



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Face of Faith: Stepping Out”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 3: 1-12; Matthew 14: 22-33

October 5, 2025

Those who were with us last week may recall that our second reading, this morning, is a repeat. It's a story that could grab our attention for weeks, if not months. In the midst of this fall series in which I am reflecting upon the Facebook responses I received to the question, 'What does faith look like?' however, we will take just these two weeks, focused particularly on Peter's part of the story. So, allow me to share with you, again, these words from Matthew 14.

Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

28 Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Last week, of course, we spent some time digging into Peter as the forgotten portion of this narrative. The notion that Jesus walked on water is the piece that gets all the attention, while I would argue that it is equally, if not even more, stunning to consider that Peter did as well! And, to some extent, we are working our way backwards through Peter's experience in this passage. Last Sunday we focused on Peter out in the water, walking atop the water while his sights were set on Jesus, sinking when his sights turned to the threat at his side, and then rising again when his sights returned to Jesus. The point I tried to make was that nothing is going to keep the waves from coming in our lives, but the choice of where to set our sights when they come will have a significant impact on how well we ride out the storm.

Today, however, I want to go a few moments earlier, before the sinking, and the waves, and even those hallowed steps that Peter took on top of the sea, and I want to look at one singular moment of this story. Listen again, starting at verse 28, “*Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ 29 He said, ‘Come.’ So, Peter got out of the boat...*” That’s where I want to stop. That’s the moment that I want to look at today!

There’s part of me that is fascinated by the initiative that Peter takes here in even raising this possibility of walking out on the water towards Jesus. Remember, Jesus doesn’t bring up the possibility of Peter walking on water – Peter does! So, I’m genuinely compelled by the question of what was going through Peter’s mind in that moment. Was this a proclamation of faith? ‘I know it’s you, so let me come to you.’ Was this more of a test, a ‘Doubting Thomas’ moment of his own? ‘I don’t buy that it’s you, so prove it by having me come out to you?’ Was it something else altogether? It’s an interesting question that I think could impact the manner in which we read the story, but regardless of what was going through his mind when he raised the possibility, the result was the same: *‘Peter got out of the boat...’* I think the notion that Peter walked on water deserves a lot of our attention, as we discussed last week. Perhaps even more critical than the fact that he walked on water, however, is the fact that he got out of the boat in the first place.

Just try to imagine that circumstance. Peter stepped out of that boat in the middle of the sea! Remember, there’s no precedent for this. Admittedly, Peter has seen Jesus do some remarkable things by this point, but he’s never seen this before. It’s not as though Peter has watched other people walk on water and figured that the time had come for him to have his turn at it. No, Peter took that step solely on the basis of his conviction that Jesus could and would empower him to do it. That’s the key! In the end, it doesn’t matter if Peter’s initial motivation in this was grounded in his confidence or his doubt that it was Jesus out on the water, because in either case that step that Peter took out of that boat was grounded in his fundamental conviction that Jesus could and would empower him to do something theretofore never imagined – to walk on water in the middle of the sea!

The comment on Facebook that sent me down this path was a comment made by a colleague and friend, Bill Rafuse, who serves our sister church in a small town called Rapid River in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In response to my question of what faith looks like, Bill’s simple statement was that faith looks like ‘stepping out of the boat in the middle of the lake.’ I was compelled by that comment because the story of Jesus walking on water is what gets the attention in this passage, and the notion of Peter walking on water is striking when we consider it. Jesus walking on water – and Peter doing the same – is a profound reflection of the wonders of God that were made known in and through Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. The true moment of faith and trust for Peter, however, came just before that. The true moment of faith and trust for Peter came not when he walked on water, but when he stepped out of that boat in the confidence that God, in Jesus, would take it from there! The remarkable act of God’s faithfulness in this story is reflected in both Jesus and Peter walking on water. The remarkable act of Peter’s faithfulness, however, comes in the moment of stepping out of the boat in the first place.

I included that early portion of Moses engaging with God in that burning bush as much as anything, this morning, as a reminder of the challenge that is stepping out of the boat in that faith. Those early verses of Exodus 3 are just the beginning of that long back-and-forth between Moses and God in which God keeps telling Moses to step out of the boat, only to have Moses offer one excuse after another in an attempt to stay within the safety and security of the circumstance with which his is comfortable and familiar. I included that early portion of the conversation between God and Moses as a simple reminder that there's nothing easy about stepping out of the boat – that even those we glorify as the heroes and exemplars of faithfulness are prone to hiding, obfuscating, redirecting and doing any and all things within their power to stay in the boat. And we do the exact same thing – because we like it there.

It's comfortable in the boat. It's familiar in the boat. We feel as though we have some extra protection from the windward vicissitudes in the boat. But, far more often than not, the greatest opportunities for faithfulness, service, and extending God's love to the world around us aren't with us in that boat – and the only way we can pursue them is to find that faith to trust in God to step out onto the water in an attempt to meet that moment of faithful service that has been set before us.

I've talked about a particular scene in the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade in the past, but Chuck Petersen brought it up in conversation with me after worship last week, so I'm going to bring it up again. In the movie, Indiana Jones is seeking out the Holy Grail so that he can use the power of that grail to save his dying father. In his journey, he has to accomplish a series of tasks to reach the location of the grail – one of which is crossing a large underground chasm far too wide to traverse and so deep you can't even see the bottom. To do so, he has to take a 'leap of faith.' And he does. He catches his breath, calms his mind, sticks his leg out in front of himself and takes a long stride out into the heart of the chasm – but he doesn't fall. The camera pans out and, in classic 1980's movie magic, reveals this stone bridge that was so perfectly camouflaged into the cavern wall that he couldn't even tell it was there. Now that he has taken the step, he sees the path, he continues across, he retrieves the grail and, sure enough, Sean Connery lives after all.

The 'leap of faith' tends to be an overused term and concept, but the underlying notion that we can't forget is that, often, the greatest act of trust we have in faith is to take the step. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said that 'you don't have to see the whole staircase, you just have to take the first step.' Whether it's 1980's movie magic, mid-century reminders from a civil rights legend, or Peter in that moment some 2,000 years ago, the lesson remains the same – the greatest act of trust we have in faith is to take the step out of the boat – out of the comfort – out of the familiarity – out of the seemingly protected surroundings that keep us warm and dry, all while holding us back from the life of discipleship to which God is calling us.

There is risk to faithfulness. Even Moses, who fought tooth and nail, eventually came to that conclusion – and we all know what happened next. Some of us are more risk-averse than others, and the context and details will be different from one to the next. I am convinced, however, that there is some corner of our lives – each and every one – in which we are sitting in that boat and looking out towards Jesus who is clamoring for us to take that step, and we have a choice to make. It won't necessarily be easy, and the waves very well might come crashing upon us. The

simple and undeniable truth, however, is that we will never walk on water if we don't start by 'stepping out of the boat in the middle of the lake.'