

## Sermon

### ***Faith comes by Hearing***

Matthew 14:22-33; 1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15

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There is a common factor of these three readings: God is near and God saves.

That is what Paul wrote in Romans – the word is not far away in heaven it is near you. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Saved is *sozo* which means saving or healing of body, soul and spirit. This is holistic salvation.

Paul goes on to say:

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ... <sup>11</sup>As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.”<sup>1</sup>

It matters what you believe. Faith is the spiritual connection by which we receive the benefits God wants to give us. It is sometimes called the currency of heaven.

Sometimes we get nervous about the word ‘faith.’ But faith can be understood as ‘trusting and obeying.’ You know what it is to trust – you do it all the time. You trust people, you trust machines, you trust things you don’t understand. But faith is active which is where the obedience comes in.

So as you believe in Jesus in your heart and speak it out, salvation is granted to you.

Let’s look at the two accounts and see how this applies.

#### ***Elijah***

Elijah was spiritually and emotionally exhausted. He had exercised faith – great faith. By faith he had commanded a 3.5 year drought. By faith he had called down fire from heaven on the sacrifice to prove that Yahweh not Baal was the true god. Then by faith he had prayed for a breaking of the drought and the rains had come.

He had heard and trusted and obeyed to great effect. He had won a great spiritual battle but then was threatened with death by the queen. He had run away and was depressed. He had stopped trusting and gone into a slump.

He had already said he wanted to die. He claimed he was the only faithful person left in Israel. God could have rebuked him strongly. However, he met his need by putting on a display of power: a wind storm so great

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<sup>1</sup> Verses 9, 11

that it tore the mountains apart and shattered rocks, an earthquake, a great fire. Then in the silence, God spoke to him and recommissioned him.

Elijah was saved from despair, set back on his feet and given a set of tasks to fulfil. And God finished with, "Oh, by the way, you are not the only one, I have 7000 faithful to me in Israel."

As he heard God speak to him, faith was rekindled – he could start to trust again and then to obey. Now you may say, if God put on that sort of display for me, I'd believe too. But it was not in the power display that God spoke. It was the still small voice – that is how God speaks to us.

### ***Walking on Water***

Skip forward to the gospel passage.

Jesus has taught a crowd all day, and then fed them – the 5000. Sending disciples off in the boat, he dismissed the crowd and went up a mountain to pray. As the disciples try to cross the lake a contrary wind blows up and they labour to make way.

In the last watch of the night (sometime after 3am), he came walking across the water.

Now stop right there! Some of you are thinking this is a fairy story or maybe just a metaphor. Of course the idea is remarkable. The Gospel writers were neither fools nor tricksters but wrote it because they were eyewitnesses. And it was hard for the disciples too – they were terrified. The story doesn't look good for Peter – most people would suppress a story which showed their leader (Peter) in a poor light, but the gospel writers include it because it happened.

People will go to great lengths to avoid believing in miracles. I laughed out loud when I read this one, quoted from Church Times 14/4/2006:

"Jesus could have been walking on ice 'stepping-stones' caused by sudden climate change when his disciples saw him walking towards them across the lake, says a team of US and Israeli scientists. According to this theory, St Peter, eager to prove his faith but unaware of the unusual distribution of the ice, stepped on to one such ice floe, only to lose his footing and start to sink."

Really that is more improbable than the face value story!

### ***Driving on Water!***

I wonder if this account would help you? I heard it by a fellow student at college who knows and respects the lady concerned. However I rang her and asked her to confirm the story in detail and in person.

Kath Hall who now lives in Eastbourne in England was a missionary in Nigeria in the 1967-8. She was training Girls Brigade Leaders. She drove herself to the village of Matazu, north of Katsina in Northern Nigeria to visit a girl's Bible school.

Near the village the road crossed a river with a simple concrete bridge just a deck with no sides. The bridge was damaged and half the width of the deck was washed away. There was just a hole there. However she managed to skirt the hole and get by.

In the Bible school, a girl, Amina, had become pregnant by a Muslim man who was going to claim her as extra wife and the child too when it was born.

There was a lot of pressure in the situation and the Senior Missionary Jessie McGill asked Kath to take Amina away for refuge while matters were sorted out.

So Kath and Jessie set off with Amina. When they came to the bridge they found that there was flood and the bridge was now hidden underwater. Kath wasn't sure which side of the bridge was sound but she thought she remembered and drove through successfully!

They got Amina to the refuge and next day returned to Matazu. When they reached the bridge the flood had receded and they were shocked to see that the side of the bridge they had used was the side which was washed out!

Furthermore, the tire tracks of the Holden ute she was driving could be seen going down one bank and up the other in line with the hole.

Some of the local Muslim men, saw what had happened and said, “Your God has power, you should be dead.”

I don’t understand how that happened but Kath Hall told me the account herself when I spoke to her on the phone. And when I told that account in Carlisle, one of my colleagues, Julia Powley, said she knew Kath Hall well and she trusted her word.

Back to the gospel account. As the disciples labour at the oars trying to cross the lake against the wind, Jesus comes towards them over the water.

Do not think God is unaware of your struggles. Here Jesus sees and goes to be near them, ready in their need. Ready to strengthen them. We can trust that he knows our situation, he draws near and is available. But we may need to ask for his help.

People say that Jesus never claimed to be God. But action after action, word after word shout his claims particularly to his Jewish hearers.

This man has just walked on water. When he gets in the boat, the wind dies down. What should a Jew understand from that? Let’s see - there was the crossing of the Red Sea & later the Jordan by God’s intervention. What else?

Job 9:8 (extolling God’s majesty) “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.”

Isaiah 43:16 “Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters...”

Very strong hints that someone walking on the water – treading the waves of the sea – making a path in the mighty waters – is none other than ... God.

Heap the evidence up further:

When he reassured them. The NIV says, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid!”<sup>2</sup> “It is I.” Actually, in the Greek it says, “I am.” That ought to ring bells for us all. When Moses asked the name of the God who revealed himself to him in the burning bush, the answer was, “I am”. Jesus identified himself to the frightened disciples by saying, “I am.” It is a claim to be God Almighty.

In walking on water Jesus is not some kind of magician. He has not performed a party trick on a cosmic scale. What we see is the Son of God, the creator of the universe ruling over his world. Nature obeys the Son of God; humanity should worship the Son.

This is also not a general call to walk on water – Paul didn’t apparently consider it an option when he was shipwrecked! That story I told you from Kath Hill was not a case of knowingly driving over the non-existent bridge decking. Rather she found out afterwards that it had happened. There was no presumption – just genuine awe at the wonderful works of God.

What do we see of faith in the account? A good point is that Peter asked Jesus before he stepped out. He did not assume it would work just because it was working for Jesus. From being terrified of a ghost on the water, when Peter heard that it was Jesus, he asked him to call him onto the water. Now why he did that I’m not sure. Maybe it was inspired. Maybe it arose from the practice of Rabbinical disciples to copy everything that their rabbi did. Some would literally walk in the footprints of their teacher, and strive to emulate every detail of his way of living. With that custom in the background, maybe Peter was just acting like a good and brave disciple should and seeking to copy this latest action of his master.

What is good for us is that Peter didn’t just climb out of the boat, he asked Jesus to call him. When he was called, he acted. We need to learn that. There is a difference between faith and presumption. When we assume God is telling us to do something radical and act on that it is not faith, it is presumption. Two verses

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 14:27

further on from the Epistle reading we hear, "... faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. Peter heard the word of Christ and he was empowered to be part of a miraculous event. He trusted and he obeyed.

But then, his attention was diverted from Jesus onto the dangers – he was still obeying but as he thought about how big the waves were and how impossible this was, he stopped trusting and his faith collapsed.

The story doesn't end with a wet Peter swimming to the boat. He did the right thing – he called out to Jesus, "Lord, save me." Jesus took his hand, steadied him with his faith and they together climbed into the boat. Remember Paul wrote, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Peter learnt from this event. John Ortberg put it this way:

"... only Peter knew that when he sank, Jesus would be there, and he was wholly adequate to save. The other disciples could not know because they never got out of the boat. This is the fundamental truth: If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat. If you want to experience God's power in your life, you've got to take a step of faith. It involves risky obedience."<sup>4</sup>

Peter asked, he heard, he acted and so he walked on water. He looked away from Jesus, he lost faith, he sank. He called out to Jesus, who lifted him up again – took him to safety and stilled the storm.

What do we learn? Faith comes by hearing. We trust and obey. Always, Jesus is near us ready to help. We need to call out to him. And his answer is, "Take courage! I am. Don't be afraid."

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>4</sup> Ortberg J., 2001, *If you want to walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan