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Encore! Encore!

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TEXT: Matthew 14:22-33 (ESV)

Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

And Peter answered Him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

"Encore! Encore!"

People will sometimes shout that after witnessing a great musical performance. And if we shout loudly enough or applaud long enough, sometimes the artist will come out and play one more for us. Well, in today's story from Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus giving His disciples an encore performance, you might say. Again, the context for this story is important; the disciples have just witnessed Jesus performing an amazing thing

– feeding over five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes. How do you top something like that? I can hear Peter say to his brother Andrew, “Jesus is really something else, isn't he? I'd like to see more of this.” I'm sure the crowd would have agreed with Peter that day. But after this magnificent performance of power, Jesus immediately puts His disciples into the boat, and sends them on their way. Then He quickly dismisses the crowd, sending them on their way as well before they got any big ideas, like trying to make Him their king who could take care of them from now on. He didn't want that. After all, He had a mission to accomplish. Jesus then goes up on the mountain to pray, to be alone with His Father for a bit.

That was important to Jesus. He needed that time to face every day. I think if He needed it, how can I reasonably say it's not a priority for me, that I don't need it? We all need time with the Father each day, don't we?

Well, meanwhile, back in the boat now, which is very far from land, the disciples have run into trouble. A great wind blows in. The disciples are struggling to keep the boat afloat amongst these big waves that are beating the boat around in the sea. And it's all happening late at night; in fact, it's pitch black out there, about three o'clock in the morning. Why is it that these things always seem worse in the dark? Well, they're exhausted and totally overwhelmed by the situation. They're fighting the winds to make headway but the gale winds are winning the battle. Now they're afraid. And then to top it off, they think they're seeing ghosts approaching them over the water and now they're terrified. And then they heard a familiar voice, the encouraging voice of Jesus. “Take heart. It is I, don't be afraid.” That “It is I” phrase is more than a mere identification, like, “Hey, guys, it's me.” These words are an awesome form of self-revelation, revelation of God. The Greek words used there are “εγω εμι” (ego eimi), which is the name God used of Himself in the Exodus story, in the calling of Moses into leadership, and also in Isaiah 43 as God identifies himself in a courtroom scene before his people. So Jesus is presenting himself to the disciples as the solid and saving presence of the eternal God. He's basically saying, “God's here with you in this storm.”

It's interesting that at the beginning of Matthew, Jesus is referred to as “Emmanuel” – God with us. So these are really powerful words of encouragement that Jesus is giving. The question is: did the disciples get it? Well, the story goes on. Peter answers, “Jesus, Lord, if it is you, command me to come out to you on the water.” Jesus commanded, “Come,” almost as if to say to Peter, “I dare you.” And Peter obeys Jesus. He climbs out

of that boat before anyone can stop him to go to Jesus. And lo and behold, he finds himself actually walking on water with Jesus. Can you imagine how that felt? The adrenaline rush, the sense of “I think I’m having an out-of-body experience. Pinch me, somebody, I must be dreaming.” Suddenly, though, he notices out of the corner of his eye this gigantic wave coming his way to just douse him. And he feels himself to be now in an impossible situation. “What in a world was I thinking and doing this?” Peter got into a panic as he focuses on the wave coming his way, he begins to sink. His faith is wavered on the waves.

He has the wherewithal, though, to cry, “Lord, save me,” confessing at once his helplessness and also his hope in Jesus. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him and pulled him up. Here we see His grace and love and mercy at work. That reminds me of an old hymn:

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more.
But the master of the sea heard my despairing cry
And from the waters lifted me, now safe am I.
Love lifted me, love lifted me.
When nothing else could help, love lifted me.

And with the wind still blowing and the waves raging around them, Jesus asked him, “Oh, you have little faith. Why did you doubt?” It’s a good question, a fair question. After all, Peter has just seen Jesus do something great, previously: the feeding of the five thousand. There’s both faith and doubt at work in this scene with Peter, isn’t there? And before we giggle about it, Peter’s small faith, at his expense, let’s be reminded that Peter’s story is not so different from my story and your story when you think about it. Some of us profess our faith in Jesus and call him “Lord God,” but we also find that there are moments when trust wavers sometimes, when we’re facing scary circumstances in life, when things aren’t adding up. There are those times of sickness or the death of a spouse, as we wonder, “Why was this person taken from me? How am I supposed to go on alone after all these years?” Or there are financial hardships that come our way at times: “How am I going to provide for my family now? Where are you, God?” And sometimes faith wavers in the midst of obediently joining Jesus in mission. We set out to join Jesus in doing some amazing things in the world that we sense He’s calling us to do, but then the winds of adversity and opposition and rejection hit and our faith gets a bit shaken.

Years ago, when I sensed Jesus calling me to bring about some major change in my congregation's ministry as its leader, I started out so full of confidence. But there were so many moments of doubt when the going got tough along the way. And I found my faith was wavering a bit. A small faith is what I discovered I had. Maybe I thought I was crazy to do this at times, leading my congregation in this direction. I was having doubts. I had this sinking feeling, as Peter did.

So why does this happen? Why do we doubt? It's a fair question Jesus is asking Peter and us as well. I mean, we might reason, after all Peter has seen (amazing things from Jesus already, great works of power), so why does he fear and doubt? But we have the advantage of knowing the Easter story, don't we, where Jesus conquers the power of death and is vindicated by God who resurrected Him? His assurance to be with us always to the end of the age is there for us. What is it about us, the doubts? Is it our sinful nature? Maybe we're questioning whether God really cares and has our best interests in mind. But when we look at the cross, the cross tells us that's not true. He laid down His life to rescue you and me. "Greater love has no man than this: that He lay down His life for His friends." Still, we're a lot like Peter aren't we? Sometimes our faith is so small, yet the object of our faith continues to be so big and to show up as we cry out to Him.

I like what biblical scholar Robert Smith writes about this episode. He says,

To some extent the life of the post-Easter community, the church, is played out ahead of time in the experiences of the twelve disciples. Among the twelve, Peter is representative of the twelve. In this narrative on the sea, Peter stands forth, not as an incomparable hero, but as an example of varied facets of the Christian communities' life: all mixed and mingled in disciples of every age, boldness, even rashness, and obedience, fear, and prayer, littleness of faith, and confession. When we look at Peter, it's like looking in a mirror and seeing ourselves. And we exclaim, "Hey, that's me!"

Well, when they got back in the boat, the wind ceased. The storm was over. Jesus has now shown himself to be Lord, Master, over the wind in the waves. Lord over the sea and nature. As I said earlier, man, what an encore! Jesus has done it again; power over the wind and the waves as well as feeding five thousand. He is amazingly powerful. Now in the boat, after they got back in, the disciples worship Him. And they say,

“Truly, you are the son of God.” That's what He wants from you and me. He wants each of us to see and understand who He really is, and profess our faith in Him and believe in Him, knowing that He's the Son of God who has left the glory of Heaven to not just be with you, but to save you from your sins. Knowing that He is your savior from sin and death, to be trusted and followed in all circumstances. Knowing that He holds the future, your future, in His hand. In Matthew's story of Jesus, we observe again and again friends and foes who are staggered by the weight of Christ's presence, struggling for understanding Jesus. But the disciples of Jesus who follow Him progress from understanding to understanding. And today, we see them ascribe to Jesus, the highest name of all: “Truly, you are the son of God,” they say.

I find it interesting that the next time we see this exact title being used about Jesus is in a most unlikely setting: it's at the cross, after Jesus breathed His last. And these same words come from the lips of a non-Jewish person, “Truly, this is the Son of God.” One might say it's no great miracle there. Ah, but there is. God's rescue plan was happening. Sin was being paid for, and when seen through the eyes of faith, that's the greatest action, most powerful action of all that Jesus did; followed by another encore: Easter morning. And a week later, we hear Thomas, one of His disciples, exclaim, upon seeing Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” See, eventually, they really got it. Oh, they continued to waiver as we see, and be afraid like we all do, but they really got it. And the question I have for you today is, have you? Have you really got it? He came to save you and be your everlasting friend. He wants to take a walk with you. As you walk with Him through the Gospels, you can see for yourself who He really is.

And we see that this Lord over the wind in the waves is, first of all, a “3:00 a.m. friend” we can count on. In my church, we talked about the importance of small groups and developing “3:00 a.m. friends” that you can call on when life is overwhelming. Even if it's 3:00 in the morning, they'll come and be with you. Interestingly enough, Jesus came to be present with his disciples at 3:00 a.m. in the midst of their trouble. He's a “3:00 a.m. friend” you can count on. He's God come to be with us, Emmanuel. Peter learned that as he was sinking and crying for the Lord's help: immediately a hand reached out and took hold of him, the hand of Jesus, and got him back in the boat. And that's good news for us. Even though our faith is small, Jesus faithfully proves Himself to us over and over again until we can sing with the hymn writer, “Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him, how I proved him o'er and o'er.”

Not only is He our “3:00 a.m. friend”, He’s worthy of our worship, isn’t He? Notice, they not only believe in Jesus, they worship Him. And also notice He doesn’t stop them or correct them, does He? He doesn’t blush and say, “Oh, stop it you guys.” I believe He smiled in response to their worship and confession of faith. He’s not only worthy of our faith, He’s worthy of our worship and praise as we serve and obey Him as the master over our own lives.

Last, we see He’s someone you want to keep your eyes on as you follow Him. Sometimes Jesus commands us to step out of the safety zone and security of our boat and do with His help the seemingly impossible. N.T. Wright writes in his commentary about Peter jumping out of that boat these words:

There are many times that Jesus asks us to do what seems impossible. How can we even begin to do the tasks that He’s called us to? How can we even think of doing without that sin which we’re being asked to give up? How can we really suppose we might be able to develop a serious habit of prayer when we’re so frantic and disorganized? How can we really afford to be that generous with our money when the economy looks so bad? Seems like a risky idea.

That sounds familiar, doesn’t it, “little faith?” Wright then goes on to say,

Of course, if like Peter, we look at the waves being lashed by the wind we will conclude that it is impossible. So what we are called to do, it’s so basic and obvious but so hard to put it into practice, is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our ears open for His encouragement, even if it does contain some rebuke for us as well. And our wills and hearts must be ready to do what He says, even if it seems crazy at the time.

So there you have it. What a story, what an encore! He’s ready to do more encores in your life, friend. I don’t know where you are in relationship to Jesus or what you might be going through right now in your life, but I do know this as you turn your eyes to Him and cry out, “Lord, I need you, help me,” He will not turn you away. He loves you. He died on a cross for you. He rose again and calls you to have a relationship with Him. Scripture is inviting, appealing to you today to turn your eyes upon Jesus in faith.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.