

Jesus Is With Us

"Fear Not" Series, December 5/6 | Matthew 14:22-33

Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal

ARE WE ALONE?

Imagine hurtling through the vastness of empty space in a home roughly the size of a U-Haul truck.

That's roughly the size of the crew compartment on the Orion space capsule NASA is planning for the next set of missions into deeper space.

Right now, Orion is planned to carry human beings back to the moon.

Once we reach the moon again, we are setting our sights on Mars.

On the way to Mars, several people could be on an Orion-sized capsule for three years.

Scientists are thinking in a very focused way right now about the new and critical kinds of risks that astronauts would face. They're thinking about radiation and the lack of gravity.

They're thinking about the impact of being so far away from Earth. Here is a picture that one of our Mars landers took of Earth. From Mars, Earth looks like a star in sky.

And they're thinking about the impact of being isolated and confined. For a long time.

Life will get lonely.

That picture reminds us in 1,000 ways that we are not alone.

We may be a little more isolated from one another right now, but we are not alone.

We see people; we are able to go to stores.

We are able to text, talk on the phone, and video chat with people.

Some of us are even able to get together with some people some of the time.

We are connected in ways that an astronaut headed for Mars would envy.

We are not alone, and that statement is very comforting right now.

Still, we have a nagging question in the depths of our souls: Are we actually alone?

If you've ever felt alone in a room crowded with people, you understand what I mean.

We might not say it, particularly when we're around other people, because it sounds silly.

But deep down inside, some of us (many of us) wonder if we aren't actually truly alone, left to fend for ourselves in a cold, uncaring universe.

Seasons like the coronavirus aggravate that sense that we're alone.

The Bible addresses this fear head on with a message of comfort and hope.

JESUS DOESN'T LEAVE US

Matthew 14:22-25 records a time when Jesus and his disciples were worn out.

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.

Jesus and the disciples had all been through a trying time.

Just a short time earlier, Jesus sent out twelve of his disciples to preach the Good News, change the world, and announce the Kingdom of God in much the same way that he did.

While they were away, Jesus heard that John the Baptist, his cousin, had been executed.

When the Twelve returned, together they went by boat to a deserted place to debrief and rest.

From the shore, crowds followed Jesus and his disciples and were waiting for them.

Jesus had compassion on them and began healing the sick.

At the end of the day, Jesus miraculously fed the entire crowd.

After feeding the crowd, Jesus sent his disciples away by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He himself stayed behind with the crowd. Then he dismissed the crowd.

Jesus was still longing for time to connect with his Father.

While he was and is the Son of God, Jesus was still wrestling with and processing the death of his cousin. He was grieving. As dusk set in, Jesus went up on the side of a mountain to spend time with his Father in prayer. He himself was never alone.

Prayer is the language of God the Son's relationship with his Heavenly Father; it's exactly what he needed in a moment when he was tired and grieving.

Prayer is what connects us with God as well. It's how we relate to God. Prayer is also an "always on" kind of connection that we can access at any time.

In that sense, we are never alone.

However, Jesus surprisingly sent his disciples out into the wind and storm.

The disciples included fishermen who were accustomed to the Sea of Galilee, to handling boats, and even to rapidly changing weather patterns on the lake.

They managed to make significant progress despite worsening weather conditions. The Sea of Galilee is between four and five miles wide, and the Gospel according to John clarifies that the disciples had travelled between three and four miles. They were most of the way across.

But the weather worsened, and the wind became so bad that progress came to a halt.

The text implies that the wind was almost like a demonic power, that was fighting against them.

The disciples had to feel like the wind, the lake, the darkness, and the world was against them at that moment. Do you ever feel that way?

And isn't it fascinating that Jesus allowed them to go out onto the lake that night. Check that. Jesus sent them out onto the lake that night. It reminds us...

Sometimes, Jesus lets us “row the boat.”

Jesus knew what would happen when he sent them onto the lake.

Still, Jesus spent hours and hours praying. He didn't reach them until after 3 am.

In the meantime, he let them row their boat against the waves.

“Row the Boat” is the leadership philosophy of the head football coach for the University of Minnesota. For PJ Fleck, rowing the boat means that you never give up. The oar is what we bring to life, it's the energy we put into any given task and into life itself. The boat is the sacrifice you're willing to make, and the compass is the direction your leader sets for your life.

For the University of Minnesota's football team, PJ Fleck wants them to put in the effort, make the sacrifice, and keep things moving in the direction of excellence.

PJ Fleck talks about “rowing the boat” to mean that we never give up.

And Jesus let the disciples row the boat for a while.

Jesus won't always take our struggles away either. That doesn't mean he doesn't care or that he isn't with us. Jesus is always with us, even when we're rowing our boats. However ...

JESUS SAYS, “FEAR NOT”

In Matthew 14:26-27, we read that Jesus reached the disciples in the boat.

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.”

Naturally, they were terrified.

When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, it's not clear that they recognized him. They hypothesized that what they saw was a ghost, since normal people don't walk on the water. They may have even thought that something demonic was coming for them.

What is clear is that they were afraid of what they saw. They were terrified.

The Bible adds that they cried out in fear. I'm sure that's not normal for experienced fishermen.

They had the same reaction to Jesus' walking on the water that people normally have to angels.

However, Jesus told them to “fear not” and comforted them with his own presence.

He told them to “take heart” or muster their courage.

Then he identified himself. In some ways he simply said to them, “Hey, it's me!” The fact that it was Jesus, and not something else, was meant to drain away some of their fear. The fact that Jesus was now present with them was also meant to reassure them. It is reassuring to us to know that Jesus is present with us.

Then he said those familiar words to them: “fear not.”

This is not the only time Jesus told us to “fear not.”

When Jesus called his disciples in the first place, he knew that the life they were about to live and the commitment they were about to make would and should frighten them. In Luke 5:10 Jesus said,

*"... **Do not be afraid**; from now on you will be catching men."*

When Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration with three of his closest followers, it seems that heaven opened up, those disciples caught a glimpse of the spiritual realm, and they saw Jesus glorified. They were overwhelmed by the experience, because this wasn't anything they had experienced before, and it was frightening. Matthew 17:7 reads,

*"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and **have no fear.**'"*

After Jesus rose from the dead, angels appeared to humans to announce Jesus' resurrection. Of course, they began with "Fear not." In Matthew 28:10, we read that Jesus himself appeared in his resurrected body to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Jesus said,

*"... **Do not be afraid**; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."*

Even in Revelation, when John saw the resurrected and glorified Jesus, his presence was so overwhelming that even after a lifetime of knowing and following Jesus, John was terrified! Jesus said to him in Revelation 1:17-18,

*"... **Fear not**, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."*

Can we hear these words from Jesus?

We find ourselves in frightening situations over and over again.

Every time we find ourselves in these frightening situations, we know on some level that Jesus is with us, even if we are having trouble wrapping our minds around it at the time.

Can we hear Jesus saying, "Have courage and take heart?"

Can we hear Jesus reassuring us, "It's me?"

Can we hear Jesus encouraging us, "Fear not?" And can those words bring peace to our souls?

JESUS IS GOD WITH US

We find out for certain that Jesus is God with us in Matthew 14:28-33.

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."

Peter asked the key question.

Peter heard Jesus' reassurance that he was present with them and that they should not fear.

When the figure on the water said, "It's me," Peter still wondered who that was.

Peter asked back, "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water."

It's an odd question, really. What was Peter driving at? Was he asking if it really was Jesus?

If it really was Jesus and if Jesus were truly able to walk on water, then Peter knew that Jesus would be able to pass that power along to him. Jesus had handed power off before!

But there's more to Peter's question, perhaps even than Peter realized.

By "Lord," Peter may have meant "Master/Teacher," as it normally means in the gospels. However, there may be more.

"Lord" is also the Greek translation for the name of God, "Yahweh."

Peter's question could be, "Yahweh, if that's you..." Jesus' identity is the real subject here.

Who was Jesus?

Jesus had already answered the question.

When Jesus said, "Take courage," he didn't simply add, "It's me, Jesus. You're safe."

Instead, Jesus said, "It is I!" His words were the closest direct translation of the Hebrew name for God, "Yahweh," which means "I am who I am"

When Jesus said, "Take courage," he added "I am. The Great I Am has shown up."

Jesus has already answered Peter's question.

Then Jesus demonstrated that he was indeed God with us.

Surprisingly, Jesus said, "Come."

In response, Peter got out of the boat, walked on the water and walked right to Jesus.

But Peter's initial bravado melted away when he saw the wind and waves. He became afraid and doubted. When he doubted, he began to sink and cried out for help.

Jesus "immediately" reached out his hand and grabbed Peter.

Jesus chided Peter as he pulled him back up out of the water.

Together, they crossed to the boat.

The once-terrified disciples now helped Peter and Jesus into the boat.

As soon as Jesus and Peter were safely in the boat, the wind died down.

That's something only God can do. Nature only answers like that to its Creator.

The disciples worshipped him as "Son of God."

They said "truly" Jesus was the Son of God.

It seems here that the disciples have come to understand and embrace the idea finally.

However, clearly the disciples didn't fully understand what they were saying.

Instead, they were just beginning to wrap their heads around what it meant. They knew that he could work miracles and that even nature obeyed his every command.

They still needed to come to understand that his power demanded their faith and obedience.

Jesus' divinity was the real issue in this passage, and it's one of the critical issues in the New Testament!

It's something God the Father had said himself in Matthew 3:17 when Jesus was baptized:

... and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The demons concurred and confessed the same thing when Jesus cast the out in Matthew 8:29:

And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"

In Matthew 16:16, we still find even Peter still learning what this claim meant: Simon Peter replied,

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In Matthew 26:63, we read that the Jewish religious leaders were wrestling with the question at Jesus' trial:

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

1 John 4:15 reminds us that, when we grasp the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and allow that truth to grasp us, we are never alone again. It reads,

"Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God."

PULL JESUS INTO THE BOAT WITH YOU!

I can picture the disciples pulling Peter and Jesus into the boat.

Of course, it's possible that Peter walked right up to the boat, hoisted his leg over the side, and hopped right in. It's possible that Jesus did the same.

Given the wind and the waves, I think it's far more likely that, as Jesus and Peter made their way toward the boat, the disciples in the boat had finally realized that Peter was out there on the water and that the person in the dark was actually Jesus. I imagine that they were anxious, waiting to get them both out of the dangerous water and into the relatively safe boat.

As Peter and Jesus got close, I can just see the disciples hanging over the side of the boat, reaching out to them both. As first Peter and then Jesus made it to the side, I imagine that multiple pairs of strong arms hoisted them, one at a time, out of the water.

As soon as Jesus' feet touched the boat, the wind stopped. It didn't die down. It went away.

The question we began with is, "Are we alone? Are we really alone?"

The further we dig into Jesus' encounter with his disciples on the stormy waters, the more we realize that we are coming right back to the nature of Jesus and to the mystery of Christmas.

Jesus told them to "fear not" and to "take heart." Why? Because "I am. I am with you. I AM is with you."

That's the central meaning of Christmas. As John 1:14 says,

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

The Son of God, the Word of God, God the Son, God Himself, Yahweh took on human flesh and crossed the divide between Creator and created to come to us and become one of us.

He is as the prophets say, "Immanuel," God with us. And he has never left us.

Our lives really are like boats.

At times, the boats of our lives are tossed on rough waters.

For a while, Jesus knowingly lets us row the boats of our lives against the winds.

Then, in the dark of the night, he comes to us.

At first, we are afraid. Terrified even.

But then we realize it is Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

In that moment, we face a decision. Will we pass by and keep rowing all by ourselves? If we do, then we are truly alone, and that loneliness is something we have chosen for ourselves.

Instead, pull Jesus into the boat with you. You will never be alone again.