Lord, who will never lead us astray or into a situation He can’t handle. And we can also find hope in knowing that God uses those tough times and storms to mould and shape us to be more like him as Romans 5 reminds us.

God comes to our aid when we start to sink

When Peter started to sink, he immediately cried out to Jesus to save him. He didn't try to rescue himself or rely on his own strength to get back on the boat – Peter knew he was in over his head. And of course, Jesus immediately reached out to help Peter – He wasn't going to let him drown. He's not going to let us drown either. John 10 reminds us that Jesus is our good shepherd – and when we stumble, when we fall, when we start to sink – and we will, Jesus lovingly comes to our aid. Through His Spirit Jesus strengthen us, binds our wounds, restores our soul, and gives us rest. In short, Jesus takes good care of us because we are His, and He is ours.

God doesn't give up on us

Despite his missteps, his failures, and his awkwardness, Peter never gave up – he kept trying to get it right and kept growing in Jesus. We also see that Jesus never gave up on Peter – even after Peter disowns and disserts him later on. Jesus knew Peter's heart was in the right place and that in time (and through the empowering of the Spirit), Peter's actions would come to match his authentic, genuine, and sincere love for God and desire to follow Jesus. We are works in progress and Jesus understands that.

As we wrap up, it's no secret that in this life we will face storms of hardship, trial, and uncertainty. There will be times when we're scared, things seem hopeless, and we're beyond weary. But if we follow Hebrews 12:2 and keep our eyes firmly rooted on Jesus then we really don't need to be afraid. Jesus is always present, and He's got this. And not only that but sometimes it's in those storms of life, when Jesus calls us to walk with Him on the deepest waters, that we get a chance to see and experience the grace and the might of God in ways we wouldn't otherwise. So let me leave you with this question... where in your life is Jesus saying to you "eyes on me"

Prayer:

We thank you Lord for your love, for your care, and for your presence. We thank you that you are always with us and that you'll never leave or abandon us. And as we go through life and encounter different storms and times of difficulty, may we keep our eyes firmly fixed on you. May we not rely on our own strength or understanding, but walk in faith as we trust in your goodness and faithfulness.

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