

“Going Overboard For Jesus”

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

Today all of us are in the same boat. We experience the storms of life without the physical presence of Jesus to make us feel safe. I think of the storms that are buffeting the members of most congregations. I think of the stormy marriages some of you may be going through. I think of the financial storms that some of you may be going through. You may be going through the stormy weather of religious doubts, or old age, or poor health, or the loss of a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

Life would be so simple if Jesus were in our boat to make everything alright. Wouldn't life be great? Think of it! If we could see and touch and hear Jesus talking to us; if we had his physical presence with us he would go to the bedside of Marcus Anderson or Doris Ghearhardt who are now dying of cancer in Lewistown hospital. He would touch them and they would sit up with a smile and be perfectly well again.

He would go to the grave of James Reed and Mabel Lukens and Tom Snyder, three members of my congregation who died last year; and he would say, "Come forth!" they would come out of their graves. He would go to Angola and Northern Ireland and reconcile enemies to one another.

He would sit with me privately in my office while I poured out to him my feelings of guilt over sins committed long ago; and over my feelings of frustration when things aren't going the way I think they should. He would say a word of forgiveness and all our guilt would disappear and be forgotten. He would answer all our questions. He would inspire us to live each day at a time without worrying about the future. Everything would be smooth sailing if Jesus were in the same boat with us.

But without the physical presence of Jesus I can feel very helpless. When I go to visit someone dying of cancer I know I can't heal her. I can pray and ask God to heal her but God always seems so far away. I stand at the grave of someone and I have no power to raise him from the dead. I visit the parents of a child who will undergo a serious operation and I can't ensure the doctor's success.

But all of us are very helpless in this. Jesus is not with us to heal our diseased and solve all our problems. Oh, I know that there are people who have experienced the healing power of Jesus; I know there are many Pentecostal Christians who testify to an almost physical sense of the presence of Jesus. But I have to say that isn't my experience. And when I talk to many other Christians I hear my own feelings echoed. I feel like we are out on the ocean by ourselves. We don't feel, or see, or hear Jesus with us. We are in the same boat with the disciples.

Now I know that in one sense the Spirit of God is with us now. I know that there is nowhere we can go to escape his presence. I believe that everything that happens is under the control of God. But I can't see or feel or touch the Spirit of God.

Those disciples on the storm tossed sea believed in the Spirit of God also. If you were to sit with them in your comfortable living room some evening and have a theological discussion with them you would find them to be very orthodox; very fundamental. They would all believe that the Spirit of God is present with them always. They would all tell you that everything works together for good for those who love God.

But they aren't sitting calmly in someone's living room discussing theology. They are out in the middle of the sea. Waves are crashing over them and all around them. They are at the complete mercy of the hostile wind and waves. Their orthodox theology is unable to calm the storm or take away their fears or make things go easier for them.

I have to confess that though my theology is precisely and narrowly orthodox in the old Princeton tradition, I get scared sometimes when I think of the uncertainties of life and the certainty of my death. I was sitting in my study one morning preparing a sermon on "trusting God in every situation"; when I got a pain in my chest that kept getting worse and worse. It lasted for 15 minutes or more. It was getting to the point that I was having a hard time just breathing. "Is it possible that my heart is bad? Am I having a heart-attack? Is it possible that I could be dead in a matter of minutes? Oh God, I don't want to die!" Then I hiccupped and the pain went away. Despite my orthodox theology I was scared. I didn't want to die.

I visit a certain patient in the hospital dying of cancer and the thought of the possibility of me dying with cancer causes me anxiety sometimes. A friend calls me up from Pittsburgh and tells me that his wife of four years has left him; and I'm all the more afraid of getting married.

I wish that Jesus were in the same boat with me... a Jesus I could see healing the sick and raising the dead... a Jesus I could hear audibly counseling me on the important decisions in my life... a Jesus whom the crowds would pack out the church to see and hear. But that isn't the way life is for me. We are in the same boat with the disciples out on the sea of life where storms arise suddenly; the winds of adversity beat against us; and it's in the middle of the night; and Jesus is far away.

But when things are darkest; our text says between 3 and 6 in the morning Jesus comes walking over the stormy waves to his disciples. But notice this. Look at what happens to the disciples when they see Jesus coming to the rescue. Listen to what the text says; "When the disciples saw him walking on the lake they were so shaken that they cried out in terror: 'It is a ghost!'" They are more afraid of Jesus than they are of the wind and waves and darkness. And they don't recognize him!

You know, I've always been taught that when we are in the storms of life Jesus will come and comfort us and take away our fears. And that has always bothered me because, you see, when I am in the storm of depression or anxiety or fear, I never feel Jesus coming to me. I pray for him to help but he doesn't. And I think, "Maybe there's something wrong with me. Maybe I just don't have the faith it takes to be a Christian." And so I feel guilty because I never sense Jesus coming to my rescue and comforting me.

But I read this passage and I think, "Well, maybe God really has come to me and I didn't recognize him like these disciples. Maybe when Jesus comes to us when we're troubled his presence sometimes frightens rather than comforts." Because, according to our Scripture Lesson, the storm continues as Jesus comes to them. They don't recognize him. They're scared

and think they are seeing a ghost. Peter is the only one who thinks it may be Jesus. He asks, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water."

No I want you to think about what Peters say here. "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water." When you think about it that's a crazy question. That's a stupid question. Put yourself in his situation. What would you have asked? I would have asked, "Lord if it is you, calm the storm. If it is you take away my doubts."

I know one thing though. I would not have asked, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you over the water." Because, you see, if I go overboard for Jesus and he really isn't there, I'm sunk. Don't you think Peter realized that? Don't you think he could have devised a better test to prove it was Jesus? Don't you think he could have thought of a safer way to be sure Jesus was with him? Why then did Peter risk going overboard for Jesus?

I wonder if he may have been thinking, "What do I have to lose? The way the wind and waves are crashing against the boat it's only a matter of time before I sink beneath the waves even if I stay on board. But if what I am seeing is really Jesus I can go overboard for him without drowning. If it isn't Jesus I'm going to drown anyway. If it isn't Jesus...if my faith is in nothing more substantial than a figment of my imagination....does it make any difference in the long run whether I live only to sink beneath the waves sometime in the uncertain future?"

Our situation is not that much different. Do we have anything to lose if we go overboard for Jesus? All of us are in a boat tossed about by the sea. Our boat may not sink for 70 or 80 years, but then again it might be caught in a violent storm and go down in minutes, like the Titanic. There is so much in life that is not under my control. So much can happen that I haven't planned for. There are so many possibilities for ship-wreck. And it's pure escapism to think otherwise.

That's what this passage of Scripture means to me. Basically I could sum it up by saying this. Jesus is there even when I don't recognize him. Jesus is there even when he doesn't take away all my problems. Jesus is there even when the storm continues to rage around and inside of us.

Jesus is there when I am frightened and doubtful. And if he is there I have nothing to lose if I go overboard for Jesus.

Amen.

Father, we thank you that you listen to us whether or not we feel your presence...in your awful presence. We bow before you who are worshipped by angels and archangels and all the beings of heaven. You are beautiful in your majesty and holiness. We long to stand in your heavenly court as your sons and daughters on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Lord our God we would that the unseen part of your creation would be as real to us as it is in fact...that we might see the demonic adversaries and so be convinced and acutely aware of the dangers that surround us; the roaring lion that seeks to devour us. We would that you would enable us to see the great cloud of witnesses that surround us and the hosts of angels that guard us and the King of Angels, Jesus Christ, who has won the battle for us.

God, help us to live out lives in the light of eternity. There are probably people here today who have never had their eyes opened to see the world as it is...whose eyes are blind to spiritual things...whose eyes have never seen Christ coming to them...who have never obeyed his command to come to him. Open their eyes and ears so that they won't be afraid to go overboard for Christ.

God, our father, there may be people here today who have doubts and questions; who have hidden sins; who harbor anger and hatred in their hearts...send your healing spirit to minister to their needs

We pray that each would find a place to serve you in this congregation...to speak the good news...first of all to know it. We pray for the President and all in authority. For the sick and all who are in sorrow. Amen.