

No Fear In The New Year

Matthew 14:22-33

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I want to read the whole text—it's a popular story, and we know it well—and then we'll go back and look at it phrase by phrase.

Beginning in verse 22, Matthew says, "Immediately Jesus made..."—or "constrained" or "forced"—"...His disciples to get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away." Jesus is putting them in a boat and sending them across the Sea of Galilee. "And when He had sent the multitudes away, He..."—that is, Jesus—"...went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.' And Peter answered Him and said, 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' So He said, 'Come.' And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!' And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God.'"

It is said—and it's true—that into every life, storms will come. I've been around long enough to know that whenever you enter into a new year, you don't know what it holds. It may hold sickness, tragedy, bereavement, loss, pain, darkness or difficulties. For some of us, we may encounter a fierce storm. But we know that the Lord is holding us as we enter into this new year.

I've been pastoring long enough to know that just about every year, someone from the congregation dies and goes to heaven to be with the Lord, is diagnosed with cancer, has problems in their marriage, has problems in their job or has problems in their family. God never promised that life would be smooth sailing. We often encounter storms, and we need assurance that God is with us, guiding us through the storms of life whenever we begin a new year. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

The key verse in this whole text is verse 27. "But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.'" We can hang onto that verse this coming year. Whatever you go through, whatever you encounter, whatever darkness, difficulty or storm, even though the winds are against you, "Be of good cheer." Jesus said, "It is I; do not be afraid." So the experience of the disciples in the storm can be an encouragement to us when we go through the storms of life.

What I want to do is give you five affirmations of faith that you can speak to your own heart when you are facing storms or going through that valley of difficulty in this new year. The first one is in verse 22. That affirmation is that He brought me here. You can understand that whatever happens this year, God is in control. In His providential care, God brought you to that place and circumstance. "Immediately Jesus made His disciples to get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away." Notice that Jesus constrained His disciples. That's a very strong word, which means that He forced them into the boat and caused them to go to the other side of the lake.

It's like trying to get a two-year-old into a car seat when you're leaving Disneyland. "I don't want to go."

"You have to go. Get in the car seat!"

Jesus would be saying, "Get in the boat."

"I don't want to get in the boat!"

"Get in the boat, you disciples." And He sent them "to the other side of the lake."

Why did Jesus constrain them to get into the boat and go to the other side, but He did not go with them? The answer is in John 6, where the same story is recorded. It says that Jesus had just fed the 5,000 with the five loaves and two fish. And what did the crowd want to do? They wanted to forcibly make Him king. But this was not the way Jesus was to go in obedience to the Father. Jesus was to first die upon the Cross, then He would come back as King and reign on the earth. This was really a temptation to forgo the Cross and to allow the people to have their way, out of the will of the Father, to make Him king. So Jesus was doing this to protect His disciples and to protect Himself. It's ironic that the disciples were safer in the storm, in the will of God, than on dry land facing temptation.

I want to give you some reasons why God would purposefully, intentionally allow storms to come into our lives. I see our text as a picture of the difficulties and storms that we go through.

The first reason is for our protection. Jesus put them in the boat and sent across the lake to protect them from the crowd that wanted to make Him king. The disciples were in danger of being swept up in the excitement to make Him king, and He wanted them to know that He first had to go to a cross to die. Whenever we go through a storm or a difficulty, we can know that He brought us to that place; it's under His design, and He's doing it for our protection.

An example of this is found in 2 Corinthians 12. It's the story of Paul having a thorn in his flesh. Paul said there was given to him "a messenger of Satan to buffet me." The reason was "lest I be exalted above measure." God allowed Paul to have a thorn in his flesh. We don't know exactly what it was, but my guess is that it was a physical ailment or affliction. It was a gift from God. You say, "A gift from God?!"

“Yes.” Even though God used the devil to buffet Paul, he said it was to keep him humble. Someone said that because Paul had the Paradise experience and saw all those wonderful things, God had to balance his life by giving him a painful experience so Paul would remain humble and dependent and, thus, could be used by God. The minute we’re filled with pride, God cannot use us. But when we’re humble and dependent, God can use us. God allowed Satan to buffet Paul—have this thorn and pain in his body—so that he could stay humble. So God allows storms for our good, for our protection.

The second reason God allows storms in our lives—and we see it in this story—is for correction. The illustration for that is the story of Jonah, who was told by God to go to Nineveh and preach to the Ninevites. Jonah didn’t want to do that. He was the rebellious prophet. So he went to Joppa and got on a ship to Tarshish. He went the opposite direction from Nineveh. The first thing he encountered was a storm. (There are a lot of interesting storm stories in the Bible.) Jonah ended up getting thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale. Some people think that’s a fishy story. I think it’s a whale of a story. I happen to believe it because Jesus believed it, and it’s in the Bible and the Bible is true.

Jonah was so hard and so rebellious that he had to spend three days in the belly of the whale before he repented and got right with God. Don’t let that happen to you.

Many times God will bring a storm into our lives to correct us. He does it to protect us and to correct us, to get us out of a path of rebellion and disobedience and to bring us back onto the path of obedience—back onto our knees, back to His Word, back into church, back to prayer, back to seeking the Lord, back to serving the Lord.

Maybe there is a storm in your life right now that God is using to correct you. Maybe you’re out of His will. Maybe what’s going on in your life right now is God trying to get your attention. He’s saying that you need to turn around and go the other way.

So God brings storms for our protection, our correction, and thirdly, for our perfection. The Bible tells us in James 1:3-4, “...that the testing of your faith produces patience” or “steadfast endurance.” “But let patience...”—or “steadfast endurance”—“...have its perfect...”—or “full”—“...work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” So storms come into our lives to protect us, to correct us and to perfect us. Now we may not like the storms, but we can like what they do for us.

I like what Warren Wiersbe said. He said, “If we value comfort over character, our troubles will upset us. But if we value character over comfort, our trials will work for us and our good and for the glory of God.” So sometimes God allows trials and troubles in our lives to remind us to develop our steadfast endurance or patience.

The disciples were in the storm because they obeyed Jesus, not because they disobeyed Jesus. He told them to get in the boat, and they got in the boat. He said to go to the other side of the lake, and they went to the other side of the lake.

So the disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and this big storm comes. Jesus is not there, and they're thinking, Whose idea was this midnight boat ride?! It's like someone might say, "Let's go camping!"

"Alright; let's go camping."

Then the person calls and says, "Sorry; I can't go camping. You need to go without me." Then you go camping, and the wind's blowing, the tent blows over and it's raining. It's miserable, so you say, "Whose idea was this camping trip?!"

"It's Mike's, and he's not even here right now! Wait 'till I talk to him!!"

The disciples are out in the boat going through the storm, and Jesus is warm and cozy up on the mountain. But He was praying for them.

So being in God's will does not mean that life will be smooth sailing and all sunshine. God's will may involve dark, difficult storms as we pass through them. Remember that He's protecting us, correcting us and He's wanting to perfect us. So the first affirmation you need to remember when you're going through a storm is that He brought me here.

The second affirmation is in verses 23-24. That is He is praying for me. "And when He sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea." The Sea of Galilee is a lake about eight miles wide; it's a big lake. So if the disciples were in "the middle of the sea," they could have been out four miles from shore. They were "tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary."

If you check a parallel account of this story in Mark 6:48, you find out that Jesus "saw them straining at rowing." Matthew doesn't mention that.

I remember my first night on the Sea of Galilee, and it was a beautiful, moon-lit night. You can look across the lake and see the moonlight glowing on the water, so when ships would pass in front of the moonlight, they were silhouetted on the lake. It was a beautiful picture.

So I believe that Jesus, even without His omniscience, which He possessed, could look down from the mountain and see the disciples in the storm and wind. Perhaps it was a full moon that night. He could see they were struggling on the lake.

The natural response to a storm in our own lives is to think that God doesn't see and know or that God doesn't care. The truth is that God sees, God knows and God cares. In whatever storm you're going through right now, He sees, He knows and He cares. He brought you to that place, and he is interceding and praying for you.

Note the picture in verse 23: "He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray." The question then is, "What do you suppose Jesus was praying for?" I have no doubt that Jesus was praying

for the struggling disciples on the lake. They were there by His design; He sent them out into the storm. It was part of the day's curriculum for them; it was His training. So now Jesus is praying to the Father that God would protect them and watch over them and help them through the storm.

The Bible tells us in Romans 8:34 that Jesus is "at the right hand of God," and he "also makes intercession for us." No doubt Jesus was praying for the struggling disciples, and He prays for us.

If you are struggling right now and you're experiencing a deep darkness in your life, Jesus sees, He knows, He cares and He's actually praying for you. Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father and is praying and interceding for you.

Remember when Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Simon...Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat"? Can you imagine Jesus turning to you and saying, "The devil called me last night. And he asked for you by name"?

I'd ask, "What did you tell him, Lord? I hope you told him I'm not available! I hope you told him, 'Bug off, Beelzebub!'"

But Jesus said to Peter, "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." You see, Peter was going to deny the Lord. He was going to have a horrible fall that would break his heart, and then he would weep bitter tears. But Jesus was saying, "When you turn back around, I want you to know that you can be a blessing and can strengthen your brothers."

In John 17, Jesus prayed His great, high-priestly prayer to the Father. He prayed, "I do not pray for these..."—His disciples—"...alone but also for those who will believe in Me through their word..."—He's talking about you and me—"...that they all may be one...that they may be one in Us." He prayed that they "may be sanctified" and that they would see Him in His glory.

So Jesus actually prayed for you then and is praying for you now. When you think that no one knows, no one cares and no one understands, Jesus knows, cares and understands. He is actually praying for you. Someone is always praying for you, and it's Jesus, who is at the right hand of God the Father. So in this new year, you have Jesus interceding for you at the right hand of God.

The third affirmation is that He will come to me. So He brought me here, He is praying for me and He will come to me. Verses 25-27 say, "Now in the fourth watch of the night..."—that is 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.—"...Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.'"

Something that is missing in Matthew's Gospel but is included in Mark 6 is that when Jesus came walking on the water and approached the boat, he acted as though He was going to walk

right by them. That would be pretty cruel of Jesus if He did that. He would freak them out and just then say "Hi," while they were in the middle of the storm.

It must have been hard hangin' out with Jesus. He sent them out in the storm. They're out there in the middle of the night, and it's raining and windy, the waves are breaking over the boat and Jesus comes walking to them on the water. It would freak you out! He would wave and say, "Hey, what's happening?" and then would look like He was going to pass them by.

When we are in the storms of life, Jesus comes to us. Verse 25 says, "Jesus went to them, walking on the sea." The Lord is always with us, but He comes to us in a special way that is very near and dear to reveal Himself in the storms. John Bunyan said, "In times of affliction, we most commonly meet with the sweetest experiences of the love of God."

Let me give you four facts about Jesus coming to us in our storms. First, He comes in the darkest hour of the night. Verse 25 says it was "in the fourth watch," 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. It's always darkest before the dawn. Many times He comes in the darkest points in our lives. When we feel He is so distant from us, in our darkest hour, is actually when He is coming to us.

Secondly, He comes when we have exhausted our energy. Notice verse 26 says that they were "troubled" and "cried out for fear." Someone said, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." When you have exhausted your wisdom, your finances, you're weak and depleted and can't go another step, that's when God comes to prove Himself strong in your life.

There is a beautiful story in the Gospels where Jesus healed a lame man. For 38 years he had been lame, and he had come often to the pool of Bethesda. Jesus said to this man, "Do you want to be made well?"

The man said, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

Then Jesus said, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." Isn't that beautiful?

So when we come to the end of ourselves, that's when we meet God. When we're willing to say, "God, I can't do this. I need your help. I surrender," God comes in and He gives us His help and His strength. What a glorious truth that is!

Thirdly, Jesus comes on the waves. How many times, in the storms of life, we see that the very thing that we fear becomes the path for His feet. The very thing the disciples feared, the wind and the waves, became the path for His feet that brought Him to them. Many times, that which you fear is what brings God near.

In Isaiah 43:2, the prophet said, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned."

Fourthly, Jesus came to them in His Word. Verse 27 says that in the storm, “Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.’” God comes to us in our storms in His Word. That’s why you should never stop reading your Bible when you are going through a dark night. The Bible is your light. Open God’s Word and let God speak to you. The disciples heard His reassuring voice.

Matthew Henry said, “Sometimes God hides Himself in the dark, but never at a distance.” I like that. God is always there, and He speaks to us through His Word.

You talk about having a difficult time—Joseph was falsely accused, thrown into prison and forgotten. But the Bible says that at that point, “The Lord was with Joseph.” Wasn’t that good? Joseph is accused unrighteously, put in prison, but the Lord was with him. God is always with us.

Then there are the three Hebrews—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in Daniel 3. They were thrown into a fiery furnace. The Bible says that the Lord appeared to and walked with them in the fire. You’re never alone. How glorious is that!

The Apostle Paul was arrested, put in chains, put on a Roman ship and sent across the Mediterranean Sea to Rome. There was a big storm, and for days they were cast about and didn’t see the sun or daylight. But the Bible actually says that the Lord stood with him and strengthened him. Then when Paul was writing to Timothy, Paul said that he stood before Nero and was accused, and he had to have his trial before the Roman Emperor. Paul said that no one stood with him then and all had forsaken him, “But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me.”

Isn’t that wonderful to know that when everyone forsakes you when you’re going through a storm, God stands with you and will strengthen you?

In Psalm 23, David said, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”—which in the Hebrew is “the valley of deepest darkness”—“...I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

So you may be going through a valley of deepest darkness, but God is with you. He brought you there, He’s praying for you and He will come to you and you’ll meet Him in the storm.

Affirmation number four, for this coming year, is in verses 28-31, and it is that He will help me grow. Getting back to our story, the Lord had walked on the water up to the boat, the disciples were freaking out because they thought He was a ghost and the Lord spoke to them, saying, “‘Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.’ And Peter answered Him and said, ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.’” I imagine the other disciples looked at Peter and said, “Are you crazy?! This might be a ghost! Now you’re talking to it, and you want to go walk on the water to it?!” Peter knew the Lord’s voice. The Bible says, “My sheep hear my voice,” and they know His voice. Peter knew the Lord, and he loved the Lord.

Verse 29 says, “So He said, ‘Come.’” The word “come” in the Greek is a strong word; it’s a command. It’s not a suggestion; it’s a command. Do you know that whatever God commands, He enables us to do? If God says, “Come,” and we step out of the boat, we can walk on water.

“And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus.” Wow! That’s amazing! “But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, ‘Lord, save me!’” That’s one of the shortest prayers in the Bible. “And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

Why was Peter fearful and sinking? The same reason we get fearful in the storm and sink: his focus and his faith was not on Jesus. Remember that old hymn:

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in His wonderful face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,

In the light of His glory and grace.”

One of our big problems—and I struggle with this myself—is that I get my eyes off of Jesus, and I get my eyes on the wind and the waves. I get my eyes on my problem, on my circumstances, on my bank account, on my health. I get my eyes on people and get my eyes off of Jesus. And when I do, I’m filled with fear and I begin to sink.

But Peter did the right thing, and what we need to do also when we’re fearful and sinking. Notice verse 30: he prayed. Notice that his prayer is sincere and short. I like that. It’s real, genuine, authentic and short. All he said was, “Lord, save me!” Three simple words. He didn’t even say, “...in Jesus’ name.” He didn’t have time for, “Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.” He’d have been at the bottom of the lake by then. He just said, “Lord, save me!” He probably was up to his chin in the water and was flailing.

It’s been said that man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. Peter was sinking and he was going to drown. He was a fisherman, and he knew what it meant to go down under the water in that storm. So Peter prayed.

And we need to pray. The Bible says, “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.” The psalmist says that He “heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock....He has put a new song in my mouth.”

Notice the response, in verse 31: Jesus saved him. “And immediately...”—there was no delay —“...Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

We are never outside His love and care nor beyond His help. It's never too dark, the wind's never too fierce, the waves never too deep for Jesus to always be there to reach out His hand and save us and deliver us. I believe that Peter grew in faith because of this situation. Someone said, "One of the purposes of a storm is to perfect us." Peter grew in his faith. Peter was matured in the midst of the storm. So are we.

The fifth and last affirmation is to remember to tell yourself, when you go through the storms this coming year, is that He will see me through, verses 32-33. "And when they..."—that is, Peter and Jesus—"...got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God.'"

The disciples in the boat had already seen three miracles: Number one, Jesus walked on the water. In Egyptian hieroglyphics, the symbol for the impossible is two feet over water. So Jesus does the impossible. The second miracle is that Peter walked on the water. Just think that when Jesus commands us and our eyes are on the Lord, we can do the impossible. Not in our strength, but in His. The third miracle was that Jesus reached out and rescued Peter from drowning.

Now when Peter and Jesus got back into the boat, there were three more miracles. First, "the storm ceased," verse 32. There was a great calm. The minute Peter and Jesus got back into the boat, the wind stopped and it was calm. That was a miracle. The second miracle was that the boat instantly arrived at its destination at the shore, John 6:21. It was another miracle; the minute they got into the boat, it was at the place they intended to go and arrived safely. The third miracle was that the disciples' eyes were opened to understand who Jesus is, verse 33.

I propose to you that this is one of the greatest miracles. These Galilean fisherman had their eyes and understanding opened; in the storm, they came to a revelation that "Truly You are the Son of God."

Earlier in Matthew, in chapter 8, there was another storm when Jesus was in the boat with His disciples. This was a different time than that in our text. They all went out to sea together, and Jesus was sleeping on a pillow in the boat. A storm came up, and they tried to row against it but couldn't get anywhere. So they woke Jesus up and actually said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!" That's what we do: "Lord, don't you care? I'm going to drown!" Then Jesus stood up in the boat and rebuked the wind, and there was a great calm.

At that moment, the disciples asked, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?!" Then some time later, when Jesus comes walking to them on the water, and there is another calm, they say, "Truly, You are the Son of God." In Matthew 14, they now come to the conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God, so they worshipped Him.

God reveals Himself in the storms of life. He reveals Himself in our darkest nights and in our deepest pits and in our most horrendous times. Hebrews 12:2 says, "...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." That means that what God starts, He finishes. He reveals

Himself to us and takes us safely home. In Philippians 1:6, Paul says, "...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." In Psalm 23, David said, "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," but at the end of that psalm, he says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." We'll get home safely.

You may be in the dark night right now, you may be facing winds of adversity and difficulty, but the psalmist in Psalm 46:10 said, "Be still and know that I am God."

So remember these five things: He brought me here, He's praying for me, He will come to me—He'll reveal Himself, He will help me grow—it's for my perfection and He will see me through.

Amen.