

We find ourselves in quite the predicament. In an age of instant information we somehow feel less informed and overwhelmed. None of us has lived through the circumstances we all find ourselves in – restricted in where we go and what we do and driven by the fear that an unseen agent could somehow invade our person and cause us to fall ill. Fear has more than done its work over this past week and will continue to drive decisions and efforts for the foreseeable future.

One thing that I will be doing is sharing thoughts in writing and not in a recorded format. There are many reasons for taking this approach – one of which is my underlying belief that recorded interaction skews our ability to interact in person later. We tend to “revere” or “admire” individuals who occupy our TV screens and we are far less likely to create such idols if we are confronted by a written word. If you were to meet the author of the book of James your reaction would be quite different than if you got to meet Joel Osteen or any other popular Christian TV personality. (I know, I know, not everyone would behave this way – but as a rule-of-thumb it’s true). It is worth noting that, when addressed by something in writing, there is still opportunity for interaction – one could write a response or a responding correspondence. This is not possible in recorded communication such as audio or video. So – for the sake of these difficult days I will respond primarily by writing.

I have seen many posts and shared perspectives – all efforts to encourage and uplift people in the face of these difficult times. The temptation in writing – of course – is to address what appears to be unfinished learning on certain aspects of our Savior and his presence in times of difficulty. Although, if one steps back and gives some thought – maybe the only difference that we really see in this moment is that instead of the minority of our congregants and friends being shut-ins, we are now all shut-ins. We now all get to experience an element of isolation and fear that as healthy and functioning individuals we haven’t had to experience before. That is the first step of recognition – that we can now identify with every person who has, by some circumstance, been forced to remain home. And as such, it should increase our ability to identify the many small ways that we can reach out and encourage people in such situations. We need to look beyond whose “job” it is and simply act upon the impulses placed on our hearts by none less than the Holy Spirit.

This does raise an important issue. Is the Holy Spirit going to prompt each one of us on to do things that would be dangerous or life threatening to others? Will our actions be assessed as being driven by “too little faith” or “irrational emotional response” to faith? Is there any guidance in Scripture?

Two episodes immediately jump to mind. That infamous moment that Peter (foolishly) walks on water and the time that Jesus (comfortably) sleeps through the storm.

For today, let’s consider the account with Peter. First of all – we should not be like Peter. He was irrational and impulsive. If we take anything else away from the account of Peter walking on the water then we have sorely missed the point of that passage. In a nutshell, the moment that Peter walks on the water has everything to do with Jesus being God and nothing to do with Peter being superhuman. And yet – time and again – this account is shared as one that we should somehow emulate or put into practice in our own lives. No. The only thing to be emulated or put into practice is the recognition that our circumstances can and will divine the Divine – our circumstances can and will display the Glory of God through his Son Jesus. Here’s the passage:

Matthew 14:22-33 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Walks on the Water

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

29 “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

The first question we really need to ask ourselves is: Why do we make this particular passage all about Peter? Those who chose to sub-title sections of Scripture wisely named this section “Jesus walks on water” but in most of our contemporary teaching we focus exclusively on Peter. We see things like “Take courage” “Don’t be afraid” – but these are statements made by Jesus BEFORE Peter responds irrationally and impulsively. Even in the face of hearing his Lord and Teacher tell him to take courage and not be afraid, Peter responds from a place of doubt – not faith. If he had responded from a place of faith he would have taken courage and not been afraid and stayed in the boat! But driven by his doubt, he calls out “Lord if it’s you...” And this has always fascinated me. The only other moment we see similar language is when the Devil is tempting Jesus. Each time the Devil lays out a proposition he begins with, “If you are the Son of God...” One could easily wonder why Peter was not rebuffed and accused of putting the Lord his God to the test. First, the Devil was interested in Jesus using his power in inappropriate ways. Jesus using any of his ability to self-satisfy in contradiction to the will of the Father would have been devastating. This is why Jesus avoided responding to each of the Devil’s demands. Peter, on the other hand, was not trying to trick Jesus into doing something inappropriate (Jesus was already walking on the water of his own free will) but was asking in an irrational and impulsive way to affirm the presence of Jesus. They were, after all, afraid that he was a “ghost” (a theme that recurs after the resurrection too). It is interesting to note the order of the language too – when the Devil confronts Jesus he starts with “If you are...” and then provides the title. When Peter addresses Jesus he begins with “Lord...” There is no underlying desire to usurp Jesus in Peter’s request, but it leads to one of the greatest affirmations of the divinity of Jesus up to that point in history.

It is interesting to note that in the earliest accounts of creation that the Spirit of God is “hovering over the face of the waters”. It is interesting to note that the only Being in the universe capable of creating something out of nothing is God. It is interesting to note that water has traditionally represented chaos and part of the creating act of God was to bring order out of chaos. The disciples were in a boat being tossed by chaos – along comes Jesus walking on the chaos and his command is to take courage and fear

not. And at no point does he command anyone to get out of the boat to prove their faith. Quite the opposite, it would appear – that in the absence of a command to leave the boat, then the command to take courage and not fear would mean REMAINING IN THE BOAT. It isn't Peter's faith that drove him to his irrational and impulsive response, it was his doubt ("if it is you"). Notice that the only person to end up in a position of danger is Peter! And out of all the disciples, the only one to have his faith questioned is Peter! It is interesting to consider that at the end of this account none of the other disciples is ever reprimanded for remaining in the boat and at no point does Jesus ever reference Peter's actions as something that should be copied by others.

This leads us to the point that our irrational and impulsive responses will lead us to a place where Jesus is the only one who can possibly save us. And this seems appropriate given our current circumstances. We are witnessing many extremes. There has been an extreme reaction that has led to the closing down of social gatherings and businesses. There has been an irrational and impulsive reaction to purchasing all the toilet paper (weird!). There are irrational and impulsive actions in those who refuse to take simple sanitary measures and continue to roam about in public. None of the irrational and impulsive behaviors negate the proclamation of Jesus as He masters this chaos. "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid!" This is the message that should so clearly resonate with each and every believer. As we honor our authorities and as we creatively continue to minister to one another we can "Take courage" because He is with us! And we do not need to be afraid! We don't need to prove our faith – but through our faithful actions something more important will be achieved – we will share the living presence of the only Master of this Storm – we will share the living Word – the Gospel of life by deferring to the one who is Lord and Master and God! May we live and share in a way that draws less attention to "me" and gives all glory to "Thee".

Prayer:

Father – when everything is so chaotic and overwhelming help us hear and know the words of your son. Give us courage to face our circumstances with confidence. Give us knowledge of your constant presence. Take away our fears and allow us to be your presence in the lives of our family, friends, and communities. Thank you Lord. We love you.

Amen