



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“How Do We Hear From God?” Matthew 14:22-33; 1 John 4:1-3

Before we begin today, I want to thank you for your gift of time through providing a series of guest preachers. I have used that time to read and work on my Doctoral project proposal. Here are the books I’ve read in the recent weeks. I’m nearly ready to submit another draft to my advisor. I hope to make the December due date for the Committee’s meeting on January 15th or thereabouts, and I hope to get approval to go to the next step—the final paper, which will be between 125 and 175 pages. The earliest I could finish would be in the spring, though I have almost two years more to complete everything. However, I’d like to be “done-done” as soon as possible, and get another part of our house back from the stacks of books that lie around now. Again, thank you for this time.

Last week, Lydia Richards was here to help us deal with fear. Today’s sermon will follow a similar theme, but will also provide tools to test whether we are hearing from God. Our Bible text is from Matthew’s gospel, chapter 14, starting with verse 22. Please find that section in Matthew 14 in your own, or a chair pocket Bible, and keep your Bible open so that we can look at the text in detail, to get as much from it as possible. You can take notes in your own text, or in the open section in your morning worship bulletin. Listen for the Word of God to you and me today, as I read Matthew 14, 22-33. *[text]*

“Jesus and the boys” have just fed more than 5,000 people with the 5 loaves and 2 fish they were able to scrounge. You’ll see from the section before that Jesus had been healing, and it got late, and the disciples wanted to send them off to buy lunch at the local deli’s. But Jesus told them to feed this crowd themselves. No way, they say. YES way, said Jesus. And with the little they had on hand, Jesus gave thanks--and there was more than enough food, a miracle! There is no reaction from the crowd, this time—interesting! Also, I see Jesus deliberately involves his disciples in making the miracle happen. That’s a detail we’ll need to bring into the focus text for today.

Our focus text begins with some odd language. As soon as this terrific miracle was complete—and the disciples had picked up all the leftovers—Jesus “makes them” get into “the” boat. If Jesus “made them”, it suggests the guys really wanted to stick around, perhaps to bask in the glory of the miracle they had helped produce. But in addition, Jesus is not planning to go with them, and perhaps he had to “make them” go on ahead to the western side of Lake Galilee without him so that he could be by himself with God. Sometimes Jesus prays with his disciple around, sometimes he doesn’t—now he just needs to be with his Father, himself. After a miracle like this--which skated pretty close to one of the temptations Satan threw at him in chapter 4, before his public ministry--Jesus wanted to be sure he was sticking to the boundary His Father had set.

So the disciples shove off in a pretty large boat, if it held the Twelve (with enough room for Jesus to join them). Matthew records that they had been rowing all night against the wind, (the sail is down in the storm), and still had not gotten to the other side. It's a good thing some of these guys had fished the lake for years!

Then, without warning, here comes Jesus. It's the "fourth watch", which according to Roman military time, would have meant between 3 and 6 a.m. The guys are beat from their hours of rowing; it's the darkest part of the night. And they suddenly see Jesus, walking toward them on the water. But of course, it can't be Jesus—no one walks on water; it must be a ghost. And as soon as one of the guys says that, fear travels like wildfire throughout the boat, and all the disciples are afraid. They can't row any faster. There's no escape!

Then Jesus calls out, "Take courage. It's me. Don't be afraid!"

Let's look at these three short statements. The third ("fear not") part, you heard Lydia speak to, last week.

"Take courage." Courage is not the absence of fear—it's the decision to act in spite of our fear.

"It is I," is the usual translation for the next words of Jesus for the Greek phrase, *ego eimi*. Literally, the translation would be "I am." This is the same phrase God used with Moses at the burning bush, giving Moses the "name" of God. With this phrase, Jesus tells them, "God is here." And, "that's me."

Now this next part is interesting. Peter decides to test this "ghost". "If it's really you, Lord, order me (that's the literal translation) "order me" to come to you on the water. "Come on!" says Jesus.

So Peter takes the risk of following Jesus' order. He gets out of the boat, and he walks! He walks toward Jesus on the water. I imagine he had his eyes locked on Jesus, as he had already been peering at him to discern whether it was Jesus at all. How many steps did Peter take? Four? Ten? But then the roll of the waves, the spray of the water, the wind whipping his cloak overcome his fix on Jesus, and he looks down. And as soon as Peter does, he begins to sink. Now his clothes have become dead weights; he's a fisherman, and he knows he's really in trouble. "Save me, Lord," he cries. And Jesus saves. Note that "immediately" Jesus reached out and grabbed Peter and hauled him back up to the surface of the water—so Peter must have walked most of the distance toward Jesus before he fell.

"Hey, Little Faith, why did you doubt?" says Jesus. When we doubt God, we fall. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, when we live in his will with him, we do miracles. It's always been that way.

And note this last part. When Jesus and Peter climb into the boat, the storm subsides. It's as though Matthew wants to show us that when Peter rejoins "the church" with Jesus, the danger is over. The church has traditionally been portrayed as a boat on a stormy sea; this story is the inspiration for the symbol.

When Jesus and Peter are in the boat, the disciples "worship", saying "Truly you are the Son of God." THE son of God.

Now, do you see here how Jesus has been equipping his men to do ministry? In John's gospel, Jesus tells them (chapter 14, verse 12): "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He [or she] will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." Jesus keeps giving away the ministry, even doing miracles. Feeding the 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Walking on water. Overcoming fear. Soon he will have them out on their own, without him, for a missionary journey of healing and proclaiming the inbreaking of God's Kingdom.

I want to drill down a bit more into Peter's test of "the ghost". The first letter of John tells us, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." (1 John 4:1-3, NIV) God is not afraid of our tests. In fact, since we can be wrong about these things, God wants us to test.

How do we test that what we're hearing is God's voice? Here are some standards to apply. First, is it a natural voice? If it speaks to you in "King James English," or comes as a deep bass voice, like James Earl Jones, it's probably NOT the voice of God. Second, if the voice is critical or caustic or accusing, that is definitely NOT God's voice. God's voice will be empowering. But when God is correcting us, it will not be belittling, but a gentle chiding—kind of like a wink, or a gentle chuck in the ribs. God is on our side, wanting us to grow to be like Jesus. God encourages.

What are some other tests the church has found over the centuries to be reliable? Well, if it's God's voice, it won't just be a one-time thing. We can ask God to tell us again—say, the next time we pray. We can also ask other spiritually-sensitive people to ask God for confirmation. Someone we trust who knows God can help us from doing something ungodly. We can look for reinforcing messages in common daily encounters. We should especially search God's Written Word, so that what we're being told (or asked to do) is in concert with the character and values of God that we discover here. These are just some of the ways we can know this is the voice of God we are hearing, or feeling, or sensing.

But there's one more common-sense way to know God's voice—seek God frequently. Jesus told the Pharisees, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27, NIV) We learn to recognize God's voice by living in God's "fold", and listening. And obeying. Often God holds back on further directions until we have obeyed the ones He's already given us. If you have not been listening to God through the "channels" you already know, why would you imagine God would speak to you? Someone has observed, "We are educated far beyond our obedience." Ouch! If on the other hand, you listen for God regularly, and obey, then you are just the kind of person whom God is more likely to use for—miracles!

And that raises the question, do you really believe God "talks" to people, and wants to "talk" to you? If you "doubt", if you aren't looking to Jesus, then you won't hear God; God will pass you by, and find someone else, and you will find out about that at Judgment Day, to your sorrow. You will see the video of what you might have been, had you been listening and living for God, and the comparison with the life you actually lived will give you regrets, even as you are glad to be in the full presence of God.

When Peter took his eyes off Jesus, and looked more at his circumstances instead of the Savior, he “fell”, like Eve and Adam “fell”. When he was looking fully at Jesus, even though he had a lot of fear, he did a miracle—he walked on the water in order to get to Jesus. Do you want to get to Jesus that much? Will you let a desire for Jesus outweigh your fear?

You see, I think we settle for too little—too little faith, as Jesus said. We are far too familiar with the world, and not nearly familiar enough with Jesus. We have a lot of worries these days, and like the wind and waves on Lake Galilee, they easily capture our attention. Fear is hard-wired into us; it’s all about self-preservation. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16:25, NIV) It takes courage to be a Christ-follower, for we are going against some of our deepest hard-wired emotions. We need God’s help to do what God wants—and that’s just the prayer God loves to answer most!

One more question, before we sing, have our brief election, the benediction, and then move to the healing ministry: are we afraid of doing miracles? Modern people might call this, “Fear of success.” Once Jesus confirmed his identity and told Peter to come to him, Peter had to make a decision. We usually think it was a struggle between fear of failure and faith in God—the basic struggle of our lives, really. But what if Peter was afraid that he COULD walk on the water. What would THAT mean? It would change his relationship with Jesus, for one thing! It would force him to change his view of himself, for another. It would bring him more responsibility for carrying out God’s will. Maybe it would be better to just stay in the boat-- “Just making sure it was you, Lord,” he could have said. But no, that would not be enough. Jesus is in the business of making “little Christs”, as C.S. Lewis put it. That’s the church’s job. That’s one of the messages from God to you, this morning.

How much do you want to get to Jesus? Will you take the risk of looking stupid in front of your friends, in order to do it? Will you take the risk that you will be doing miracles? (And of course, it’s not “just you”, it’s “you with God”, joining Jesus in what Jesus is already doing.) Often, people who do miracles are not particularly impressed with themselves, and shun adulation from people who can so easily mistake the miracle for one’s own power, or misunderstand its purpose. Miracles are easy compared to dealing with people who have experienced a miracle!

How much do you want to get to Jesus, so that you can follow where he leads? Having tested the word you are getting from God, will you take the risk of a miracle? Isn’t it a miracle when we connect with the God of the Universe?

Do you hear God’s Word this morning?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 9, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]