

Up to this point, Jesus' ministry had been a public declaration that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Part of this declaration included sending out his disciples to perform miracles and warn people of the coming kingdom. And the results were disappointing. His disciples found the crowds to be fickle and unresponsive. The Jewish religious leaders criticized him. His hometown essentially disowned him, and he lost his greatest ally, his cousin John the Baptist, to Herod's lust for a stripper. Even his disciples seemed to be growing at a snail's pace. In a sense, they had been good children up until now, but it was time to grow up. They needed to be adequately prepared for what was to come, as Jesus only had a year left with them. Soon the disciples' faith would be tested beyond their comprehension. And so we find ourselves at this turning point, or this shift in Matthew where the author begins to communicate two things: the opposition to Jesus and his ministry and Jesus' growing urgency to test, teach, and grow his disciples in order to prepare them for what was to come.

We pick up the story after two important events, which show opposition to Jesus' ministry. He had been rejected by the people of his own hometown, and he found out his cousin, John the Baptist, had been killed by Herod. If you were here last week, you learned that Herod, the tetrarch, was the son of the Herod the great. Herod the Great killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem around the birth of Jesus after learning he had been fooled by the wise men. His son, Herod the tetrarch, is the one who had John the Baptist killed, and he's the one who would eventually hand Jesus over to Pontius Pilot to be crucified. If you were to do a character study in the book of Matthew, you would find two contrasting kings and kingdoms. One kingdom was ruled by ruthless, selfish, insecure kings who maintained their power by murder and intimidation. They put their faith in their own ability to gain power and maintain control. By contrast, the Kingdom of God was ruled by a humble, sacrificial king, and it was marked by those who were meek, who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and above all, those who put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Our text this morning shows us what faith in Jesus can look like, and how it grows. It comes in two scenes: Let's read the first one.

**When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.**

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:13–21)

So after Jesus heard about John's murder, he left his hometown of Nazareth and withdrew to a remote area, somewhere around the Sea of Galilee. It seems likely that he wanted to be alone to process his cousin's death and so he left the crowds. It also seems likely that John's death gave Jesus a new urgency to train his disciples in the kingdom of heaven and it might have made his own impending death feel more imminent.

It might be easy to pass over these details without reflecting on the humanity of Jesus during this time in his life. This withdrawal to isolation reminds us of the humanness Jesus. He needed to retreat and process the frustration, the sadness about John, and spend time in prayer. I think it's worth noting; there is not a human emotion Jesus did not feel. He loved, he lost; he got angry, sad, tired, and even hungry. He wasn't a distant, conquering hero. He was fully God and fully man. He was not partly one or the other, but fully both. And in all this, he made time to pray, because he needed to. Jesus was showing his disciples something about faith. Faith and trust grow out of a relationship. Like any relationship, the more attention it gets, the healthier it grows. Jesus shows us that prayer is the seedbed for faith. In both scenes, you'll find Jesus practicing prayer before taking action.

Not long after he sought solace in this remote area, the crowds found him and came to him for healing and comfort. Matthew writes that when he saw the people, Jesus had compassion. The power of this word for compassion gets lost a bit in translation.

The kind of compassion Matthew describes here is not just a side-hug kind of compassion; it's compassion that is felt in your gut. In fact, Luke used this same word to describe the father's emotion the moment he saw his prodigal son walking toward him. It is a word full of emotion. Perhaps some of you in this room have experienced something similar to the father of the prodigal son—you've welcomed a child home who had been wandering and you felt that gut-wrenching compassion the first time they came home. Or maybe you're still waiting for a child to come home and you feel that longing in your gut. Jesus has soul-moving compassion for his hurting, sick, broken children. And so when Jesus looked at these people who followed him into the wilderness for comfort, he could not help but **feel** compassion deep down. And the crowds came to this desolate place like sheep seeking a shepherd to lead them to cool water and green pastures.

Jesus healed the sick among them, but eventually, as the day wore on, a practical problem presents itself. The disciples came to Jesus and remarked, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late." They also had a solution, "*Send the people away so that they can go to the villages to buy food for themselves.*" (v.15) Jesus responded with an odd statement. He said, "*They don't need to go away, YOU give them something to eat.*" (v.16) We might have responded in bewilderment, as the disciples probably did, but Jesus is trying to teach, or reveal, something here. This miracle is one of a few, which is recorded in all four gospels. Matthew recorded that after gathering up five loaves and two fish collected by the disciples, he instructed the people to sit down, or rather "lounged" like at a banquet or wedding. Think about what the disciples must have thought. "Jesus, these loaves and fish are enough to feed maybe two people. Why would you instruct people to prepare for a banquet when this amount of food wouldn't even give each person here a crumb?" The loaves back then would be the size of a hamburger bun today, and the fish weren't exactly the size of tunas. The gospel writer, John, tells us that this was actually a little boy's lunch. Clearly, the amount of food was small. But that is the point; Jesus starts with a small amount.

He then gave thanks for the bread and gave the bread and fish first to the disciples, and then they gave it to the people—all 5,000 men and probably another 10,000 to 15,000 women and children. The exact numbers don't really matter. The point is that Jesus performed a massive miracle with a minuscule amount. Jesus fed all those who came to him, all those who trusted him. Think of the contrast to Herod, who had John killed at a feast to feed his own lusts. At this feast, Jesus set aside his own need to process and grieve, and provided out of his compassion, the real tangible needs of his followers. He didn't send them away; he brought them near. He then gives to his disciples the same task. It was as if he was trying to get his disciples to look at people

the way he did, the way God does. He was trying to show them something about himself. The Old Testament imagery of this scene would not be lost on any of Matthew's Jewish audience. Just like God provided Moses and the people of Israel manna and quail in the wilderness, Jesus provided bread and fish to the people in this solitary place. Jesus was both showing his disciples something about himself, and something about Kingdom work.

He took a small amount and did something miraculous with it. He did something miraculous because he is a compassionate king, who expects his kingdom workers to be compassionate as well. This still applies to us, as his disciples, today. The church that shows compassion on hurting, needy people will never be short of an audience. Matthew records that there were 12 baskets of bread left over. This could be seen as a minor detail, but the importance lies in the next scene.

**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. Later that night, he was there alone, (verse 22–23)**

The gospel writer, John, writes that the people were so amazed at Jesus' miracle that they marveled at Jesus as a prophet and wanted to make him king. Matthew did not record the reaction of the people, but he does write, "*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side (of the lake), while he dispersed the crowds.*" (v. 22) That may seem like an odd thing for Jesus to do, but the phrase "*immediately he made*" is used in a way that suggests an emergency. Matthew means to say that Jesus was not just suggestive but demonstrative that the disciples get in the boat and go away. Perhaps the disciples got caught up in the hysteria that John describes, and they thought this was the moment when Jesus would rise to power, and they would ride his coattails to fame and glory! Of course, that just shows the disciples misunderstanding of the role of Jesus in his Kingdom and their role as well.

The disciples got into the boat, to continue on their journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Meanwhile, Jesus dispersed the crowd and stayed on land to pray as the evening turned into night. Not long after the disciples pushed off from shore, a storm develops. And it must have made the waters difficult to pass through because after a whole evening and night of rowing they hadn't made it very far across the lake. The Gospel of Mark informs us that the disciples were straining at the oars for hours. The storm must have been incredibly frustrating, even for these fishermen. It is interesting that Jesus, who was able to see them, didn't immediately go out to them. Instead, during the fourth watch of the night, sometime between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., he decided to walk across the stormy water to their location. If you remember, the disciples had already been in a storm with Jesus,

but in that storm, Jesus was asleep in the boat. When he was woken up, he asked, *"You of little faith, why are you so afraid?"* (Matt. 8) But Matthew doesn't record that the disciples were afraid for their lives in the storm. Matthew wrote, *"When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, there were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and they cried out in fear."* (v.26)

What image comes to your mind when you think of chaos? Is it on highway 101 at 5 o'clock? Or maybe it is your home in the morning when everyone is trying to get out the door? Is it trying to leave a concert with no traffic controllers? In the culture of that time, the ocean or sea represented chaos in a very terrifying kind of way; it was full of spirits who would sink ships and destroy sailors. Think about it; they didn't have aquariums or submarines or scuba gear to explore the wonders of the deep. It was mysterious, unknown, frightening, and powerful. The sea could change quickly, could swallow a ship, and could toss and turn the strongest of man's efforts. And so for these disciples, the sea represented all of these things. And then, in the middle of a storm, they saw something they had never seen someone walking towards them on the water. Even today we would be astonished to see someone walking on water. So their cries of fear seemed reasonable. But think of what Matthew had just written. The disciples had just witnessed Jesus multiply five loaves and two fish for thousands of people, with 12 baskets left over, one for each of them. And then Jesus emphatically told them to get into the boat to sail away. Jesus sent them into the storm. Was he really going to let an evil spirit sink the ship? Was he going to supply their needs in one moment, and abandon them in the next? What was Jesus trying to teach them here, what was he trying to show them?

We read that Jesus told the disciples to *"Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid."* (v. 27) And then, a character, who Matthew had not yet recorded one word from, spoke up. *"Peter replied, 'Lord, if it is you...tell me to come to you on the water.'"* Peter made a proposition to Jesus, and Jesus told him to come. After Peter got out of the boat and began to walk toward Jesus he then saw the wind and the rain he was afraid. Matthew tells us that Peter began to sink and cried out, *"Lord save me!"* (v. 30) Jesus immediately rescued Peter and said, *"You of little faith...why did you doubt?"*

So, what's going on here? What is Matthew trying to communicate?

The answer comes in Jesus' choice of words *"...it is I"*. In the original language, this statement is really, "I am." The disciples and original readers would have understood Jesus as saying, "Take courage. I AM. Do not be afraid." Does that phrase ring a bell? This is the same statement God introduced himself by in the Old Testament. This phrase is actually in the middle of this miracle, meaning it is the point of Matthew's story. In a larger sense, it's the point of Matthew's gospel. Jesus was telling his friends who he is. He is the Messiah. He is God. He is the God of

the Old Testament. He is the One who provided manna for his people in the wilderness; he is the one who brought light out of darkness and land out of the chaos of the waters at the beginning. And he was God with them now. He is the reason they need not be afraid.

So actually when Peter said, *"Lord, if it is you...."* it's more like he's saying, "Lord, since it is you...." Peter, who represented the disciples, took a step of faith because he could no more walk on water than feed thousands of people with such a small amount of food. But no sooner did he get out of the boat and into the chaos, then his faith began to crumble.

Peter looked to at the wind and the rain; he became overwhelmed and started to sink. Peter cried out, *"Lord save me!"* And immediately Jesus did. It's funny how sometimes a simple phrase can have such a profound meaning. In this simple cry, we see the heart of the gospel. Peter's faith was only that Jesus would save him, and Jesus did. He saves all those who cry out to him in trust.

But Jesus' response seems a bit harsh. I think any of us would be afraid of the wind, the waves, and the fact that we were walking on water. But *"you of little faith"* was actually a tender term. It would be better translated, "little faith." Jesus asks, *"Why do you doubt?"*

You see the disciples didn't fully understand after they saw Jesus provide bread for the masses. They didn't make the connection. They hadn't understood, up until now, about who Jesus really was.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, gosh, if I saw someone take five hamburger buns and two Nemos and feed Oracle Arena, I would get it. I would know this was a god worthy of my worship. And Mark offers us an explanation for why the disciples didn't get it—he says their hearts were hardened after the miracle of the loaves and fishes. But even still, I find it interesting that it is not during a moment of abundant provision that the disciples' hearts are softened to the point where they get it. It's in the middle of chaos, in the middle of a storm, that they cry out for Jesus to save them. Did you first cry out to Jesus to save you in the middle of a storm? Has your faith ever grown in the middle of a storm? Do you find yourself in a storm right now? And could it be that he has sent you into this storm to grow your faith in him?

Previously, when Jesus calmed the wind and the rain in the last storm, the disciples marveled and said to themselves, *"Who is this man!"* They didn't realize who Jesus was then. In this current storm, Jesus got back into the boat and calmed the storm again, yet this time their answer was clear. So, for the first time in Matthew's gospel, they worshipped Him as, *"the Son of God."* (v.33) Matthew shows the disciples growing up, and it serves as a mark of a growing disciple, which is worshipping Jesus, trusting in Jesus, putting our faith in Jesus.

Are you like Peter? Do you vacillate between faith and doubt? Do you believe that he died for your sins, yet you struggle to believe that he will provide for your needs today? You believe that he is God, yet you feel overwhelmed by the storm you find yourself in now?

Matthew's point is not that we need to be more like Peter and get out of the boat. Neither is it that we need to be less like Peter and not be distracted by the wind and the rain. Matthew knows that as disciples, there will be times we're called to take a step of faith, and there will certainly be times that our faith fails us and we become overwhelmed. Matthew is not trying to draw us to Peter; he is trying to draw us to the Messiah. The point is that Jesus takes a little faith, even faith that is riddled with doubts and makes it go a long way.

You see Peter would doubt again when Jesus needed him most; he would deny any affiliation with him, three times. But despite the weakness of Peter's faith, the disciples understanding of the Kingdom, or the immaturity of all of us here, Jesus redeemed Peter, and anyone who calls out "**Lord Save Me!**" once and for all time, on the cross. He doesn't wait until we have a perfect understanding of who he is or until we are free of all doubt. He comes to us in the stormy chaos of our sin and calms the wrath of God's just punishment that would otherwise drown us. He tells us to take courage, he is who he is, and he is here with us.

You know as I reflected on these miracles and I was thinking about chaos a story came to mind that my wife told me when she was training as a pediatric ICU nurse at a children's hospital while we were living in Philly. She found herself in the room of a baby who had been intubated practically since birth, meaning there was a breathing tube down his throat and a machine had been doing most of the work of breathing for him. A nurse standing close by filled her in on this patient's history. This baby had spent months at the hospital, and his mother had lived in his room with him, always by his side. Gradually the baby's health had improved, and he was breathing "above the ventilator" meaning he really didn't need its help anymore. But the medical team had already made two attempts at taking his breathing tube out, and each time they tried taking the tube out, his oxygen levels tanked, and the tube had to be immediately put back in. And they really couldn't figure out why. Everything about the baby's breathing indicated that he should be able to do it on his own.

So with this third and final attempt, someone got the idea to have the mother remain in the hospital room for the procedure. Taking the tube out required a lot of medical staff and was a very intense ordeal, so the mother had stepped out the previous two attempts. So here my wife was, observing this final attempt. A breathing monitor was put on the baby that would beep faster and at a higher pitch if his oxygen levels started to go down. As the team began the procedure, the oxygen monitor beeped at a nice steady low beat. But just like the previous two attempts, as the team started to take the tube out, the beeping got faster and higher, and nerves and frustrations rose, and there was a lot of noise in the room. At that point, a nurse motioned to the mother, and even though she couldn't be right next to the baby (who was surrounded by the doctors and nurses and respiratory therapists trying unsuccessfully to force him to breathe), she began to sing. She sang the lullaby that she sang to the baby every day while they were in the hospital. And upon hearing the mother's voice, a change took place in the baby. The beeping of the oxygen monitor got lower and slower as the baby calmed down and began to breathe. In the midst of the chaos of that crowded, tense hospital room, the voice of the mother rose above the din and tenderly soothed the baby into breathing.

In the trials and storms of life: The broken marriages, the sickness that comes upon us suddenly, the kids who cause us heartache, the loss of job and security, unmet expectations and shattered dreams, Jesus comes to us with gut-wrenching compassion, provides for our needs, and he speaks to us in the storm. He comes to us who have so little faith and much doubt. He takes what little we have, our little bread and fish, he takes our weak attempts at walking on water. He comes to us, we who are so easily distracted, so hard-hearted, so feeble and faithless. He sends us out into storms and comes to find us when we feel helpless. He wants us to grow in our trust in him because he is the object of our faith. He is the Son of God, the Messiah! He is here with us, speaking to us, reminding us, "It is me, I Am is here." And like the lullaby that rose above the chaos of the hospital room, it saves us. Like the bread of his body offered in abundance to you, like the hand reaching down, it brings life. While you may doubt, he never does. He knows you; He does not take his eyes off of you. Let's continue to worship him.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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