

***Surviving the Storm* – Matthew 14:22-33**

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August 9, 2026

One of the monikers we ascribe to Jesus is the title of “servant leader.” He sacrificed himself for others, found his power in his submission to death on the cross, all for the sake of the children of God. He put others first, ceding to their well-being before his own.

Therefore, there’s a temptation to think of Jesus as a more passive guy. His choice not to retaliate in the face of physical abuse following his conviction and in the act of dying proved his submission to his fate. This demanded incredible strength.

Despite this passivity or submissive streak, there’s no doubt that Jesus exerted an assertiveness far more frequently during his life. Rarely was he aggressive (the time he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple is about the only thing I can think of). Instead, he was often assertive and direct in his teaching and in his call upon the lives of those he interacted with, taught, and even offended.

He did not shy away from conflict. He openly and vehemently challenged the hypocrisy and corruption of the religious leaders of his day.

He frequently set boundaries on his time and mission. When crowds or even his disciples tried to steer his path or overwhelm him, he refused to succumb to peer pressure, often withdrawing to pray or shifting locations (as we see in the opening of our text today “he went up on a mountain to pray”).

And he spoke the truth in love. When interacting with marginalized people—such as the woman caught in adultery—he

was profoundly gentle yet uncompromisingly straightforward about sin, telling her to "go and sin no more".

All these examples of his assertiveness bring us to the meat of this story today. Immediately following his feeding of the five thousand, Jesus was not passive in his interaction with the disciples. As you'll notice, he didn't invite, hint, or request that the disciples get into a boat. No, he made them. In fact, the word in the NRSV is a little softer language than some translations, which translate the Greek here as "to compel, to constrain, to force."

This verb appears only nine times in the entire New Testament, and in every instance, it carries the weight of a command rather than invitation. Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He put them in that boat the way, as one scholar put it, a teacher puts a test on your desk. You did not ask for it. You may not be ready for it. But it is here, and you are going to take it.

"The announcement of a test is often the catalyst that opens us to a deeper kind of learning. It is the thing that makes us go back to what we skipped, sit with what we avoided, and reckon with what we thought we already understood. Jesus has been teaching these disciples for chapters. They have heard the Sermon on the Mount. They have watched healings. They have just participated in this massive feeding. They have been in the classroom of faith, and now it is time for the test, which comes in the form of a storm." (Zina Jacque, *Working Preacher*)

Now, it appears that this storm in which the disciples found themselves while in this boat, isn't just a little squall where the wind kicks up a little and escorts in a rain shower for a brief time. The text says the boat "was battered by the waves." "Tossed by the waves" or "tormented" is how other translations put it.

So, it's a terrifying moment for the disciples and a test of survival and, ultimately, a test of their faith.

And in this precise moment of terror and despair, Jesus shows up.

Imagine the worst storm of your life. Imagine, metaphorically speaking, you being bruised and battered to the point where you are fearful of your ability to survive. And you know that, off in the distance, God is there. And amid the high winds, the flooding waters, all the damage around you, amid the catastrophe of brokenness everywhere—health, relationships, livelihood—Jesus invites you to approach him.

What will you do? This is the test.

God does not bring tragedy into our lives, we—all of us—who are so precious to him. And yet, amid these awful moments that do happen, we are tested. We have decisions to make about what we will do amid the chaos.

And every time we face a crucial moment, we can choose God, who in the person of Jesus is near and extends a hand to us. Will we have faith that we won't sink as we walk toward him?

For the disciples on this day, the decision to move toward Jesus was only able to be made in the heat of a test. And that's often true for us too. Only in a moment of extreme crisis do we often move toward the one who says, "Here I am. It is I."

When things are going well, when our marriages are thriving, our kids and grandkids are excelling, our careers are flourishing, and our bodies are humming along flawlessly, there's an absence of major tests to our faith. They're more like pop quizzes—2-3 questions that are easy to answer: *How are things going? Great. How blessed are you? Very blessed! Thank you, God. Will you walk with me? Absolutely! Anything you'd like, I'm there.*

But when the bottom falls out of our lives, that's when the major test comes. Will we walk across that choppy water to Jesus who has his hand extended? Will we pass that test of faith?

Five years ago this month, my first marriage ended. And for those of you who were here, you witnessed the "skubalon show" that was your pastor and your pastor's wife divorcing right in front of you. It wasn't pleasant.

And amid that whole thing and into its aftermath, there were moments when I passed that major test and chose God. You helped me. But, there were moments also when I failed. I chose not to accept the outreached hand of God who asked that I have the faith to walk toward him in very choppy waters. The pain was too brutal, the anger and heartbreak too consuming.

The church also has similar moments. We do a pretty good job at times of leaning on God—when our budgets are brimming with surplus, when our memberships ooze a healthy mix of children, young adults, and seniors, when we're all in sync over cultural issues and the church's voice amid them. But at times when we face our biggest tests, in our deepest moments of challenge—church splits, membership loss, divisive theological or social issues, financial woes—do we collectively choose God, or do we sink into the sea?

One thing was constant for me, though, throughout both my choosing and not choosing God amid that divorce, and the same is constant for us as the church when we either embrace Christ or not: Jesus is always there. He doesn't disappear; in fact, he often becomes more visible in that period of time—even in those moments when we just can't make it to him, when we don't choose him.

In this Matthew text today, after Jesus made the disciples get into the boat, he went up on the mountain to pray by himself. The disciples were on their own. And yet, when the storm came up, threatening the guys on the boat, he shows up walking on the sea.

In their moment of deepest need, he shows up. Ultimately, he saves Peter when his lack of faith sinks him into the choppy waters. And that's what led to their confession—"truly you are the son of God."

Sometimes we choose him, and sometimes we don't. And yet, Jesus always shows up.

Zina Jacque, a pastor and leadership consultant, wrote of this lesson: So when the test lands on your desk, and it will, remember who put it there. The insistent, even bossy, Jesus who compelled the disciples into the boat is the same Jesus who shows up [in the middle of the night], when every resource is spent, and the only answer left is three words long ["It is I"].

"The storm is the test. The test is the teacher. And the lesson learned in the belly of a storm is the lesson that lives and holds you through the next test, and the next. It is the lesson that drops you to your knees and fills your heart with a post-test confession: Truly, you are the Son of God."

That's how we survive the storm.