

“When Was the Last Time You Tried Something Great?”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-29 “The Great Commission”

John 6:16-24 “Peter Walks on Water”

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Have you ever been scared of something? I mean really scared. Maybe it was a first date, a job interview, going whitewater rafting, or bungee jumping. For some, it is sitting in a plane waiting for takeoff. When have you been “white knuckle” scared?

Several years ago, S.L. Porter celebrated his 90th birthday by bungee jumping off a 210-foot platform. He was interviewed afterwards and said, “I’m cold, I’m tired, and may I please have my teeth back!”

When anxiety enters our life, fear can slow down our steps and cause us to seek the comfort of complacency. Fear creates a powerful inertia. The longer the step to overcome fear is avoided, the greater the barrier to overcome. It is not surprising that fear can create a life of its own. FDR said, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself,” making us cower and seek cover in safe places.

Where do we go to have our fears alleviated? Today we look at a famous event found in John 6:16-24.

“When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake to Capernaum. By now it was dark and Jesus had not yet joined them.” Jesus compelled the disciples to get into the boat because he knew they were in danger. The crowd was so pumped up and there was a movement swelling up among the masses following him to make this miracle worker the king. But before the scene could turn into a political rally, and the disciples' egos overly inflated, Jesus thwarts their plans and sends them out in the boat across the Sea of Galilee. Verse 18 states, “A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.” The rough water raised the anxiety level of the disciples – a storm was coming in and there was a race against time. When the going gets rough, the tough get rowing. And row they did. They headed toward the closest shore. They were rowing hard but did not make much progress because they were rowing into the storm. About halfway across, something very strange happened. They saw Jesus approaching the boat – walking on the water. This even made them more terrified. In Matthew's version of the story, we read that the disciples thought they saw a ghost. But Jesus said, “It is I; don't be afraid.”

John's version of the story raises several questions: If Jesus knew what was going to happen, why did he send the disciples out into a storm? Was he testing them? Warren Wiersbe says another reason for sending them into the storm was to balance their faith. They had seen great miracles and now faced great fear – both necessary to learn to trust Jesus. Wiersbe believes that strong faith must have two experiences – the experience of God doing great miraculous things, and the experience of God calming our fears and getting us through the white-knuckle moments in our lives.

In the Old Testament story of Job, God is bragging about the faith and devotion of his servant, Job. The devil, being cynical, says, “If I were very blessed, of course I would trust in you. I want to see how Job's faith stands up when life is in shambles – his foundations rocked.” It was only when Job trusted God after having everything taken away that the devil was satisfied that Job's faith was real and not conditional on life going his way.

Reasoning has led many people to be suspicious of the public faith pronouncements of celebrities and professional athletes. Anyone can say, “I owe everything to Jesus” if that person is winning championships and making \$3 million a year! Perhaps we learn more from the mistakes we make and the consequences of our failures than we do from our successes.

Sometimes we're stuck in storms because we have disobeyed God. Look what happened to Jonah when he headed in the opposite direction from God's call. Christians down on their luck ask the question, “If I am following Christ, why am I going through difficult trials?” You need to examine your life. Maybe your motives are out of balance and your poor decisions and bad habits are taking you away from where God wants you to be headed. Sometimes we're stuck in storms because we have disobeyed God.

Other times we face storms because we are being obedient to God's will and plan for our lives. That is what happened here with the disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian leader in Nazi Germany wrote the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Being faithful in an unfaithful world makes you a target of hatred and sometimes violence. Just look at the martyrs for peace around the world. **God is not our strength from storms; he is our strength in storms.**

Jesus spent the majority of his ministry preparing his closest followers and teaching them the lessons of faith that growth in life requires courage to overcome what we fear and to take bold risks. See what happens to those that act on advice and take risks. After Jesus tells the disciples not to be afraid, Peter jumps up and says, “Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus replies, “Come.” Peter, fearless, got out of the boat.

Just picture the disciples. James was hollering to John to get out the net – ready to rescue you-know-who. Doubters like Thomas saying, “Great idea. Jesus almost kills us in the storm and *now* we lose Peter!” I wonder what they thought when Peter took his first few successful steps. Wow – Let me try!! The bandwagon effect.

In Matthew 14:30 we read, “But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!’” (You don't see the wind – you see the effects of the wind. Peter lost his confidence and took his eyes off Jesus – the one whose power enabled him to do the impossible.)

My take on this is that Peter believes Jesus' vision and dream of doing something important. At first, the power of the Spirit carries him, but then the effects of doubt take over. We might ask, “What if I fail – how will I recover?” We so often get off to a quick start, but pull back to a level of comfort if we receive the least bit of negative feedback. It is clear that Jesus selected Peter for leadership. He had the instincts and the courage and the vision to achieve great things for God.

Ministerial renewal emphasizes a plan of study and the need for strategic planning. If we are not creating some level of tension in the church by pushing people where they need to go but are not really comfortable, we are not being effective leaders.

It is similar with parents. If we are so set on protecting our kids from the consequences of trying things, making mistakes, and trying again, that we stunt their development; if we are so fearful of the world that we prefer to be spectators, watching things from a safe distance, then we run the risk of raising a generation of scared spectators.

Sixty-nine percent of children have a television in their bedroom. The world is a scary place when viewed from the eyes of a child watching television. They have a cell phone for a lifeline when anything is threatening.

In Matthew 14:31 we read, "Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him." We have always heard this as a rebuke - "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Or, "You wimp - come on, don't you have the heart of a champion?" And it ends simply (v.21), "They climbed back into the boat, then the wind died down."

Observation 1: You don't have to walk on water or be perfect to do great things for God. We all are flawed, but those who take risks, overcome fears, and step out in faith will have a more rewarding and faithful life than those who "play it safe."

Observation 2: The disciples were not at that time a confident group of men. They were learning, doing things out of their comfort levels while Jesus protected them. The hard lessons were learned in private. Peter, who had the most vision and courage, was never made to look like a fool in public. The fact that he became the leader was an indication of the natural leadership Jesus had to start with. It is the aspirations that make the man. Peter had huge aspirations. He stepped out of the boat time and time again and got results.

When was the last time you tried something big for God?

- Have you tried to patch up a struggling friendship?
- Have you attempted to have a regular prayer time?
- Have you taken some steps towards holding yourself accountable to change some of your destructive habits?
- Leave that comfortable but boring job you have and try something more challenging in line with your gifts.
- Commit to being a loving spouse, a dedicated parent.

As I've grown older, I've become a spectator. I have a more realistic opinion of myself. I am more aware of my shortcomings and have grown more cautious. I play it safe. In our Prayer of Confession today we said, "I am content with what I have done and not overly concerned with what I have left undone." Sins of omission and commission.

Although there is safety in being aware of the dangers in life, there is greater danger in letting our calculated fears keep us from trying to follow where Christ might be calling.

Peter was no fool. He had vision. The rest of the disciples stayed in the boat, but when Jesus bid Peter to step out and do what seemed humanly impossible, Peter jumped out in faith.

Researchers at the Center for Creative leadership in Greensboro asked seventy-six highly successful women in major corporations if they had ever failed on the job or taken a career misstep. Nearly 85% reported at least one major setback. The most frequently mentioned failures were the failure to sell one's ideas and the failure to carry through on ideas. Yet, all the prominent women ultimately succeeded because they pinpointed their fears, challenged their weaknesses, and went on to risk leading again.

The next time you are afraid, remember this story. Remember that the one who calms the storms in your life also gives you the ability to do the impossible if you will only just step out in faith. Sure you might fail, but Jesus is there to pick you up and put you safely back in the boat until you can get your courage up to try something great again. But do try again!