

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon: Stormy Seas Dr. Scott Dudley

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Well, hello, BelPres. Thank you for letting us be part of your Sunday morning worship and Happy Mother's Day to everyone. God, as we turn to your word, ask that you would help us to learn from it and be empowered and emboldened by it. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, I'm sure most of you have noticed that every TV commercial that's COVID-related, they all sound the same. There's tons of them going on right now and they all sound the same. Depressing music going on in the background while a voiceover says, "In times like these, unprecedented times, now more than ever, we're here for you. Jack in the Box is here for you." Awesome. Thank you. Then there's the obligatory, "Though we are apart, we are together, we're all in the same boat." Then they always end with the same thing, "Be safe. We want you to stay safe. Safety is our number one concern."

I always cringe a little bit when I hear that word safe. Now being safe as a good thing, I like to be safe. But for me and for many of us, one of our biggest idols is safety and one of the things this crisis is doing is it is purging me of my idols. It's revealing all of the idols, those things I turn to other than Jesus for comfort and strength and encouragement and all of those things. Safety is a big idol for a lot of us, I think, but we are now in a situation where we are not safe. But I believe that God can use times like these, unprecedented times now more than ever, to use these times to purge us of our idols and make us braver people.

One of the churchy phrases you sometimes hear is people will say, "The safest place to be is in the center of God's will." Oh, eek. Seriously? Have you read the Bible? Read the Bible. The prophets were beaten and jailed. God told Isaiah to preach naked. That ain't safe. Jesus, who is God in the flesh, was crucified. Not even God is safe in the Bible. The book of Hebrews says that the heroes of the faith faced jeers. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawed in two. They were killed by the sword. Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?

God's will is the most exciting place to be. God's will is the most meaningful place to be. Every mountain-top experience I've ever had in life has been because I stepped out of my comfort zone to follow Jesus, to do something he asked me to do that scared me, but it wasn't safe.

Now, obviously, we shouldn't take stupid risks. God gave us a brain, he expects us to use it and, for sure, there are times that God protects us and comforts us. But there's a big difference between being comforted and being comfortable. The idea that God's job is to keep us safe has a whole lot more to do

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with American culture than it has to do with the Bible or with Jesus or anything like that because we are the most seat-belted, airbagged, kneepad-wearing, bike-helmeted, hyper-insured, sunscreen-slathering, protected, inoculated generation in history, and it's done nothing, but make us more afraid. Now we face a real danger. COVID spreads very quickly and can kill especially vulnerable populations.

Then there's a whole economic impact. Tens of millions of people are out of work, some slipping into homelessness, which also causes death. People are home more so domestic violence is through the roof. And the UN estimates that 50 million kids are going to starve to death this year because of the economic disruption of the virus. We are not safe at all.

But what if, what if, what if Jesus is going to use this, this time to make us braver people? Because here's the thing, our safety idol itself isn't safe because it wrecks our lives. So for starters, it's an illusion. We were never safe to begin with.

A while back, I read a news article about freak accidents that have happened in the last hundred years. So, for instance, in London, at the turn of the century, a giant vat of beer exploded and created a wall of beer 25 feet high. Eight people drowned in beer. Some of you right now are like, "Well, if you got to go, that's the way, right?" In Boston in 1910, there was a vat of molasses that exploded and oozed molasses out onto the street killing 21 people, 21 apparently very slow people. Like, eek, molasses, run for your lives.

We were living in denial. We were never safe to begin with. Certainly for most people in the world today and historically, war, violence, poverty, plague, that's just the norm.

Then this week, oh, my goodness, that horrible video that emerged were Ahmaud Arbery, an un-armed innocent black man out jogging was killed by white people. People of color are not safe, and we should lament that and grieve that and demand justice because that breaks God's heart.

Second problem with our safety idol is it shrinks our lives, the relationships that never deepened because we won't have the uncomfortable conversation to work through conflict. The daring prayers we'll never pray for fear that God might actually answer them. And the more we try to stay safe, the more we shrink our lives until, pretty soon, everything terrifies us. Nobody, nobody ever achieved greatness of soul or an impact in the world by playing it safe.

Then the final problem with our safety idol is it shrinks God. He becomes our celestial seatbelt and nothing more. But the God who comes to us in Jesus is far more concerned that we live life to the fullest, knowing that eternal life awaits us on the other side, than he is about keeping us safe. We see that in a Bible story in Matthew Chapter 14 where Jesus' 12 disciples are out in a boat, in a storm, and Jesus calls one of them, Peter, to get out of the boat and walk on water.

The context is that Jesus has just finished feeding 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and some fish and the disciples were part of that, so they're probably thinking, "That's a good day at the office, right? Miller time. Let's relax. Let's get a little bit of R&R."

But the text says immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat to go ahead of him to the other side, made them get into the boat. He made them. Right there, Jesus pushes them out of their comfort zone. He's saying, "No time to rest now, guys. There are more adventures to be had. Get in the boat. Let's go."

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Then Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray because prayer is vital. Then the text says, "Later that night, the boat was a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it." So the disciples are in a storm. Do you ever feel like you're in a storm and the wind is against you? The job problem, the school problem, the relationship problem, the health problem, lots of storms that we find ourselves in and I want you to notice something. Notice the disciples are doing exactly what Jesus told them to do and they still encounter a storm. So much for God's will being safe.

Now God didn't cause the storm, but here's the promise. God may not cause the storm, but he's in the storm. And just because it's hard doesn't mean that God's not in it. Just because your marriage is hard right now and you feel like the wind is against it, it doesn't mean that God's not in it. Just because it's hard to talk about Jesus with other people, doesn't mean that God's not in it. God may not cause the storm, but he is in the storm and he is working for our good in the storm to make us braver, more compassionate and closer to him.

We're always looking for God to come to us in comforting and comfortable ways. But can you recognize God when he comes to you in the middle of your fear? When he comes in the middle of your pain, when he comes and he shows up in the middle of your storm, can you see him there? I think it's important to point out, as some people have been pointing out, that right now with this whole COVID thing, we are all in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. COVID is more dangerous for older people and people who have preexisting conditions. Some people still have jobs and other people don't. For some people the disease is their storm and for other people it's the economic impact that's their storm.

I think one of the ways God may be calling us to grow in this season is to gain more compassion for each other by picturing ourselves in someone else's boat, especially now as the argument about opening up or locking down is starting to divide us. Because you know what would be super helpful right now is a little more division because we don't have enough division in our culture, so let's be divided on this, too? So maybe if you're an open-up-right-away person, maybe put yourself in the boat of someone who is at higher risk for this disease or a healthcare worker. Likewise, if you're a stay-locked-down person, put yourself in the boat of someone who's unemployed and maybe even about to become homeless. Then now, how does that tweet or that post sound, if you kind of hear it through their ears, and you might want to word it just a little bit differently. We're all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat.

So the story goes on, it continues and it says, "Shortly before dawn," so 4:00 or 5:00 AM, "Jesus went out to them walking on the lake and they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and they cried out in fear." They were scared of Jesus. It's what the Bible calls the fear of the Lord. See, we tame Jesus, we domesticate Jesus, but he is God in the flesh who spun trillions of galaxies into existence. That's a lot of power.

I remember once standing at the base of Hoover Dam and feeling this mixture of excitement but also fear and awe and wonder because it was so big and you could just hear the energy humming inside of it and it was this mixture of awe, but also fear. Jesus is all-powerful, all-consuming love, which is good news if you're in a storm. Because when you're in a storm, you don't want some kind of milk toast, wimpy, safe savior in a storm. You want Jesus who the Bible describes as the lion of the tribe of Judah. He's not a house cat because there's never any need for a house cat ever. So Jesus shows up walking on the water and then he says, "Take courage, it is I." Notice he doesn't say, "Take comfort." He says, "Take courage, it is I."

My wife and I recently watched the movie Harriet, amazing movie about Harriet Tubman who was a slave in the South and escaped to the North and then made multiple trips back to the South at the risk of her life to lead other slaves North to freedom and very dangerous. She was a passionate follower of Jesus and she didn't so much pray, "Lord, keep me safe," as she prayed, "Lord, give me the courage to do your will." That's a very different kind of prayer.

What if, what if Jesus didn't come to comfort you in the storm, but to make you brave through the storm? Because, see, here's the thing. Confidence does not come from finding a lake that doesn't have a storm on it. Confidence comes from knowing that you have Jesus with you in the storm. When we know that he's with us, we don't just survive the storm, we are given the power to walk on top of the storm, which is what we see next in this story when Jesus comes walking on the water, Peter says, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."

Okay, let's pause and think about that for a minute. You're in a boat and it's the middle of the night and you're in a storm and Jesus comes walking to you on the water. Is this what you say to Jesus? "Call me out of the boat so I can get out there, too?" Is this what you say to Jesus? No, of course not. You say, "Jesus, make the storm stop. Jesus, keep me safe. Jesus, make it go away."

But Peter doesn't ask for the storm to stop. He asked for the power to walk above the storm. In this story, Jesus does not improve Peter's condition. He improves Peter through his conditions. Notice Peter says, "Lord, if it's you, call me out," because Peter ain't getting out of that boat unless for sure it's Jesus that's calling him. That means we don't just take silly stupid risks because they're there. That's dumb. You don't jump out of a plane without a parachute and say, "Jesus make me fly." We risk in response to God's call.

I think this is kind of what I would like the take-home point of the sermon to be or it might be for you one of the take-home points. Notice this. Peter doesn't ask for a guarantee. He asks for a command. In the middle of the storm, Peter does not ask for a guarantee of safety. He asks for a command. That's a game-changer. That is a game-changer.

What would happen if you stopped asking God for guarantees and started asking God for commands? Lord, in this storm, what do you want me to do? Then pay attention to what the Bible says to do and then those nudges that might be coming from God and then do it. Because here's the thing, you don't know that you can walk on water until you get out of the boat.

Notice Peter gets out of the boat while the storm is still raging because, see, I think that's important. Because sometimes we're like, "All right, I'll do what you say, God, when conditions are a little better, when I have more time, when I have more money, when things slow down." And Jesus says ... in the middle of the storm, "Come on, come on. I can give you power to rise above the storm."

How would it change our experience of this crisis if we're not asking for a guarantee, but a command, "Here I am, Lord, send me?" See how different that posture is. "Lord, make this storm stop." That's a fine prayer. "Lord, help our scientists to find a vaccine fast." That's a good prayer. That's a fine prayer. But it also is kind of disempowering. Whereas "Lord, here I am, send me," do you feel how empowering that is? It gives us courage.

So Jesus says to Peter, "Come." Then Peter got down of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus because, see, sometimes the best place to be in the storm is out of the boat. Sometimes the best place to be in a storm is out of the boat doing what God has called us to do, loving, caring, serving.

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Look what Peter got. Peter gets this awesome adventure. Like, how cool is this? I always kind of picture Peter on the water looking back at the other 11 disciples in the boat going, "Check it out, guys. I'm walking on water in a storm. Pretty cool. I'm the man."

Then the story continues. It says, "When Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me.'" Does this ever happen to you? Maybe you start to do something you think God asks you to do and it turns hard and it's difficult and you start to sink? Maybe you try to forgive someone, but unforgiveness just keeps rising up in you? Or maybe you get up in the morning and you're feeling really good, but then one news story, one angry email, and it's a wave and you sink?

This is the point in this story where preachers start to beat up on Peter. You know, "Oh, Peter, he didn't have enough faith. He lost his faith, didn't have enough faith." Really? I mean, the dude got out of a boat in the middle of the storm and started walking on water. It seems to me he had a ton of faith. Now Jesus does say to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" But it's more a question than a rebuke. I'm not sure Jesus' comment is about the amount of Peter's faith. I think it's about the duration of Peter's faith. Like, "You started so strong, Peter, why'd you quit? Why'd you give up? Why so soon, Peter?"

Then the text says that Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Because when the waves overwhelm us and they always overwhelm us, no matter who we are, when the waves overwhelm us, Jesus picks us up again through prayer, through scripture, through worship, through people, to encourage us. See, just because Peter sank does not mean that he failed or if he did fail, there were 11 bigger failures sitting back in the boat, the other 11 disciples playing it safe, too afraid to get out of the boat.

Peter at least took a few steps on the water, and I got to believe that those 11 other disciples, I got to believe they regretted that the rest of their lives. Like every time they looked at Peter, they had to think, "Stupid Peter. I could've walked on water. I was about to walk on water, but Peter went first. Peter always goes first. Stupid Peter." In fact, in the gospel of John's version of this story, John conveniently leaves out the fact that Peter walked on water. I wonder why John did that.

If we get out of the boat, here's the thing, guys. If we get out of the boat, we will, guarantee, we will fail. We will. In fact, Jesus may be saying to us, he needs us to fail more. He may be saying to us, "You're not failing enough," because lack of failure usually means we're not doing anything that's super risky. See, failure is not an option. It's a necessity. Failure is not an option. It's a necessity. We cannot grow without failures.

You know, in this time here at church, we're having to figure stuff out. Like, how do we do ministry in this new environment? How do we bring God's healing? How do we make online services more engaging because it's a different medium? We're going to try some things, we're going to try new things. Some of them won't work and some of them will.

One of the things that is working is in this storm we have heard God command us to help care for families in need because of this crisis. One of the ways we're doing that is to provide groceries for families in need in partnership with Jubilee REACH. Hundreds of you are doing this. Oh, my good-ness. Thank you so much, BelPres. Hundreds of you are doing this and right now we are helping 465 families who need food. That's over 2,000 people. That's a big number. Thank you, BelPres.

Recently, we got an email from one of the families that we're helping and I want to read it to you. This is what it said. "My family is made up of four beautiful daughters. Dad worked in a restaurant, mom in a kitchen at a school and 2018 was a very hard year because we found out that a person had done much

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wrong to our 16-year-old when she was 14. It was really painful because of the process of having to declare all of this and everything that happened made us remember that pain all the more."

"Well, this year our 16-year-old daughter wish to celebrate her sweet 16 with a dress, dance, friends. But then this terrible virus came along and all of our plans will not be a possibility and it would've been something to distract our daughter from all that had happened. Because of COVID, Dad and Mom are not working and there's no money for rent and there's no money for food. But God loves us so much and people like you exist," talking to you BelPres. "Although we don't know you, you've become very important in our life because without your help, we wouldn't have food in our house. I thank God because good people like you exist. Thank you for thinking of us."

In the storm, we are doing our best to ask God for a command and the grocery project is one of the commands we've heard and it is helping 2,000 people, more than 2000 people. Just as a PS to this story, a woman in our church heard about this and provided this family with a party in a box. So balloons, food, that sort of thing, so that this girl could get her party after all.

So this week in the storms in your life, whether it's COVID-related or other storms because there are other storms, too, ask God for a command in the storm. Even if you're home-bound, you can pray. Prayer is so important. Prayer is where the battle is won.

Or maybe it's to be a little uncomfortable and lament Ahmaud Arbery's murder and not turn away and not look at it and not move on to the next thing in the news cycle, but maybe let it sink in and lament and being a little uncomfortable with that. Or connect with our justice and reconciliation team to find out ways that you can help bring justice.

You could call someone to encourage them. You could invite people to join us on these live streams. People are needing to hope right now and they are open, so maybe invite a neighbor or a friend. Post an excerpt of a sermon, post a little bit of a sermon on social media and invite people to join. We're focusing our relief efforts this week on caring for infants and young children and we're part-nering with Jubilee REACH, CareNet and Baby Basics to help 300 families by providing diapers and wipes, formula, toys, that sort of thing. And maybe God's calling you to that. If he is, you can sign up on Together We Help on our website.

Couple of months ago, I got an email from a guy named Bob, I'll call him Bob, man from our church and it said, "I have a minor miracle of evangelism to tell you." Bob's a veteran who was exposed to Agent Orange in combat during the Vietnam War and, as a result, has a lot of health problems because of it. Well, recently he was in the VA hospital for a week because of those health issues. He was in a room with three other Vietnam vets so there was four of them. All the other vets also had combat experiences. One of them there was named Mike who'd been assigned to do triage during the war, basically decide who would benefit from medical help and who was most likely to die. That duty left him with deep wounds, scars, trauma, understandably so because his job involved having to lie to dying patients to comfort them by saying that they're going to be okay and then having to watch them die.

Bob said that, "Because Mike knew that the others in the room had been in combat, he assumed that we looked down on him, a mere corpsman and that he was filled with resentment." Mike complained bitterly that he wasn't being treated fairly by the doctors and nurses and loudly and rudely abused the medical staff, but Bob said he was being treated just fine. Bob said, "His percep-tion was that he was stuck with the three of us who didn't care about him or like him and a staff who were mistreating him." So Bob decided to respond and I'll pick it up in Bob's words from his email.

This is what he said. Bob said, "So I decided to try to ease his mind. So I asked him to describe some of his experiences in Vietnam, and I shared some of mine with him. I spent a lot of time in the field, explosives disposals, two helicopter crashes in the same day and I said how much of those of us who were being shot at and wounded appreciated and respected corpsman like him who took care of us, patching us up when they were being shot at, too." Bob said, "Mike's attitude shifted and he began to calm down." Then Bob said, "I mentioned that I was a Christian and that I couldn't take credit for surviving my combat experiences and I believed I was protected by a battalion of angels. I told him no matter what he'd done, he'd also been protected and that God must have a purpose for him and for me, too."

Bob said, "Then Mike became quiet and stopped complaining." Bob said, "I got the impression that he began to feel more like he was one of us. Mike started to treat the staff better. Toward the end of my stay, a chaplain came in to speak with all of us. When he was talking to Mike, he asked, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' And Mike said, 'Yes, can I please have a Bible?'"

They were all in a storm. They all had health problems, having to relive traumatic memories. Mike was in a storm feeling unloved, uncared for. But Bob got out of the boat and started having a conversation with a very angry Mike. That conversation could've gone very badly and then they would have all been stuck together in the same room for a whole week. But Bob got out of the boat in the middle of the storm to speak words of hope and love and courage and comfort. The storm did not stop. The storm is still raging. They still have their health problems, but they all walked on top of the storm because that's what Jesus does.

At the very end of today's text, the way it ends, it says, "And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. That is, the storm didn't stop before Jesus and Peter got back in the boat, but af-ter. What that means is that after sinking, Peter must have gotten back up and walked back to the boat on the water. The point of this story is not that Peter took his eyes off Jesus and said, "Yeah, yeah, he did that." But that puts the emphasis on the wrong syllable. The point of this story is not that Peter sank. It's that he got back up and walked on the water again.

This is not a story about failure and fear. It's a story about grace greater than doubt, grace greater than fear, grace greater than failures, greater than the divorce, greater than the [inaudible 00:24:23], greater than the addiction, greater than COVID, grace greater than all of my sin.

It's not about how weak Peter was. It's about how strong Jesus is to rise above the storm and stomp all over that stupid storm in victory. Because Jesus is Lord of the storm who says to us in the words of one of my favorite hymns, "Fear not, I am with thee. Oh, be not dismayed. I am thy God and will still give thee aid." Notice aid, not comfort. "I'll strengthen thee, help thee. I'll cause you to stand upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand."

Jesus, you are Lord of the storm and you and you only can give us power to rise above the storm. So Lord, we ask for that power that you would call us out of the boat, that you would make us brave in whatever storms we face right now and help us walk on top of that storm. And Jesus, we stand as a church in front of you and say give us a command. Command us, Lord. Here we are. Send us in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Matthew 14:22-33

1. What do we learn about Jesus from this story? What do we learn about Peter?
2. Had you been there, would you have stayed in the boat with the other 11 disciples or got out of the boat with Peter? Why?
3. What keeps you in the boat? What helps you get out of the boat?
4. Where is God calling you to get out of the boat these days?