

Christ's Compelling Call  
Matthew 14:22-36

Think of Thanksgiving dinner, if you will. You've eaten way to much, but it was all good. You're in your recliner, pie in one hand, since it's been already a half hour since you had dessert, and remote in your other. Life is as good as it gets. And then someone says, let's take our leftovers to the homeless shelter on the other side of town.

At that moment, it's the last thing you want to do. You want to relax, bask in the warm glow of a delightful day. So it was with the disciples.

The last thing the disciples wanted to do was get into the boat. Why? Because it is the end of a long day, a day in which they witnessed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They were basking in success, basking in the good time they had had with Jesus. More than that, it was late, it was getting dark. Five thousand men and countless women and children had been fed, and there was plenty left over. What a way to end the day! Not only a miracle, but plenty to eat.

But then Jesus says, rise up, get going, head out and do ministry.

And in all this is we find again something of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, to follow Jesus Christ, and to accept Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives.

Discipleship, following Jesus, is not a static, unchanging thing. It is a journey. Following Jesus to new place and trusting in him in different situations. Now, Scripture is not just addressed to individuals; in fact it is more often than not addressed to a community, the community of faith. What does it mean for us as a church to believe in Jesus Christ, this Christ who makes us leave the shore and head out into that wild restless sea?

As we look at this Scripture we are struck by a word repeated three times. That word is "immediately." For the call of Christ is a compelling one. It demands our attention and it demands it now.

At the end of a long day, Jesus IMMEDIATELY compels the disciples to get into a boat and head for the other side. IMMEDIATELY. IMMEDIATELY, because there is something compelling about Jesus' call to us. It can't wait. Can't wait for us to be ready. Can't wait for the weather to be perfect.

Jesus immediately compels them to head to the other side. And now we realize this story is filled with symbolism.

On the other side of the lake were folks who were different. Jesus had fed and healed folks like them, and that was enough for the disciples, but he then immediately orders them to go across to the other side.

And that lake, and night. There's symbolism there as well. Water was the place of chaos and death. Remember back in Genesis it is the spirit of God working over the dark waters that begins to bring order and beauty and life to the earth and in Revelation the Beast arises out of the sea. And darkness is a time of danger.

Jesus makes the disciples head out into the water, into ministry. You know, I once served in a small town whose mayor was asked, "What do you want Stedman to be in twenty years.? He replied, "I don't want to see any change. I want it to be exactly the way it is now." And we in the church sometimes think like that. We are tired of change. Sometimes we get tired of trying, of risking, of thinking, of dreaming. Why not just sit back and relax and enjoy the love and faith and fellowship we have now?

*And the simple answer is: Jesus won't let us.* For all we share together in the church, and make no mistake, fellowship and friendship are incredibly important, the church does not exist for its own sake. The church exists for the sake of the world.

That's why Vacation Bible School isn't by invitation only to our own kids. It's open to all, that some might hear and begin a new journey. That's why long-range planning. Our sanctuary seats enough for us, but what if Beaufort doubles in size? That's why programs such as LOGOS, that we can reach not just our own kids, to provide a strong spiritual foundation, but to create a time and place where kids who otherwise would never hear of Christ, might come to learn, to experience.

Jesus compels us to ministry and mission beyond ourselves. And in this context, that's why evening suppers, and YAH Club [Young At Heart] and trips are important: not just to share and increase fellowship among ourselves, but as a means of reaching out to new people, more people, different people.

Back to the Scripture.

Immediately Jesus makes them head out. Without him. The disciples obey. Reluctantly. Feeling as if Jesus had abandoned them. But look what Jesus is doing. He's praying. I think it's the first time in Matthew that we see Jesus praying. It's fair to say Jesus is praying for the disciples, in that little boat (which has long been a symbol for the church, but more about that another time), in that little boat, amidst the waters of chaos, in the darkness of the night.

It's hard going. The wind is against them. Symbolic? Indeed. For in Greek the word for wind and the word for spirit is exactly the same.

The wind was against them, the spirit of the world was against them. But Jesus was praying for them.

*The storm reminds us that God does not always just call the church to do what is easy and painless. Sometimes authentic ministry involves straining against the wind. The goal of the Christian journey is not to find a life of ease, but rather to be engaged against all the darkness and chaos around us.*

The night grows darker, the wind stronger, the waves higher.

We've been there, as individuals, as a church. And just think, the storm wouldn't have mattered had they been safe on shore. But Jesus has made them confront the darkness and the chaos.

But now the good news. Jesus comes walking to them, on the water. Think of that symbolism, the forces of evil and chaos are now underfoot. Jesus has control over them.

And IMMEDIATELY, immediately, there's that word again, Jesus encourages the disciples. "It is I." It echoes the "I am" that God used to describe Godself to Moses. "I am the one who prays for you. I am the one who has control over wind and sea, chaos and darkness."

When we're stuck, when the wind is against us, Jesus comes to us amidst the storm. Faith is not avoiding the storms, it is not counting on the storms to be stilled at our convenience; faith is facing the storm; faith is trusting that Jesus will be there.

It might even be fair to say, if we're not getting anywhere because we're satisfied with how things are, Jesus sends us out, in the boat through the storm, to seek new ways of ministry. But if we're not getting anywhere because because the wind is against us, Jesus comes to us. "It is I." They're scared, but IMMEDIATELY, he offers them the comfort of his presence, and they find their courage.

And now Peter gets into the act. If the disciples represent what the church is going to be or should be, Peter is the most representative of all. Take courage, it is I. This is what Jesus says, and Peter is the one who dares to reply. *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."*

But we're not sure what to make of it. Now, what do you think: are these words of faith or words of doubt? Doubt, because Peter demands more assurance that what Jesus has already offered. *It is I. I am with you.* What more does Peter need to hear?

Or are these words of a profound faith? *Lord, if it is really you, then challenge me, call me, claim me. Command me to get out of the safety of the boat and come to you. Command me to trust that I have your power, that I too can do battle with the dark, the deep, the chaos.*

Both explanations are possible. But I realize that I'm always going to give folks the benefit of the doubt. I try to think the best, not the worst, of folks. I think Peter wanted to be challenged. And so he makes his way to Jesus, out there amidst the wind and the darkness and the waves.

And as long as he keeps his eye on Jesus, he moves forward. As long as he maintains his focus on what Jesus has called him to do, or more precisely what he has asked Jesus to do, he's in great shape. But then, he notices the waves more and Jesus less. Literally, he sees the wind – symbolically, he notices the spirit against him rather than the Christ who is with him. And begins to sink.

Peter has risked it all for the sake of Jesus. But his faith was not strong enough. He begins to sink. Which leads to a third IMMEDIATELY. Peter has risked it all for the sake of Christ. But wasn't quite faithful enough. But Jesus does not come to us amidst the storm to punish us if the storm is greater than our faith. He comes. . . yes, to save.

Peter was afraid. He was beginning to sink. He cried out, "Lord, save me." IMMEDIATELY Jesus reaches out his hand and rescues him. And they make it to the other side to minister to the folks there.

And I wonder. For you, for me, for us together as a church. . . where do you think he is leading you today? For I know one thing, He simply won't let us stay safely on the shore, nor will he ever leave us alone amidst the wind and the waves and the storm. Amen.