

“How to Keep Your Head Above Water”

Matthew 14:22-33

Series: Follow Week 4. Danger

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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One of my most cherished places on earth is the Sea of Galilee. It's not really a sea like the Mediterranean. It's a lake surrounded by sloping hills, craggy peaks and fertile plains. You can stand on the shoreline and take in the whole thing. Jesus spent the majority of His three year ministry around this body of water. Thankfully, it has changed little since His day. There are no Starbucks, Walmarts, or McDonalds to tarnish the view. It's easy to picture Jesus walking over the hills and teaching by the shore.

Now I made the mistake in telling my most recent tour group I've walked almost everywhere Jesus has been. Someone who will remain nameless, Arlene Sevens, decided to challenge me. "You've stepped every place Jesus has?" "Yes," I replied. "How about there?" and she pointed to the Sea of Galilee. With everyone watching me I took the challenge...and sank like a stone. Unfortunately, the group also got out of the boat and followed me. My real mistake was trying this on the Sea of Galilee. In the Holy Land, the best place to stay on top of the water is the Dead Sea.

So far in our *Follow* series Jesus hears He is God's Beloved in the Jordan, lays out the Blueprint of His Kingdom in Nazareth, and Begins His ministry by calling fishermen to follow Him in Capernaum. If you and I are to follow Jesus we must do the same. You discover you are God's Beloved before you do a single thing. With the help of the Holy Spirit you build your life using Jesus' Kingdom Blueprint. You are set free and you set others free. Then, as Martha said last week, you Begin Here – with who you are and where you are. You begin to follow Jesus one day at a time. Jesus' ministry starts small but it doesn't stay small. Mobs of the sick, hungry, poor and possessed follow Him. Such tremendous success is a recipe for danger. Threatening storms are gathering. Why?

Galilee is a tense and volatile area. In Jesus day, Palestine is divided into three regions: Judea in the south is the homeland of the Jews. Samaria in the center is the land of the Samaritans who are considered anything but "good" by the Jews. They hate and avoid each other. In the north is Galilee: a mixed bag of nationalities. In the Old and New Testaments it is called "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 9:1; Matthew 4:15). For centuries it had only a tiny Jewish population. The rest are Gentiles who worship multiple gods. In Jesus' day the Jewish population has grown but it's still pretty diverse.

It's a fertile area due to the Jordan River and the lake. Fish, olives and grains, sheep and goats feed the people. They are not rich yet neither are they desperately poor. The Via Maris – a major highway from Syria to Egypt passes through this region much as I-95 connects the east coast. Trade from all over passes through here. The Sea of Galilee is the intersection of three kingdoms – Herod Antipas on the west, his brother Herod

Philip to the northeast and the Decapolis, a Gentile territory, to the east and south. Generally speaking on the west side are Jewish villages and on east Gentile villages.

So Galilee is a soup of different religions, rulers and races. The success and growth of Jesus' movement in this small region starts to stir the pot. Some think He is turning up the heat from simmer to full boil. If you follow Jesus you can expect opposition. The forces which rise against Jesus are the same which push back on us. Use the insert in your bulletin to jot these down. Beneath each one, write a word or phrase which describes an example of that opposition in your life.

1. Ominous Threats The Romans made Herod Antipas the ruler over Galilee. When John criticizes Antipas' illegal marriage to his sister-in-law and cousin Herodias, Antipas throws him in prison and cuts off his head. Now he turns his sights on Jesus.

Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead. Herod said, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him. Luke 9:7,9

What is making you anxious right now? What threats arise when you do God's will?

2. Official Criticism Orthodox officials from Jerusalem are suspicious of rebels and rabbis from Galilee. Jesus, they claim, is too loose about the Sabbath and He has no right to forgive sin. They call him a blasphemer and a demon.

It is only by Be-el'zebul, the prince of demons that this man casts out demons. Matthew 12:24.

Are you facing criticism from supervisors, peers or partners? How do you respond?

3. Outright Rejection When Jesus casts the demons into the herd of pigs on the Gentile side of the lake the villagers tell Him to leave (Mark 5:1-20). Have you been rejected in the past or present? Was it because of your faith in Jesus? Does fear of rejection keep you from speaking about your relationship with Jesus?

4. Overwhelming Demands After hearing of John the Baptist's brutal execution, all Jesus wants to do is be alone and pray. Yet crowds of sick and hungry people wait for Him on the shore (Matthew 14:13-14). What demands bear down on you right now?

5. Overpowering Circumstances The disciples face a powerful headwind. What circumstances are beyond your control: literal storms, health problems, powerful addictions, downturn in the economy, unemployment? What's swirling around you now?

How do you keep your head above water? How do you follow Jesus through the danger? When Peter agreed to follow Jesus in last week's passage he never expected the pathway to cross water. Strolling on the sea in a storm may be the very last thing you want to do. You want to play it safe, stay secure, keep your walk with Christ quiet and

calm. There is only one problem. Sooner or later, the storms will find you. You may be in one right now. This miracle tells you what to do. Here's the first truth it teaches us:

See Jesus in the Storm. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus tells the disciples to get in the boat and cross the lake while He dismisses the crowd. It is a stressful day and He wants to call home, to check in with His Father through prayer. While He is on the mountainside conversing with His Father, the disciples head into a gale.

When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.
Matthew 14:23-24

The Greek says the waves "harassed, tormented, tortured" the disciples. On one trip to the Sea of Galilee I met the man who found a first-century fishing boat in the mud. The tiny craft is patched together. There is nowhere to hide. A storm can easily sink a boat weighed down with twelve men. Yet something terrified them more than the storm.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. Matthew 14:24

Sometime between 3 and 6 a.m. they look into the ominous darkness and see a phantom walking towards them on the waves. The storm makes them scared. This spirit makes them scream. Then the ghost speaks.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
Matthew 14:27

Why does Jesus send them ahead and then walk out to them? Is this a magic trick? No, it's a revelation – about Him and them.

Jesus knows they need to reach the end of their strength before they will trust Him. It seems unfair. Yet in counseling people I find many are not ready to accept a way out. They would rather obsess about the problem than seek a solution. They want to do it their way even though it keeps getting them into trouble. They will not admit they are wrong, offer forgiveness, change their habits, seek a counselor or join a support group. People ask me, "Why does God wait until I'm at my breaking point to come to me?" My reply is, "God asks you the same question. He's here in the storm waiting for you to stop rowing uphill against the wind." Your way got you where you are. Why not try His way?

It takes faith to see Jesus in the storm. At first, the disciples think He is a ghost. Then He reveals Himself through His words. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Jesus often says, "Take courage!" before He heals someone. Jesus and angels often say, "Don't be afraid." In the middle He says, "It is I" which is literally translated "I am" – the name of God. God reveals Himself in the middle of a storm. God is always with us but He really shows up in the storm when we come to the end of our power, when we stop trying to do it our way, when we reach the breaking point. See Him with the eyes of faith. What evidence of God do you see in the trouble you face right now?

Next, **Hear His Call**. What happens next is not entirely unexpected. Peter, the impetuous, the risk taker says,

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come,” he said. Matthew 14:28-29.

Again, a better translation of “tell me” is “command me.” This isn’t just a risky step. Peter is a seasoned fisherman. He knows you don’t walk on water. It has to be God’s idea not his. This is obedience. How do you hear Jesus’ voice in the storm? Here are three tools to help: prayer, Bible study and a trusted Christian friend. When those line up you are ready for the next step.

Third, **Step Out of the Boat**. Put yourself in Peter’s sandals for a minute. It’s 4 a.m. Storm clouds shroud the night. A violent wind whips the sails to shreds. Your tiny craft is rocking and rolling. Everyone else is clutching the ribs of the boat. Not Peter.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. Matthew 14:29.

Why would you leave the safety of the boat, grab the railing and go over the edge? For one thing, the boat is not that safe. Peter knows many boats go to the bottom of this lake. But beyond that, Peter knows the thrill of walking on the water waits for him out there on the waves. The only way to experience it is to get out of the boat.

What’s your boat? To what are you clinging? John Ortberg says, “If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat.”

Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don’t want to give it up even if it’s keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves.

Want to know what your boat is? Your fear will tell you. Just ask yourself this: *What is it that most produces fear in me – especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith?*¹

What’s your boat? What do you keep grasping even though it’s taking you down?

- Your job is stressing you out and stealing time from your family. You are scared to make a change now but you don’t know how much longer you can keep going.

¹ John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 17.

- A relationship is getting rocky. You're afraid it's going to sink. But instead of seeking counseling you just keep clinging to the old patterns and hope it will get better.
- Your health is not right. You've suspected it for a while. But instead of having it checked out or making changes you ignore it and hope the storm will just blow over.
- When life gets stormy you keep turning to that thing which gives you comfort. Lately instead of comforting you it's starting to control you and take you under.
- You want to be more open about your faith at school, at work. But it's so much easier to blend in and act like everyone else. You don't want to stand out or be kicked out. But you feel you're pushing Jesus away.
- You'd like to learn more about God and the Bible but you're afraid to join a Growth Group. There are plenty of excuses. But underneath it all is fear. What if you ask a foolish question? What if you don't fit in?

Fear keeps us clinging to the boat. It also prevents us from growing.

That's why the next step is **Look at His Face**. Imagine the thrill Peter felt to be actually walking on the water. Like a baby taking his first steps, Peter the fisherman is out on the waves he was taught to fear. He's moving toward Jesus. Then he looks down.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" Matthew 14:30-31.

Here is the reality. When you get out of the boat, expect to face fear and failure. I'm sorry to say it will never go away. All growth comes through risk and risk always includes fear and failure. But failure need not be fatal or final. Failure can be the lesson that leads you to a better future. Peter learned to look at Jesus' face. Don't concentrate on the wind or the waves. Little faith is looking all around. Larger faith is looking at Jesus alone, following Him and refusing to let fear or failure be the last word on your situation.

Finally, **Bend Your Knee**.

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Matthew 14:32-33.

What a day and night this has been for all the disciples. They watched Jesus feed thousands from a little boy's lunch, witnessed Him walk on the waves right through a storm and wondered at His ability to save Peter and silence the storm. You can expect two reactions when Someone that powerful steps into your boat: worry or worship. The disciples fell on their knees and said, "Truly you are the Son of God." From that moment on, they knew God in a deeper way. He is the one to follow.

It's time to step out of your boat and follow Jesus. Real life begins when you get out of the boat because that's where Jesus is. This week, Susan Harris-Miller, our Director of Mission and Evangelism helped some of us step out of our boat. Trish Shallenberger, a former member of Woodside, runs a mission called a Soldier's Hands. She sends gift bags of lip balm, sunscreen, and hand cleaner to service people around the world. Trish also puts in a star from a retired US flag and a hand written note of encouragement. Sue asked Trish how many cards and letters she needed. Trish said 600 but she told Sue to see if she could get 50. Sue agreed to get 50 but she prayed for God to give her 150. She didn't receive 50 or 150 from Woodside. You wrote 280 cards. That's what happens when you trust God and step out of your boat.

Jacob Outcalt came back from Christian camp with a mission to start a Growth Group for his High School friends. His sister Jenna joined him and they asked Director of Discipleship Meg Smith to help them. Meg said, "I'll help you but you have to be the leaders and our goal is to reach kids who don't have a church home." So they met, not at Woodside, but at Dunkin Donuts at 6:15 am. The first week it was just Jacob, Jenna and Meg. They weren't discouraged. Next week there were 6 teens. This week 7. They pray God will bring friends so they can meet in Donut shops all across town. That's what happens when you trust God and step out of your boat.

This week you will have the opportunity to trust God and step out of your boat. Some Christians think the greatest risk of all is stepping out and tithing – giving 10% of your income to God or, at least, giving more than you think is possible. Taking that step and significantly increasing your giving to God can seem like you are stepping out on the waves. If you do that, you feel like you'll go under. Yet the testimony of many is that when believers stop tightly clutching their funds, keep their eyes on Jesus and go farther in their giving, they grow from little faith to larger faith, they join Jesus on the adventure of a lifetime. And they make a huge difference in the lives of others.

Pastor Kevin Miller tells the story about his Dad, a good man who spent all his time and energy on earning money. It was the focus of his life, the lifeboat he clung to. Then, one Sunday, he decided to go to church with Kevin and his Mom. The pastor was full of old-time religion, and he gave an altar call. Something connected with Kevin's Dad and he went forward and began to follow Jesus. He was 60-years-old. He began to read a small, blue King James Bible, and for the first time in his life, he began giving with real interest. He said, "Kevin, I've started to tithe, and it's been a great adventure."

My dad passed away at age 70. At the funeral home, a woman I'd never seen came up to me and said, "You don't know me, but I was in a bad marriage; my husband was beating me, and I needed to get out to save my life. But I didn't know what I would do to support myself. Your dad paid for me to go to junior college and get a degree, so I could be a dental hygienist. He paid for the whole thing, and nobody else knew about it. Now I have a job, and I'm making it. Your dad literally saved my life."

Kevin's Dad let go of the boat of financial security, took a risk and followed Jesus. And when he died, he left behind a woman who knows every day it's a miracle she's still alive.² Are you ready to step out of your boat?

² Kevin Miller, "Financial Contentment," PreachingToday.com