

October 21, 2018

Peter Part 3: Walk on the Wild Side

Rev. Dr. John Ross

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-34

Tapestry sings *Well Done*.

Dr. Ross enters. I'm just going to say what everyone else is thinking: Well Done. Well, as you think about your gift for next year, and as you continue to give throughout the balance of this year, keep in mind that the music ministry is one of the most important ministries that we have in the life of the church. It involves as many people as any other ministry throughout the course of the year, and, so, we're blessed by their presence and for Autumn's leadership in this service and Adam's and Craig's in other services. So, thank you, and well done.

Art will oftentimes provide an alternative interpretation of scripture. So, I want to invite you to look at the screen again this week. While we have them up, I'm going to continue to use them through this series because art, as I say, gives us another interpretation of scripture. Now, are there any guesses about what our scripture reading for today is based on what you see on the screen? Any guesses? Okay, okay. Let's see if I can extend a little bit. Who do you think is in the front left corner? Okay, let me just be really blatantly obvious now. Here's a clue. Michael, what do you think, right? What do we know about Peter so far? Well, his real name was Simon, but Jesus called him Peter, The Rock, and we also know that Jesus gave him the keys to the kingdom. So, anytime you see in art a character with a set of keys hanging around his hip, it's either John Estrum or Simon Peter, okay? It's one or the other. This morning, it is, again, Simon Peter, one of the best known and memorable accounts. In every translation that I could find, this section of the scripture is titled, "Jesus walks on water." But so did Peter, not for very long, but so did Peter. So, I'm going to invite you know to give attention to Matthew 14, and I really want you to listen this morning for something new.

(Lindy reads Matthew 14:22-34.)

Would you pray with me, please? Gracious and loving God, take this time and do with it what you will. As a gift of the Spirit, use it to remake us from within. Amen.

I'd invite you to take out of your bulletin once again the Weekly Inspire, and I want you to fold it in half so the back side is showing. Underneath the word "worship," it says "sermon resources." We're trying to get you into the habit of being ready to really listen for something that you want to remember, either something that you think of yourself or something that you hear in the scripture, or, who knows, maybe once in a while even something the preacher says. We want to give you a place to write those things down so that you can take it with you, put it in your pocket, take it home with you. There's also other resources there every week. I'm going to refer to one of the books there this morning.

There's a little quiz this week. I don't know if you guys saw it by now and took a shot at it, but we're in a four-part series on Simon Peter. Simon Peter is easily the second most significant character in the New Testament. Do you remember how many references there are to Simon Peter in the New Testament?

You can say it out loud. We're talking this morning. More than 150. It's hard to name an exact number, you know, to be precise, but what important about this is that, if you add up all the references to all the other disciples, it's less than 50 – if you add all the other one's up. So, Peter has a huge place in the story of Jesus and in our Gospels. Do you remember where Simon was born? This is all the way back to week one, two weeks ago. I mean, I know we're really reaching back, but it's important because it's going to come up again this morning. So, Simon Peter was born in a place called Bethsaida. Now, Bethsaida was a little Sea-of-Galilee-town, and we'll see that again in a minute. Do you remember what his brother's name was? Come on, take a real risk. Be crazy, Wayzata Community Church. Andrew. Yeah, I heard from a couple of you right away. Andrew was his brother. His brother Andrew was a disciple. True or False? True. His brother Andrew introduced Peter to Jesus first. True or False? True. Andrew and Simon together were carpenters. True or False? That should have been everybody in the room. False. They're big fishermen. This we know. This is their profession. This is what they did. This is who they are. Anyway, I want you to use this (the note section on the Weekly Inspire) and to be blessed by that.

More than anything in this series, I guess our aim is to invite you to explore the authentic transformation that Simon Peter experienced so that you might experience it for yourself. One of the resources is this terrific little book that Danielle turned me onto last summer, *The Gift of Being Yourself*. David Brenner writes this, and it really speaks well to the over-all aim of this sermon series. He says, "Knowing God and knowing self are interdependent. Neither can proceed very far without the other. Paradoxically, we come to know God best, not by looking at God exclusively, but by looking at God and then looking at ourselves. Peter could not truly know God apart from knowing himself in relation to Jesus. He did not know Jesus until Jesus showed him who he was. Deep knowing of God and deep knowing of self are always developed interactively. The result is the authentic transformation of the self that is at the core of Christian spirituality." That's the primary aim of this series - that authentic transformation of the self, based on what we see and experience in God, and in Jesus, and, in this case, in Simon Peter.

Now, whenever we venture into ancient scripture, it's always important to know the context. There are a few realtors in the house. I happen to know this for a fact, and realtors will tell you that when it comes to real estate, there's three things – location, location, location. When it comes to diving into the Bible, there are three things – context, context and context. If you take scripture out of its context, you do violence to it. You always have to hold it within the context of the intention of the writing behind it. In this case, today we're going to look at the context of this passage that you just heard read. Where were the disciples? Where were they going? What had just happened? What was going to happen next?

Now, as a reminder here, we're going to get a little geographical assistance from our slides again. A quick review of the Sea of Galilee. This is really important to today's passage. (Puts picture of Sea of Galilee on screen.) About eight miles wide, about thirteen miles north to south, and you've got the town of Bethsaida in the northeast side. You've got Capernaum with a little line under it. That's where Jesus and his followers used as kind of a home-base, and just above the 8 there is a town called Ginosar. That's the modern name for the town that was referenced in the passage today, Gennesaret. Now, in verse 22, it says that Jesus bade the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side.

Now, if we don't know where they are to begin with, how do we know what the other side is – right? – and, if you really want to understand context, and because it has meaning for today, let me be clear. To know where they are going, we have to know where they are. To know where they are, we have to know where they've been. Matthew 13, the chapter right before this, puts Jesus and the disciples in Nazareth. Why do I know that? Because it's the passage that talks about a prophet goes without honor in his hometown, - a prophet, not without honor except in his hometown. Well, it was Jesus' hometown. It was Nazareth – right? So, we know that they were in Nazareth. Nazareth is not going to be on this map, but just a little bit to the left and down – a little west and south is where Nazareth would be.

Now, Matthew 14, this chapter begins with horrific news. Herod has beheaded John the Baptist. Do you remember this? His daughter. He says I'll give you anything for your birthday, and the little girl requests John the Baptist's head on a platter, and Herod makes good on that, and why it matters is because it speaks to frame of mind. John the Baptist was not only the one who paved the way for Jesus; he was Jesus' cousin. So, we know Jesus, when he heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place. Jesus just wanted to be alone. He wanted to take a break from the demands of ministry, and he takes a boat to get away, but the passage goes on. It says, "When the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the shore." Jesus can't find anywhere to land because everywhere he goes to land his boat, there's a crowd of people that always shows up because they're following him out on the water. You can imagine. So, if they journeyed up from Nazareth, in the bottom left corner, they probably went to Tiberius, probably hopped in boat there and started cherry picking the shore line up towards Ginosar, up to Capernaum. Okay?

So, he finally kind of gives up on avoiding the crowds, we think, at Bethsaida. Okay. So, we're back where we started, back in Peter's home town, back to a place that would have been friendly to Jesus, and it's there that he went ashore and saw a great crowd. That's right before the passage for this morning. He had compassion for them, and he cured their sick. There's no rest for the weary in Jesus here. This is where he feeds five thousand. This happens just before the passage you just heard. And, again, all of this speaks to state of mind. All of this context really matters. The very next thing is the passage, and what a day this has been for Jesus. He tries to get away to grieve his cousin, to grieve his friend and his mentor. Now, so that's where we pick up.

After he dismissed the crowd, after they fed them, and he dismissed the crowd, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. What a day. Crossed the lake at least twice, first from west to east and then from east to west that night. Now, let's take a look at the next slide here because something went wrong. When you go from east to west, and a storm comes up, what happens? It's going to blow you in the wrong direction, right? It's going to totally blow you off course. We're going to see in just a second that that's exactly what happens. Evening came, and the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land for the wind was against them.

Now, two other quick contextual notes that matter. This so far has all been about where. The geography of this matters. What also matters is the boat and the wind for full understanding. So, the boat, probably about 16 feet long and seven feet wide, could hold about 14 people or so, and you're

saying, "JR, how do you know that? It sounds like you're making it up." Well, we didn't really know this for sure until about 1986 when the Sea of Galilee was at historically low levels, far enough out, in fact, that it revealed the frame of a boat in the mud. They dug it out. They concealed it in a special kind of foam. They took it to a lab where they preserved it perfectly. They were able to carbon date the wood back to the first century – back to the time of Jesus. You can still see what they call the "Jesus boat" on display to this day. Lindy's been there. Anybody else in the house today been in that room? Raise your hands high. Hillary. Who else? All the way in the back. Can't see. So, a few of you have been there and seen this – the actual boat on display. Now, a replica of the boat would probably look at little something like this. This may be the closest we can guess to what that boat would have been. Again, 16 feet long, maybe seven, seven-and-a-half feet wide, might hold up to 14 people. You could row it. You could sail it, and you could certainly fish from it.

So, again, why does this matter? It's all context. Speaks to the state of mind of the disciples and of Jesus. Now, the wind also really matters because the disciples were in a little boat like this, and they were making about a seven mile journey from Bethsaida to – we didn't exactly know where yet. It was at night. The boat is battered by the wind, far from land, and the only thing – see if this resonates with you – the only thing scarier than being on a lake in a storm is being on a lake in a storm at night with big waves far from land. Can I get an "amen?" There are few things more frightening than that, and that's the context here. Now, I had a chance to be in a boat on the Sea of Galilee about 25 years ago. (Shows photo on screen.) Now, this was way before selfies, and yes, that was long before the gray hair settled in, and that was with my good body Dick Flynn there, but we were out on the Sea of Galilee during daytime, and the weather was fair, but it wasn't great. It was a little windy and there were some waves. This is an actual photo from that day. I wanted to place it with the previous slide, the obligatory self photo from a trip, but this was nothing like what the disciples faced.

But, I did notice something that day. I noticed that the topography around the Sea of Galilee creates a very volatile and dangerous setting for people who are on the water. As the wind gains speed on the elevated plane, it races down the hillside and into the gullies, and in those gullies it intensifies like in a wind tunnel, and then it shoots out across the water. You can imagine that night. Big waves. Far from land. It's in this context that the miracle of Simon Peter walking on the water took place. It's been a long day. John the Baptist is dead. They crossed over to get away. They ended up having to feed 5,000 people. They finally sneak away in their little boat, and up comes a storm out of nowhere. Early in the morning, he came walking toward them on the sea, but when the disciples saw him walking on this sea, they were terrified, saying, "It's a ghost," and they cried out in fear, but immediately, Jesus spoke to him and said, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

I want to shift from the context, sort of from the Bible study portion to just two important points, more like a sermon now. Jesus comes to the disciples in the midst of a storm, and he still does the same for us today. God's promise throughout scripture is God's presence, and Jesus will himself, in just a few chapters, make a similar promise at the end of Matthew's gospel when he makes the great commission – to go and reach all the nations, and then he says – do you remember what he says? – "And remember, I will be with you always." He didn't say, "I'll be with you tomorrow and maybe for a couple weeks." He didn't say, "I'll be with you, you know, maybe from time to time." He said, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age, even to the end of the earth."

Now, before you dismiss that notion, dismiss that idea of Jesus coming to you in the storms of your life, before you think that cliché worthy of a Hallmark Card, I want you to really think about it. I want you to get in touch with the last time you were really in a storm, one that came up quick, one that came in the darkness with big waves, when you felt far from any stable ground. More than anything, what brought you comfort? What brought you hope? What brought you courage? I'd be willing to bet that somebody's face just came to mind for you – that in that storm someone came to you and gave you the gift of their presence, pure and simple. Notice that they didn't take the storm away from you. The storm of a diagnosis or the storm of death or the storm of just a profound disappointment was still there, but you had somebody by your side. That's the very face of God, and the people that are really good at doing this, people like Lindy Purdy, they show up and then they shut up. My friends, this is the face of God right here in front of you in my friend Lindy, and I know many of you have seen her in that moment in the midst of a storm in your own life, and we hope that all of our pastors and clergy have those great sacred moments with you in the example of Jesus to come and be his hands and feet, to come to you in the midst of the storm.

I see my friend JoEllen, and I didn't get her permission to tell this, but JoEllen's mom died last week unexpectedly – Ruth, here every week – and I called JoEllen yesterday and just chatted with her a little bit, and one of the first things she said was that she couldn't wait to get to church today. She was really hoping she could come and be here. I'm so glad you're here, JoEllen. She said not only was it her thing with her mom – they came together every week – but also because she knew that she would find in this place a room filled with Jesuses, the very presence of God in the midst of a storm for her, that came out of the blue, that she didn't see coming and has put her in a dark and sad place, but more manageable by the presence of God. I wish we could take that pain and that loss away from you, but we can't. But we can be with you through it.

I mention those prayer cards at the beginning of the service every week. Danielle gave me a little report on those. We've had about 50 of those come through just in the last month, representing all kinds of things in the family and in the life of the church, and we're holding those in a sacred trust - your telling us about the storms of your life, those places where you need us to come and be. Just as Jesus came to the disciple in a storm, he comes to us in and through others and says the same thing, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid."

Now, we've learned a little something about Jesus in that. Let's make sure we learn a little about Simon Peter, also, and then we'll be done. We can learn a little about Simon Peter because he takes a walk on the wild side, doesn't he, in this passage? Stepping out of the boat? A walk on the wet and wild side. It says, "Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it's you, command me to come out on the water,'" and Jesus said, "Bring it on!" Jesus said, "Come on." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. I've always thought there's a fine line between courage and crazy – right? – and I think this scene for Simon Peter in my mind sort of toggles back and forth between those two things of courage and crazy. First of all, it's Peter's idea. Jesus didn't call him out of the boat. Have you ever noticed that? Jesus didn't say, "Hey, come on out, Peter." Not like two week ago when Jesus asked for his boat and then asked Peter to go out into the deep water and drop the nets again, and remember

what Peter said? “If you say so.” This is not an “if you say so moment.” This is Peter taking initiative on his own, saying, “If it’s you, I’m coming out.” Jesus says, “Bring it on. Don’t be afraid.”

This sounds courageous to me, but then I remember. It’s at night. There are big waves. It’s far from the land. They’re in the deep of the lake. That sounds crazy to me. I’ve been in a canoe in the middle of a large lake in the boundary waters and wanted nothing less than to get out of that boat. I mean, that’s just crazy, but isn’t that what we have to learn from Peter? - that life is getting out of the boat, and everything else is just waiting. Life is getting out of the boat, getting out of the safety of our own little comfort zones. A guy named John Ortberg made this phrase famous. He said, “If you want to walk on water, you gotta get out of the boat.” It’s simple, but it’s really hard because we like our little boats of safety and comfort and knowledge and ease. We like our little boats where everybody in the boats looks like us and talks like us and worships like us. That’s easy. We like that, our little 16 foot by 7 foot boats of comfort.

But Jesus didn’t dare him or beg him to step out of the boat, but when Peter was ready to, Jesus said, “Come on. Bring it on,” and Jesus comes to us in the storms, but sometimes, we have to go to him. Life is getting out of the boat. Everything else is just waiting. It says, “When Peter noticed the strong wind – remember, Jesus didn’t take the storm away from them in that moment – “When Peter noticed the strong wind, he started to sink, and he cried out, “Lord save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Peter the Rock sank like a stone, but Peter’s failed walk on the wild side is a tremendous testimony to the things upon which Jesus will build his church, and those things are not things of performance or perfection or piety. Those are things, instead, like failure and losing faith and having the courage to find it again. It’s more important, my friends, to have right failures in life than it is to have right beliefs. Huge, important distinction, and Peter shows us that, and in and through that, we learn about God, and we learn about ourselves.

You know, for Peter, in this moment, what he learns about himself comes from Jesus, and it’s easy for us to read these words of Jesus while Peter is sinking in the water as him chastising Peter. “Oh, you of little faith. Why did you doubt?” Right? It sounds like he’s sort of chastising him, but I hear something different. I hear the voice of a proud Jesus, saying to his follower, “Oh, Man. What happened? You were so close. I had you the whole way. Trust me more next time, Peter.” That’s what I hear. In his boat moment, Peter learned as much about Jesus as he did himself, and I want to praise God for the moments in life when the same thing happens to us.

So, let me just close by getting you to reflect on your own life right now. What is the context of your life? Context, context, context. Is there a storm brewing, or are you in the eye of it? Have you just come out of it? Do you need Jesus to come to you, or do you need someone else to come to you? Are you in a place where you can go and be with someone else? What is the context of your life right now? I would invite you to discern that as you go from this place today, knowing that what we learn about God teaches us about ourselves, and what we learn about ourselves in the very same moment teaches us about God.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, thank you for Simon Peter, for his crazy form of courage, for his faithful and failing efforts. Help us to see ourselves in him. Help us to place ourselves in this story of yours this day and all days. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.