



***Theme: Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew – Mountains and the King
“Mountains and Fear”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

March 21-22, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-34

VIDEO Sermon Starter

SLIDE Mountains and Fear

Today we continue our journey through the gospel of Matthew for the **season of Lent, which is the 40 days and 7 Sundays before we get to Easter**. We had picked the scripture for today from Matthew 14 before we had any inkling about the pandemic we are facing, and this part of the gospel is profound for us in the times we are facing.

GRAPHIC Meditation Moments

For this series, I really hope you will use the **Meditation Moments that are available online. It gives you a reading plan for Matthew’s Gospel** covering 4 chapters each week. I think as followers of Jesus, we should read through at least one Gospel each year, so I hope you will take this journey with us. You can find those on our website or app. I am hopeful that you will learn some things today, so I would invite you, as you watch at home or online, to get out a pen and paper to write with.

Chapter 14 is the turning point, the linchpin in many ways, of

Matthew's gospel. There are 28 chapters in Matthew so 14 is halfway through and it's at this point we learn about the death of Jesus' friend and cousin, John the Baptizer. We're going to focus mostly today on Jesus walking on water later in Matthew 14, but this time in the life of Jesus begins with **storm of grief as John the Baptizer** is murdered by the state. Jesus then **walks into a storm of hunger**, with thousands needing food and we then have the miracle of the feeding of those who have nothing to eat.

He then tells the disciples that he will finish with the people and spend more time with them. Jesus tells the disciples he will catch up with them tomorrow. He tells them to get in the boat and head out across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. He realizes there is a storm and it is going to get dark eventually. Here we read what happens after Jesus feeds the crowds in Matthew 14.

BIBLE 22 Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. 23 After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

GRAPHIC Hillside above Bethsaida

Here is what this hillside looks like today as you look down upon the Sea of Galilee above Bethsaida, with the Jordan River coming out from the right into the bay of the lake. **Jesus self isolates and prays.** I imagine he is thinking of his friend John and grieving in the mountains as he prays. This story in many ways begins a journey of grief for Jesus and it speaks to us today as we experience loss in the midst of the pandemic. We began 2020 with a sermon series on change and we recognized that the first step of change is loss.

This is the first thing I would say to you as your pastor we need to remember in moments like these, where change is forced upon us.

SLIDE Acknowledge Grief

I would encourage you at some point soon to name and write down those things you have lost in the past few weeks. We've lost social connection, human contact, in person church, weddings, funerals, employment, income, vacations and many other plans. One of the gifts of isolation is it gives a chance to reflect and pray and think. What is so powerful about this story in Matthew's gospel is what happens next, after Jesus has spent time praying.

GRAPHIC Google Earth Sea of Galilee ZOOM IN

On this map, we can see the 7-mile journey from one side of the lake to the other. If you have the wind behind your back, the sails will give you a boost and you can make it in about an hour. If not, you must row the boat and it will take you two hours to get there. As we traveled across the lake last year around this time, this is the scene moving across the water.

VIDEO Sea of Galilee

As the storm comes up, they are blown off course and end up heading south into the deepest part of the lake where it is **around 140 feet deep**. As near as we can tell, this story takes place in this region. I remind you that Jesus and his friends had a **20-foot boat which was about 7 ½ feet wide**. We know that because a boat from the time of Jesus has been found at Gennesaret where this story takes place. Two Jewish fishermen loved - not only fishing - but looking for ancient artifacts. Their dream was to find a boat in the Sea of Galilee from the ancient times.

In 1986, there was a severe drought and the water levels dropped to record levels, making the seashore move back around 100 feet. These two fishermen saw timbers sticking out of the mud. As they excavated around it, they discovered the hull of a boat. They contacted an archaeologist who determined that boats like this had not existed for at least **1500 years**. They carefully protected it and perfectly restored it. It is now being housed in the museum which we visit on most of our trips to the Holy Land. **Carbon dating showed it to be from 50 BCE to 50 A.D.,** which would've been the time of Jesus.

VIDEO The Jesus Boat

Let me take you to this place so you can see it. This is the excavating which brought the boat out of its location. And here is the boat in the museum. This boat is 26 ½ feet long and 7 ½ feet wide. It's preserved in the kibbutz at Gennesaret. Some of you have been able to see it when we traveled there. They built models of the boat and some of them are sea bearing. Today, you can go out on the lake on these boats and they are used by fishermen today like this one. When you are on these boats one of the things you learn is, **they don't have lifejackets!**

Have you ever been on the water in a boat when it began to storm? What do you do? You head back to shore as quickly as possible. The disciples were several miles away and they couldn't do that because they had no motor and no life vests! Here's what we read happens.

BIBLE *24 Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves.*

VIDEO Waves on Sea of Galilee

I thought you might appreciate seeing these waves on the Sea of Galilee which someone captured and put on YouTube. Remember that this is **happening in the middle of the night as the disciples were rowing across the Sea of Galilee**. At night the lake can be beautiful if it's calm, but in a storm, when the wind is pushing you further away from the land and there is lightning and thunder, with waves washing over the boat, it would be terrifying.

The deepest part of the lake is called the abyss, and the Jews believed that it was so deep it went to the underworld. There was a portal from the underworld where the **demons** lived and entered into the world. That's why the sailors on the Sea of Galilee didn't like to cross the center of the lake, because it was passing over the portal to the underworld. Therefore, you stayed close to the shoreline, but the disciples are pushed out into the middle, over the abyss. We are meant to be scared for the disciples as we read the story. Here's what happens next in the story in Matthew 14.

BIBLE 24 Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. 25 About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

If it's three in the morning, that means **they have been rowing away for several hours** and they realize they could drown. They were already terrified, but now they were so frightened that they screamed because they were over the vents that lead to the underworld - and here comes the ghost! **They don't know that it's Jesus but think it's one of those spirits or demons rising up from the abyss.** That ghost is

coming to get them, and they are frightened from all the ghost stories people told them as they sat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as young children.

BIBLE ***27 But Jesus spoke to them at once. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Take courage. I am here!”***

Don’t be afraid, take courage, I am here! Those are words we need to hear today as we are in the midst of dealing with the coronavirus, don’t you think? The Gospel writers record this story not just because it happened 2000 years ago but because it happens in our lives all the time. This is about what happens when we go through the storms in life that inevitably come our way, and the role that Jesus plays for us. How many times has life pushed us off course and we have found ourselves frightened and feeling alone? **Jesus comes into our storm, into this storm, and says, “Do not be afraid! Take courage. I am here.”**

Each week we receive prayer requests. Some of you fill out the prayer request forms and turn them in during worship. We do prayer quilts at the end of worship several times a month and we read about people dealing with cancer or traumatic accidents. I’ve received prayer requests for people struggling with depression or mental illness and for children who have gone off the deep end. I read about addictions and people who have been abandoned by their spouses. We lose loved ones and the bottom falls out. We lose jobs and we pray for people who need transplants. Every prayer request is a storm, and every one of us will experience them at some point in our lives.

You may be experiencing a storm now? We are holding on, white knuckled, hoping to simply hang on until the calm comes and we can hear a word of hope. This story is meant to tell us today and every day

that when the storm is upon us and it feels like waves are crashing around us and we are not sure we will survive, Jesus walks on water to come and meet us in that place and gets into our boat. In this case, Jesus eventually calms the storm, but remember that Peter got out and walked on water even as the storm was still raging.

SLIDE Jesus comes to us in the storm

The virus is still around. The cancer may still be there. Your spouse has still left. You may still struggle with mental illness. Your loved one is still gone. But Jesus is walking with us in the storm. **Somehow, that makes us a little less terrified as we keep our eyes on Jesus.** The Christian spiritual life is about singing and raising our voices to God. We pray and we read Scriptures and we experience the Holy Spirit and we trust that God is with us. Jesus still comes to us on the water, when we are riding out the storms.

BIBLE *28 Then Peter called to him, “Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water.”*

This part of the story makes me laugh a bit because it seems like a strange and idiotic request. No offense to Simon Peter, but if Jesus is walking on the water towards me, **I would ask him to get in the boat!** I would throw him a life preserver or reach out my hand if needed to pull him in. **But here’s Peter, in the middle of the storm, in the middle of the night, above the abyss, and he volunteers to walk out on the water! That dude is crazy!**

Peter has the audacity to make the strange request which is probably why he became the leader of the apostles. None of the other disciples say it, but **they are probably watching to see if he will drown.** It seems like **Peter recognizes that the action is outside the boat**, along with Jesus, and he wants to be part of the action. Peter doesn’t just

climb out of the boat but asks Jesus to tell him to do it. **If Jesus doesn't command you to get out of the boat in the middle of the storm, it might be better to stay in.** But, if Jesus commands you, then maybe there's a chance of walking on water!

SLIDE ***29 "Yes, come," Jesus said. So, Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus.***

Can you imagine going over the side of that boat and what kind of courage or stupidity it would've taken? He stepped out, looked at Jesus and began walking on the water. I imagine the disciples are yelling at him to stay in the boat, but Peter gets out. I think there are several things from this passage that would be helpful for us to know in today's world

SLIDE **Not everything I hear is true!**

You are going to hear lots of stuff in today's world, and some of it is important, but don't get sucked into some of the anxiety provoking rhetoric. I have had several people send me things that were quick fixes or exaggerated facts and it's important not to let that keep our eyes focused on Christ. I think of Proverbs 14:15-16 which tells us.

BIBLE ***15 Only simpletons believe everything they're told! The prudent carefully consider their steps. 16 The wise are cautious and avoid danger; fools plunge ahead with reckless confidence.***

We wash our hands, do some social distancing and take care of ourselves, but we don't take virus tests from people going door to door and we don't believe every post on Facebook which gives us a quick and easy cure. We listen to doctors and experts and work together to **stop the spread of the virus, but we don't spread rumors. Several**

people insisted to me the day they canceled March Madness that the virus was now in Durango, and I got a bit freaked out. Yes, your pastor got freaked out! They seemed like reputable sources, but we still have not seen a confirmed case in our County. We can easily act like fools when we let news we have not checked get the best of us.

We often focus on this part of the story that happens next.

BIBLE *30 But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.*

31 Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

The word that Peter uses is literally translated, **"Rescue."** The Godfather of black gospel music, Thomas Dorsey, wrote a hymn in 1932 that most of us know. He wrote it in the aftermath of his wife Nettie dying during the birth of his first son, who also died during childbirth. He almost lost his mind and didn't think he would survive the ordeal. He called it the most horrible thing he could ever imagine. He lost the love of his life and his only child the same moment. As he was struggling and wrestling with the loss, this story of Peter crying out to Jesus came to him. Do you know the song? It's a song that Dr. Martin Luther King would sing while in prison.

**SLIDES Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on through the light
Take my hand, precious Lord
And lead me home**

Sometimes, this is our only prayer and all we have the strength to other, **“Rescue me! I don’t know if I can make it without you.”**

It might appear that Jesus is chastising Peter when he said, “You have so little faith. Why did you doubt me?” But **I don’t think it was chastising** because we can’t always tell tone of voice when we read the Scriptures. I think it was more like, **“Oh Peter, my heart is sad for you. Why did you look away? You didn’t need to worry. You were going to be fine. I had you all along. Let’s get in the boat.”** I don’t think Jesus is chastising Peter because Peter actually got out of the boat, when the rest of the disciples simply sat there like potatoes. Here’s what happens next.

BIBLE ***32 When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 Then the disciples worshiped him. “You really are the Son of God!” they exclaimed.***

34 After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. 35 When the people recognized Jesus, the news of his arrival spread quickly throughout the whole area, and soon people were bringing all their sick to be healed. 36 They begged him to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched him were healed.

Remember that in Matthew’s gospel, every one of the stories is meant to tell us who Jesus is and why he is the Messiah, Lord and Savior. We learn from Simon Peter that to be a follower of Jesus means that we are flawed and faulty, but also faithful. We also learn something about Jesus - and that’s why this story is wrapped in miracles. It starts with Jesus feeding thousands and then he calms the waves and then he gets out of the boat and all who touched him were

healed.

Jesus was a carpenter from Nazareth, so why do people worship him in this story? The word “worship” used in this story can be used as we talk about worshipping God, but it also can mean paying homage to someone who has just saved your bacon. But they then add this phrase, “You really are the Son of God.” Remember that these 1st century Jewish Christians didn’t understand the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus that the church would work out in theology over the next 300 years. They didn’t fully understand the Trinity and that God was Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What they did see was Jesus doing something that only God could do. God was somehow present in Jesus, his life and his teachings and the miracles. Somehow, when they look at Jesus, they saw God. Why did they say that? There are a few reasons.

SLIDE *Ego eimi* = “I Am”

When Jesus says, “Take courage, I am here,” there is a Greek word that is used for that phrase. We add the “here” because it seems to make sense, but that’s an add-on in the English. It really is just this phrase that you might remember hearing before, “I Am.” Do you remember when Moses saw the burning bush and God says to him through the burning bush to go to the children of Israel and tell them I am going to deliver them from slavery? Moses asks, “What God shall I say sent me? What is your name?”

God says, “I Am.” In Hebrew is Yahweh, the personal name for God. Remember when we started this series, we talked about Jesus as the new Moses, because this book of Matthew was written primarily to Jewish Christians. We are meant to make that connection in this simple phrase as part of the story. Jesus comes walking on the water and tells

us to take courage because, “I Am.”

This is **also the second time these fishermen have seen Jesus calm the wind and the waves**. The first time, Jesus was sleeping in the back of the boat as they were traveling across the Sea of Galilee. As they are traveling, the storm comes up and no one wants to wake Jesus up because he was taking a really good nap. Not even the waves and the thunder and lightning and wake him!

They finally shake him awake and say, **“Jesus, wake up! Don’t you realize we are going to drown? How can you sleep at a time like this?”** Jesus basically tells them, **“Do you really think if I am in the boat with you, you’re going to drown?”** He then stands up and he commands the wind and the waves to be silent. We are meant to remember that these disciples were fishermen and sailors and they were familiar with being on the water. They knew the Jewish Scriptures about what it meant to be on the water from when they were children. Listen to these words from 89:8. Remember that when you read the phrase and, “Oh LORD God,” it refers to I Am or Yahweh.

BIBLE ***8 O Lord God of Heaven’s Armies! Where is there anyone as mighty as you, O Lord? You are entirely faithful. 9 You rule the oceans. You subdue their storm-tossed waves. 10 You crushed the great sea monster.***

The great sea monsters, from the abyss. And who is it that calm the wind and the waves? Psalm 107 has several verses focused on sailors.

BIBLE ***23 Some went off to sea in ships, plying the trade routes of the world. 24 They, too, observed the Lord’s power in action, his impressive works on the deepest seas. 25 He spoke, and the winds rose, stirring up the waves. 26 Their***

ships were tossed to the heavens and plunged again to the depths; the sailors cringed in terror.

BIBLE 28 “Lord, help!” they cried in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. 29 He calmed the storm to a whisper and stilled the waves. 30 What a blessing was that stillness as he brought them safely into harbor!

In Job 9:8 we read these words.

BIBLE *God alone has spread out the heavens and marches on the waves of the sea.*

Somehow, in this person who walked on the water and joined them in the boat, God had come to them. This is what we believe as followers of Jesus. We see God in Jesus Christ. God came to us, Emmanuel, in human flesh, so we could see who God is and understand the character in the heart and the will and the love of God. When we look at Jesus, we see all these things because we see God. That’s what the disciples realized that night, as did those who met him on shore in the midst of their fear.

As we close, let me remind you of several things that come out of this text that point to who we might be in the pandemic we are facing.

SLIDE **Not everyone is at equal risk.**

The most vulnerable are over 60 with pre-existing condition such as diabetes, heart issues, cancer, etc. We need to be most careful about protecting this group. We want to serve them. Younger people are being asked to help ensure that others are safe.

SLIDE **This will pass, and we’ll go through it together.**

Every storm ends. Every virus ends. In the midst of the storm and

virus, we trust God. We do the common-sense things, but every virus is a bell curve. God never promises we won't experience things like pandemics. I think of these words attributed to the disciple Peter who got out of the boat in 1 Peter 4:12-13.

BIBLE **12 Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. 13 Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.**

That brings me to this important truth to remember.

SLIDE **God's love is steadfast and unchanging.**

We should focus on what is unchanging. Changes will always come and go. That's life. What does not change is God's love which is steadfast. God see it all. God cares about it all. God has the power to change it all. God always acts out of goodness towards humanity. God's plan is better than mine. God will never stop loving me.

SLIDE **God will go with us through it all.**

One of the best verses to read during moments like these are found in Isaiah 43:2.

BIBLE ***2 When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.***

Listen less to internet and more to God. Join us daily for devotionals and use this time to remember God's presence. If we do that, we also will remember this truth.

SLIDE This is NOT the end of the story...the worst thing is never the last thing.

I always say this to you at the end of the Easter service, but it seems appropriate to say now. We win in the end no matter what happens as we are reminded in 2 Corinthians 4: 8-9 and 14.

BIBLE *8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. 9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.*

BIBLE *14 We know that God, who raised the Lord Jesus, will also raise us with Jesus and present us to himself together with you.*

We are meant to live with a new focus. I received this email yesterday from a church member that reminded me what it means to have a different focus. ***I have come to appreciate the time spent sharing Glory Sightings whenever we gather. My wife and I have been noting that in this worldwide mess we are witnessing glory sightings on a daily basis. We have spent more time on FaceTime with grandkids (and kids), communicated with friends that live elsewhere, watched acts of kindness on the news everyday, and have seen creative ways to share love and peace. Watching Italians singing to each other from city balconies and Spaniards singing Happy Birthday to a confined octogenarian helps bring God's light to the world. Seeing members of our community in Durango serving each other with their spare time. We can see people being Jesus Christ to the world and that brings joy.***

That brings me to this last point for us to remember, which includes being like Peter when we can and getting out of the boat,

entering the storm to serve with Jesus. **We wash our hands and get out of the boat!**

SLIDE God is still at work now

Sometimes we are called to enter the storm. Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity* reminds us **of two deadly epidemics in the Roman empire in 165 and 251. It was followers of Jesus served the sick, needy and ill. Sacrificial care is part of following Jesus. God is not here just to protect or carry me but use me if I am not in the vulnerable category.** Even those at home will have opportunities to serve. This is an open door and opportunity and I have no doubt that new ministries will start out of this so call or email the office in the days ahead if you are feeling called.

I hope you will take these things away from our time together thinking about Jesus, the mountains and the miracles and what it means that his kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. **When we look at Jesus, we see God, because he is the one who calms the wind and the waves.** Jesus is demonstrating who he is in the midst of these stories.

Being a person of faith means we are called to step outside of our boat and move beyond their comfort zone. We are meant to take risks and pushback against our fears. The real adventure is found when we climb outside of our boat and keep our eyes focused on Jesus. When we do the things we feel like saying “no” to, and we are willing to say “yes” then real adventure in life is found, and we experience awesomeness!

Finally, I invite you to remember **that in the midst of the storms, Christ walks with you.** When we are scared and we don’t know how we are going to make it through the waves that are crashing around us,

Jesus still walks on water and meets us in that place. Jesus will calm the wind and waves, so we discover life in him.

When we get those storms in the winter with hail and thunder and lightning, it can be a bit disconcerting. We had one of those a few weeks back as I sat on our couch and watched the lightning coming down. Our little dog Jasper and even our big dog Jack got pretty nervous and jumped up on the couch with me. We have a thunder shirt that one you gave us. It wraps around him and is meant to make him feel safe and comfortable.

GRAPHIC Jasper in his Thunder shirt

He still shakes when he's wearing it, mostly from the trauma of me putting a thunder shirt on him, so he gets up on the couch and he curls up on my lap. He was shaking, so I put my hands on top of him and pretty soon he stopped quivering. Then he began breathing much more easily and eventually fell asleep. The storm was still raging, but what changed was that he was by his master. If the master is there, somehow it will be okay. I think we are meant to learn that from the story and **carry it with us. In many ways, it becomes a miracle in our lives as the fear subsides and we rest in the arms of the Savior.**

SLIDE Communion

Let's pray.

SLIDE Prayer

Oh God, how grateful we are for the story of the wind and the waves battering the ship of your followers. Remind us that you come down from the mountain to walk on the water and come to us, just like you came to them. You meet us in the storms. Thank you. Thank you for what it teaches us about your role in our lives.

If you are in the middle of the storm or dark place, you might simply pray this prayer...

Precious Lord, take my hand... Meet me Jesus and hold me up...

Some of us have lived life where “no” is the default answer. Fear is our primary mode of operating and it’s understandable. It can happen to any of us because we are human. But, if that’s where you’ve been, and you have yet to get out of the boat, and you are like one of those 11 disciples hunkered down in the back, I invite you to say this simple prayer...

Jesus, help me be brave... Help me to answer your call... Give me courage to climb out of the boat... And keep me safe, with my eyes focused on you...

Finally, if you have never said “yes” to Jesus, he has come in the midst of the storm to be Savior, companion and Lord. You might simply say these words...

Yes Jesus... I trust you as my Savior and Lord... Rescue me... And help me to walk with you...

Lord Jesus, help each of us to be your followers. We love and praise you, in your holy name. Amen.

END OF SERVICE

GRAPHIC New Members