

SERMON: Was Peter from Missouri?
TEXT: Matthew 14:22-33

August 9, 2020

I'm not originally from Missouri, so I didn't know much about it until I moved here 17 years ago. Of course, I'd heard of Kansas City and St. Louis, but that was about it. Well, except for the time I attended a friend's wedding in Columbia and learned about the humidity! I guess I also knew that Missouri was nicknamed the Show-Me state.

I finally did some research the other day to learn where that nickname came from. Apparently, there are a couple of stories that could claim to be the original. The most widely known legend attributes the phrase to a U.S. Congressman from Missouri who served in the House Committee on Naval Affairs in the late 1800's. Speaking at a naval banquet in Philadelphia, he declared, "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me."

Well, I guess I'll have to be careful not to go overboard with too much *frothy eloquence* from now on!

But are Missourians really that skeptical? Do we have to see before we will believe? Looking at current events and the stubborn refusal of many citizens to follow masking orders and social distancing guidelines, I would have to say that many Missourians seem to need more evidence that the coronavirus **is** extremely contagious and dangerous. Unfortunately, the *show-me* attitude in this case only results in more illness and even death.

You might be wondering what today's gospel lesson about Jesus walking on the water has to do with the Show-Me State. I promise, I'll *show you*, in good time.

I think most of us who have read this passage and heard it preached dozens of times, tend to think about how faithful and trusting and courageous Peter was, to step out of the boat with Jesus. He actually believed if Jesus could do it, he could do it. As the story goes, he did take a couple of steps on the water, maybe a few steps toward Jesus. "But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, *Lord, save me!*"

Thus, the message we typically hear is around our failure to keep our eyes on Jesus. That when we lose our focus on him and begin to be overwhelmed by the

storm around us, we sink. It's not a bad message, mind you. I'm sure I've preached something similar myself.

In fact, a number of years ago, someone gave me a book called, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. This award-winning book by John Ortberg is summarized as follows: *You're One Step Away from the Adventure of Your Life. Deep within you lies the same faith and longing that sent Peter walking across the wind-swept Sea of Galilee toward Jesus. In what ways is the Lord telling you, as he did Peter, "Come?" [The author] invites you to consider the incredible potential that awaits you outside your comfort zone. Out on the risky waters of faith, Jesus is waiting to meet you in ways that will change you forever, deepening your character and your trust in God.* (johnortberg.com/books)

Sometimes, when we're getting a little too comfortable in our life and in our faith, we need to be called out of the boat. We need to be challenged and inspired toward courage and risk-taking. But I'm not convinced that this is the message we need right now. Let's face it, we are all outside our comfort zone right now, and not of our own choosing. This storm of coronavirus is risky enough without testing the limits of our own potential.

As I opened my commentaries and studied the passage again, I found something new and intriguing. One commentary connected this story in Matthew with one that comes later in the gospel, when Peter refuses to listen to Jesus talk of his impending death. Jesus then rebukes him with the words, “Get behind me, Satan.”

“Peter is the first disciple, and the typical one,” the commentary says. “However, Matthew will shortly make it clear that even Peter can become the agent and voice of Satan. This potentially demonic aspect of discipleship is already present in this story.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark, p. 329)

Wow, that’s harsh! How can discipleship become *demonic*?

Let’s look more closely at these verses. “Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. [Then] he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning [Jesus] came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the

sea, they were terrified, saying, *It is a ghost!* And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* Peter answered him, *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*”

There it is. Did you hear it? Peter sounds like he might be from Missouri when he says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” **IF it is you.** Jesus has just assured them all that it really is him; he’s not a ghost, and they need not be afraid. And Peter responds, “*Show me. Prove it.*”

He still doesn’t believe. He puts God to the test. And now he does sound demonic. Peter sounds like Satan when he tempted Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness. “IF you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” (Matthew 4:3)

Furthermore, notice that Jesus does not invite Peter to step out of the boat until Peter challenges him. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus answers, “Come.” And we all know the rest of the story. Peter begins to sink, and calls for Jesus to save him. Jesus catches him, saying, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

Back to the commentary, “Faith is not being able to walk on the water - only God can do that - but daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm, battered by the waves.” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark, p. 330)

God is with us in the boat. And remember, the boat represents the church. And the disciples gathered there are the community of faith. When the winds are fierce and the storms rage around us, we need to huddle together - if not physically, then in Spirit. And we need to use the skills and talents we have to navigate the waves, to stay afloat, and to make it safely to the shore. This is not the time for risky behavior. This is not the time to put God to the test. This is not the time to question whether Jesus is real, to doubt the truth of God’s Word.

May we continue to hold on to one another, to stay connected, to be the church, and to minister in new ways. May we be strengthened and nourished by the body and blood of Christ at his table. And may we know that Jesus is with us and will calm the storm... to the glory of God!

AMEN.