

Our Refuge and Strength
Take Heart Series

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Welcome to our Creek online weekend service! My name is Chad, and I get to be one of the student pastors here on staff!

Before we get going, let me just say: thank you for your flexibility as a church family. Thank you for being such an encouraging church and for being a church that prays – your compassion and your generosity and your love is inspiring in many ways! As staff members, we appreciate you and your families so much – more than you’ll ever know. And we miss you! Can you imagine what the day is going to be like when we all get together again? Until that day, we will cling to the goodness of God and worship Him with all we’ve got.

So thanks for joining us today – you being here with us matters – and we’re just grateful!

Last week was Easter Sunday – and we kicked off a new collection of talks all centered around a common phrase in the bible. In various contexts, it’s brought up around 365 times in the scriptures – it’s the phrase “take heart,” which means “don’t be afraid” or “fear not.” Take heart!

Here’s the full verse: in John 16:33, Jesus says, “I’ve told you these things, so that in me you will have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but don’t be afraid, take heart! Because I have overcome the world.”

So today, we’ve got some good news – today is all about *hope*, the greatness and the power of God. That’s our message for today: that Jesus is bigger and greater and more powerful than *anything* you’re facing right now – so take heart!

We’ll be in Matthew 14 today, and we’ll be looking at the story of when Jesus walked on the water – in the middle of a storm. But before we dive in, it’s important to understand what was happening around this story, because the context – the backdrop – is key. This story comes on the heels of a defining moment in Jesus’ life and ministry: Jesus just fed a crowd of 5,000 using a little boy’s lunch – five loaves of bread and two fish – which was incredible. It was a miracle! And it’s here where we see that Jesus was in the business of doing incredible things in the midst of (what seemed to be) impossible circumstances.

So, the story of Jesus feeding the crowd carries right over into to our passage today – let’s look at Matthew 14:22-33:

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Well into the night, he was there alone. Meanwhile, the boat was already some distance from land, battered by the waves, because the wind was against them. Jesus came toward them walking on the sea very early in the morning. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost!” they said, and they cried out in fear.

Immediately Jesus spoke to them. “Have courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter answered him, “command me to come to you on the water.”
He said, “Come.”

And climbing out of the boat, Peter started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the strength of the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand, caught hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those in the boat worshiped him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

There’s a lot that we could unpack from this story, but here’s what we want to focus on today – here’s what I know that I need to hear for today: especially while facing a season of unprecedented storms, Jesus is greater than *anything* we’ll ever face in this world – storms included. He’s greater than any good thing you’re clinging to and He’s more powerful than anything that possibly has a hold of you.

Jesus is greater than the greatest storm you’ll ever face.

Now, Jesus does some pretty remarkable things that bring us hope and are worth us talking through today, and the first thing is this: Jesus knew what he was doing. After Jesus fed the 5,000, we read that the crowd wanted to make him King. And why not? You can’t blame them – they saw a lot of greatness in Jesus. They saw how he was compassionate and kind. He took care of them and he provided for them. He was capable of more than anyone they’d ever seen before, and he was good! Of course they wanted to make him King; Jesus was everything they could ever want in a King. And Jesus knew that not only did the crowd feel this way, but that his disciples did, too.

But Jesus knew that it wasn’t his time yet – and so what did he do? He put his disciples on a boat and sent them out onto the Sea of Galilee and off towards a place called Capernaum. Now, this would’ve been an easy travel load for the disciples – it wasn’t far from where they were at, and so many of them were experienced fishermen who knew the waters. It should’ve been safe, it should’ve been easy, and it should’ve been comfortable. But when Jesus sent them out, he sent them headfirst into a storm. Make no mistake about it – he knew what he was doing. He knew that this storm was coming. The storm didn’t catch Jesus off guard – it wasn’t like He forgot to check his weather app on his phone. He knew exactly what he was doing. He *always* does.

And you know what? If we’re honest with each other, that can be a hard pill to swallow at times, right? Because if we’re left to face trouble in this world – like we’re left to face storms – then the truth is, it’s not always as “easy” or as “comfortable” or as “safe” as we’d like it to be.

But Jesus knows what he’s doing and he always gives us reasons to take heart – because it’s often that in these moments, when we’re facing these storms, that we get to see Jesus at His best.

It’s like Jesus always seems to be most powerful when we feel powerless.

It’s like Jesus is most helpful when we feel helpless.

It’s like Jesus is most hopeful when we feel hopeless.

You see, he always gives us reasons to take heart, even when he sends us out to face our storms.

And the reason Jesus can send us out to do that, and still be ultimately good, is because Jesus is greater and more powerful than any of the storms we face! He's already overcome the world – *and* the storms that are in it. He knows what He's doing.

The next thing that's worth pointing out is this: Jesus made room to spend time with the Father. He created space and made it a priority to spend time with God, to seek his will, and to pray.

Jesus knew what he was doing when he sent the disciples off to face the storm and he knew what he was going to do while they faced it: verse 25 says, "After he dismissed the crowd, he went up on the mountainside, by himself, to pray." Don't miss this important example that Jesus sets for us here. Jesus. The Son of God. The Messiah and Savior of all the world. Even *he* knew how important it was to connect in a personal and real way with God. Even he withdrew (often!) to pray – Jesus made room, intentionally and unapologetically, to spend time with God.

He knew the crowd wanted to fast-track him to his rightful place on the throne; he knew the disciples wanted the same thing. But what did Jesus do? He fought for space to find a clearer understanding of what God's will was for his life – over and above anyone else's – and he prayed. He made room in his life, always, to stay connected to God.

Here's a question: how are *you* doing with this?

I mean – weeks ago, months ago – we all had lots of excuses. Lots of obstacles as to why we couldn't find the time to make God a priority. Like, we've got good intentions, but not the time to actually connect with God in real and regular and intentional way. I mean, who's got room in their busy schedules for that?!

And then COVID-19 becomes a thing! And for many, this pandemic that's brought us social distancing and stay-at-home orders has removed many of those obstacles for us. But unfortunately, some of us have found new obstacles to put in the way of us making room to connect with God instead of taking advantage of the unique opportunity that's before us.

You know, there are a lot of tragic scenarios that could pan out because of this crisis we are all in right now, but one of the most tragic would be that if, when this whole storm season is over, we look back and regret all the time we wasted and realize that we still chose to not make room to spend time with the Father, to spend time in his word, to spend time seeking his face, seeking his will for our life. To do so would be tragic for you, your family, your community, and your church.

So what can we do? Where can we start? A simple place for each of us to start is at 3:17pm!

3:17pm is becoming one of my favorite parts of each day. As a church have been challenged to pray every day at 3:17pm – to welcome the interruption of a notification or a reminder to go off that says it's time to pray for those in your community, to pray for the medical workers and first

responders who are on the front lines of the COVID crisis, to pray for those don't yet know Christ, to pray for our neighbors.

Making room each day at 3:17pm is a great place to start making some room to spend with the Father! But here's the deal: we need to make room to be in the presence of God more – because if Jesus himself needed to make time to spend with the Father, how much more do we need it in our own life?! If it was important to Him, then it should be important to us.

And so, the whole time while Jesus was praying, his disciples were facing a storm. And the storm was relentless. They rowed and they rowed and they rowed, but they weren't gaining hardly any ground.

I don't know about you, but I've had dreams before where I was running as fast as I could, yet felt as if I was still moving in slow motion. I imagine this is what it must've felt like for the disciples as they faced this storm! They were giving it everything they had, but were left feeling helpless and powerless.

But give it to the disciples – they didn't quit. They didn't back down. They kept doing what Jesus asked them to do: they kept going. Even though they were tired and scared and broken, they obeyed Jesus.

And you know what? This wasn't the first time they'd faced a storm before. There was another time when they were on the Sea of Galilee and in a boat together – but this time, Jesus was actually with them – although he was asleep on the boat. A storm arose and they were afraid for their lives, so they frantically woke Jesus up and said, "How are you asleep right now?! This storm is about to be the end of us! We're all going to die!" So Jesus got up and told the winds and the waves and the storm to "shut up" – and in an instant the clouds broke and the storm stopped.

And then – I love this, it's translated in a children's bible of all places, called the Jesus Storybook Bible – it says that Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them this question: "Did you believe in the storm more than you believed in me?"

So previously they had been in a storm, much like this one, not too long before – but the difference this time was that Jesus wasn't with them.

And they'd been facing this storm for hours now! This storm was unexpected, the situation was unprecedented, and the disciples were all alone – they were weary, tired, confused, shaken and scared.

Does this storm sound familiar to anyone yet?

So, the question is: where's the hope?!

We've seen that Jesus always knows what he's doing – that he's in control.

We've seen that he makes room to connect with the Father – which means he knows best.

Now we also see that Jesus responds to those who cry out to him – he can be trusted.

He's *not* distant. He's *not* too busy. He's *not* disconnected.

So he's not physically in the boat with them, but he *is* close, he *is* aware, he *is* at work, and he *always* shows up and responds to those who cry out to Him. Because he *is* faithful and he *can* be trusted.

Verse 25 says, “During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.” That means that although Jesus hadn't been with them for four hours or so, he still knew right where to find them. Even in the middle of the sea, in the middle of a mess, in the middle of a storm. He knew *right* where they were. And what did He do? He bee-lined directly to them.

This gives me so much hope and assurance! He walked *over the storm, directly to them!*

For those of you who are feeling tired and weary and beat down and scared and confused; for those of you who are feeling the effects of a storm right now, doesn't this speak to your soul? To know that Jesus knows, even in the middle of a storm, exactly where to find you?!

He knows how you're feeling. He hears your cry. And he's closer than you think.

And for the disciples – his timing was perfect! They'd been out there for hours and they were exhausted and spent and felt helpless. It's usually in these moments that Jesus shows up and is at his best.

He's at his greatest in our greatest moments of need!

And then, in verse 26 it says that “When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. ‘It's a ghost!’ they cried out in fear!”

I mean, come on. Put yourself in their shoes for just a minute – they'd been out there the whole night fighting a storm, they're beat down and broken – and they look out and see a man walking on top of the waves of a storm! I would be caught off guard too!

They panicked and they were scared because, in the history of the world, nobody had ever seen what they just saw – a man walking on top of the water!

So of course, they freaked out and were scared! They weren't thinking straight, they panicked, they assumed the worst case scenario, and they reacted out of emotion and exhaustion – which is something we all tend to do when facing our own storms.

But Jesus says, “Take courage!” He says, “Don't be afraid! Take heart!”

“It is I.”

And when Jesus says, “It is I,” it’s actually a reference to the Old Testament name God gives Moses in Exodus when Moses asks God for his name. God tells him that his name is “I AM.”

So when Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid, I am here,” a lightbulb goes off for the disciples and they’re like, “It’s him!”

You know – that name offers us a lot of hope in the midst of our storms.

Because we, too, get tired and scared, and we, too, are prone to convince ourselves of the absolute worst-case scenarios, and we, too, worry and stress and show signs of anxiety. And we, too, can react from a place of fear.

But take heart! Because Jesus knows right where you are in the water – and even in the middle of an unprecedented storm – he *responds* in unprecedented ways!

And he gives us all the hope we could ever need just by speaking his name – I AM.

Right now, some of us are facing questions like:

Who’s going to provide for my family if I lose my job? I AM.

Who’s going to take care of us if one of us gets sick? I AM.

Who’s going to comfort me and give me peace? I AM.

Who’s going to give me rest? I AM.

Who’s going to be there for me when I’m scared and all alone? I AM.

Who’s going to give me strength to see this thing through? I AM.

Jesus, in the middle of the storm, shows up and gives the disciples all the hope they needed – and he does the same for you and me.

And I’ve got say this – I had a friend point this out to me and I love it: this story from Jesus’ life is *not* about how you and I can walk on water – it’s about the *only* one who really can.

And the truth is, we need to allow Jesus to be more in our life – especially in the storms. Why? Because he’s in control, and he has a plan, and he always responds. He’s got this! Even in the midst of the storms, he’s got it!

Verse 28 says, “Peter replied, ‘Lord, if it’s you, then have me come out on the water.’” And so Peter hops out of the boat and starts walking on the water towards Jesus. And then it says, “But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink.” Peter “saw the wind” – which means that he took his eyes off of Jesus and started focusing more on the raging storm around him. And then it says that immediately, Jesus reached out His hand and caught him – and in an instant, the storm stopped, just like it had before. Jesus silenced the storm to show His disciples, “Hey! I’ve got this!”

No matter what storm you're in – a pandemic, or another one, or all of the above – Jesus is *greater* than any storm you'll ever face.

He is the great I AM. He is mighty and powerful and good. And he is greater than *any* storm you'll ever face! You can't walk on water, and neither can I – but I know who can! And he's got this!

And then in verse 31, Jesus says to Peter, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

For a long time, when I read this, I assumed that Jesus was disappointed in Peter. That maybe Peter had failed and Jesus was sort of shaking his head. But I don't think that's true; Jesus wasn't talking down to Peter.

During this time of quarantine, something cool has happened at our house! Our youngest son, Sammy, has figured out how to ride his two-wheel bike – without training wheels! It's a big deal – we were all really excited and really proud of him! And you know what, all the time leading up to now – all the pep talks and all the runs beside the bike moments to all the falls and scrapes on the knees, me and my wife, Katy – we've never been disappointed in Sammy for not figuring it out. We've never seen him as a failure. We knew that he could do it and would – because we knew that he was capable of more than he ever gave himself credit for! We believe in him!

I think Jesus was encouraging Peter – just like a parent does when helping their child figure out how to do something on their own for the first time. I think Jesus is saying to Peter, “Why'd you quit, Peter? You were so close! You had it! Just keep going! You've got this and YOU can see this through – because I AM is with you and I AM is in control!”

Peter let fear and doubt take over – and Jesus is telling him – and you! – that in the middle of the storm, not to let fear and doubt cripple you and hold you back from his promises!

Because Jesus is greater than the storms you face.

Jesus didn't just walk on water. He walked *victoriously* on top of the storm – and he walked directly to those who were calling out to him. And while doing that, he gave them a glimpse of his power.

I have a friend that I want you to hear from today. His name is Ron. Ron didn't have to wait for a global crisis or a pandemic to come in order to be introduced to a storm. And his story is about how even in the midst of a storm, he and his family are clinging to the very goodness and power of Jesus, come what may. Check this out. (View the video recording of this sermon to see Ron's testimony.)

No matter the storm, know this: *Jesus is bigger and greater and more powerful than anything you'll ever face.*

And He responds to those who cry out to Him. *Always.*

So, take heart! – because the great I AM is good! And He has overcome this world, all storms included.

Have a great week!