

OH THOSE NASTY ADVENTURES!
Matthew 14:22-33

There is a trademarked contest that occurs every year called the Wacky Warning Labels Contest. It selects “the most absurd and silly warning labels attached to everyday products.” In 2010 the winner had this label, “Never operate your speakerphone while driving.” It was on a hands free cell phone product called the “Drive ‘n Talk.” An honorable mention went to a small tractor that came with the label, “Danger: Avoid Death.” Oh, all right. Thanks for the warning. I never would have known if you hadn’t told me. Nytol One A Night sleeping aids has this warning, “May cause drowsiness.” Well that’s a shocking possibility for a sleep aid isn’t it? A rotary tool includes the warning label, “This product is not intended for use as a dental drill.” This year second place went to an electric razor that included the warning, “Never use while sleeping.” I don’t believe I have ever in my life been tempted to shave while asleep.

Why such dumb warning labels? Because companies are afraid of being sued. They evidently spend time thinking about the most outlandishly idiotic things that humans might do with their product and warn against it in hopes that it will protect them when some nimrod somewhere does the unthinkable, gets injured while misusing their product and sues. Fear really can distort things.

Michael Crichton wrote a book entitled *State of Fear* in which he presented the case that our society is inundated with stories designed to scare us. Fear pervades in our culture. Unfortunately it is an ever present and subtle reality for most of us pretty much all the time. In an editorial piece in the *New York Times* on December 6 Roger Cohen wrote, “Humanity has always been hardwired to fear. That is how we survived.” But that’s not what God wants for us. We will glimpse another way to live by looking at a familiar incident in Matthew 14:22-33.

JESUS DELIBERATELY SET UP A TEACHING MOMENT

Jesus was quite purposeful in creating this opportunity to teach his disciples. Verse 22 says he “made” the disciples get in the boat and go ahead of him to the other side of the lake. The word Matthew used is a strong one. It meant “to compel.” He compelled the disciples to get into a boat without him and cross the lake. Apparently they didn’t want to leave him, but he intentionally made them leave while he stayed behind.

How was he going to reconnect with the disciples on the other side of the lake? He could find another boat or walk all the way around. But Jesus stayed where he was until the “fourth watch” according to verse 25, which was between 3 and 6 A. M. It’s not likely that he would either start a long walk around the lake or find another boat at that time of night.

Jesus planned to use this incident as a teaching moment of revelation about who he really was. This is confirmed by the way the encounter happened. How did Jesus rendezvous with his disciples? He took a short cut by going across the lake. He walked really fast, only he walked *across the water*. That lake is more than 140 feet deep! Jesus was around that body of water a lot in his lifetime. As far as we know this was the only time he ever chose this method of transportation across it. It was not an accident. Jesus was not doing this just to see if he could. This was a deliberate choice intended to teach important truth.

THE DISCIPLES WERE AFRAID

Focus for a moment on verses 26-30. “When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost,’ they said, and cried out in fear.” In verse 27 Jesus said to them, “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Peter goes for his brief walk on the water but then we see verse 30. “When he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

Do you see the repetition here? They were terrified, they cried out in fear, Jesus said don’t be afraid. Peter was afraid. The recurring theme is fear. This is understandable. They’re out in the middle of a deep lake, they see someone walking on the water and he isn’t on a stand up paddle board. The story can lose its power through familiarity, but remember this is the only time in history that this has ever happened! The disciples had no category to put this in, no possible way of believing what they were seeing. They were seeing Jesus doing the impossible. People can’t walk on water. What they saw shook them to their core.

PETER TOOK A RISKY STEP

Peter, never bashful, is the first to recover. He says, “If it’s really you, Lord, then command me to walk out there on the water with you.” I’ve never totally understood Peter’s thought process here. Why would he come up with this particular way for Jesus to prove his identity? Possibly his thinking was that if what they were seeing was some sort of hallucination or apparition it would not have the power to enable Peter to walk on water as he saw Jesus doing. If the “Jesus” he saw could make it possible for Peter to do that impossible thing then clearly it was not some sort of ghost, but was indeed Jesus in the flesh.

Jesus said, “All right, dude. Come on out.” At that point Peter was faced with a daunting prospect. He’s in a boat on the water. The only time he has ever stepped out of a boat it was either to jump into water that was no more than waist deep or to go for a swim. In the middle of a deep, choppy lake with the wind whipping in the middle of the night was not a good time to take a little dip.

In Peter’s life every time he had stepped out of a boat he had the same experience you and I have when we step into water. He stepped *into* water not *onto* it. Would he act on Jesus’ invitation? It would mean believing that Jesus had the power to enable him to do the impossible. There’s that scene in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when Indiana, in order to save his father’s life had to cross a frighteningly deep chasm. He had to step out into what appeared to be thin air, a step that meant a certain horrifying death. Yet the book he had told him he had to take that step of faith. He took a deep breath, and fearing the worst Indiana stepped out into the void, only to have his foot land on a rock that he could not see. Peter had a similar experience. He probably took a deep breath, refused to listen to the voice in his head that was screaming, “Don’t do it! This is crazy!” and he stepped out of the boat. To his and the other disciples’ amazement it was as though he had stepped onto solid ground. He walked on the water!

What a trip that must have been. The other disciples must have asked him later, “what did it feel like?” A rational analysis would have told Peter at that point that he was safe. If Jesus could enable Peter to walk on water then there was nothing to be concerned about. The crucial moment had passed when he stepped outside the boat. But ***fear is usually not rational***. In fact, fear can destroy our ability to think clearly. The more intense the fear the more disrupting it is to calm reasoning.

Standing there on the water fear got to Peter. He saw the swells coming and he became afraid he could not handle them. He was not able to rationally tell himself there was no reason not to be afraid because fear overwhelmed his rationality. When I was in my high school years we had some friends who loved water skiing. They had a ski boat and they wanted me to share their sport. So they invited me to go water skiing with them on the Kings River. They told me they would teach me how. It was a little rough getting started but pretty soon I was up and skiing pretty well. A few weeks later they invited me to go again, but this time to a place much closer to home. There was a man made water skiing lake just outside Bakersfield that we went to. This was a different experience because there were quite a few other boats out on the lake. The water on the river was flat calm. Not so with this lake. With all these boats flying around there were a lot of wakes we would go across and the water was quite choppy. This time I got up on the first try and was

skiing like a pro, but as we went across the lake we encountered several large wakes. I managed the first one fine but as I looked ahead I saw a couple of big ones just ahead. As soon as I saw them the thought came unbidden, “I can’t do this.” I was sure that I couldn’t handle them. I was afraid of them. Guess what happened. Down I went. I know now that had I just relaxed and let the skis handle it I would have been fine. But I panicked.

Peter had a similar experience. He saw the chop and the swells coming at him and thought, “I can’t do this.” He panicked. What happened to me happened to him. Down he went. He went down because he was right. He couldn’t do it. He stopped believing that it was Jesus’ power that was enabling him to walk on the water and that Jesus’ power was more than sufficient to deal with the wind and the waves. He thought he had to navigate the swells and to stay upright on his own ability, and he knew he didn’t have that ability. He stopped believing in Jesus.

When he went down he did the right thing. He yelled, “Lord, save me.” His only hope was Jesus and he knew it. That was exactly the right thing to do. Jesus reached out and grabbed him, and put him back in the boat.

THE LESSON WAS ABOUT FAITH IN JESUS

It is important to observe Jesus’ comment on the incident. “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?” What was the whole lesson about? Why did Jesus set them up for this? Why did he make the strange choice to walk on water? It was all about learning to trust who he was. It was about faith and about not doubting that he could do anything.

For the moment they got it. At the end of verse 33 they say, “Truly you are the Son of God.” It wouldn’t last. They were like us. We learn a lesson of faith, but when another test comes we think this is somehow different. We forget all about Jesus’ power. The disciples never forgot the incident. But it wasn’t until after the resurrection that they finally understood it completely. It meant Jesus can do anything and that we must always trust him. We must have faith. But another important reminder is that fear can overwhelm both our faith and our rationality.

IMPLICATIONS

FEAR IS ALSO A PROBLEM FOR US

This passage’s big themes are fear and faith. The theme of fear is relevant for us because we all deal with it. In fact, as we look ahead to a new year fear is an unfortunate factor for us. I can assure you that all of us will fail to do something that we could and should do in 2013 because of fear.

We don't know what the next year holds, and that bothers us. In the age of exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries ancient cartographers would create maps depicting what they thought they knew. Beyond that was the unknown. There they would draw dragons in the water, images of the terror of the unknown. They often would write at the edge of the known, "beyond here there be dragons." For us, we look to the future and we think, "beyond here there be dragons."

In his book, *Running Scared* (p. 23) Edward Welch wrote, "every single person who ever lived is personally familiar with fear." In his book, *The Conquest of Fear*, Basil King wrote, "We are not sick all the time. We are not sinning all the time. But most people are afraid of something or somebody all the time."

There is a mood of uncertainty and fear pervading our nation as we look ahead. We are about to fall off the "fiscal cliff" which economists warn will plunge us back into recession when we have never really recovered from the last one. The nation's debt is more than ominous. It is disastrous and no one is willing to deal with it. The debt is currently \$16 trillion. That works out to \$52,000 per citizen. Our leaders are so concerned about it that this year they are spending \$1.1 trillion more than government revenues. That means the government is spending \$2 million more than it takes in every minute! Our economy is looking like a house of cards that at some point, probably soon, will collapse.

Some will say that statistics show that violent crime is actually decreasing. However, the recent mass killings in Colorado and Connecticut are grievous and deeply disturbing. Until the 1970's there had been only 2 "spree" killings in the 20th century. Just in the years since the beginning of the new millennium there have been 26! 6 of the 12 deadliest spree killing events in history have occurred since 2007. The shootings have occurred at schools, work places, theaters, malls, churches, just about any place that people gather. This is just one element of what is happening in our nation that is disturbing.

We could also throw in the threat of some devastating natural disaster or a terrible terrorist attack using weapons of mass destruction, but most of us don't spend a lot of our days paralyzed by fear of such things. There are other more personal fears that dog our days. We fear something terrible happening to a loved one. We fear being diagnosed with cancer. We fear finding out we have Alzheimer's. But there are even more mundane fears that rule our days. We fear failure. We fear rejection. We fear looking stupid. We fear being embarrassed. We fear disapproval from other people.

Several years ago Laurie and I had a couple from our church in our home to have dinner together. We had a lovely evening with some delightful people. In this case these people are quite wealthy and well known in San Diego County. At one point the husband talked a little about a certain level of dissatisfaction in his heart. He wasn't all that happy in his career. This is a man who is highly successful, is making lots of money and is quite respected. But he's not doing what he'd really like to be doing. He will not change. He's stuck where he is because he is afraid of not having the money, he is afraid of losing his lifestyle and he is afraid of what his family would think of him if he did anything else. He's not miserable. He doesn't hate his work. He just lives with a wistfulness, a small, nagging sense of what else he could do with his life if not for, well, for fear.

I talked to another man one day a few years back. He is a lawyer and a young dad. He's bright, personable, intelligent and doing very well in his career. But he told me in the course of conversation that he dreams of a different life. Again, he didn't hate his job, but it wasn't what he would really like to do. I asked him what he would do if he could. He said he would be a football coach. Why didn't he? Fear of the consequences if he pursued his real passion.

There are many things I don't do because of fear. I don't bungee jump or go parasailing because even the thought of such things make me distinctly unhappy. Those decisions don't really affect my life. But there have been things I haven't done in my life due to fear of what people would think. There was an occasion when the leaders of the ministry I was in were proposing a decision that I initially thought was good. But as the decision came closer I had a sense that it was a mistake. But momentum was carrying things forward and if I stood up and spoke my concerns it would really upset some people. I didn't say anything. It was a disaster. There were other occasions when I did speak up at considerable cost to myself. But there were times when fear won out and I wish it were different.

JESUS WANTS US TO STEP OUT IN FAITH

Jesus wanted Peter to learn to live by faith. And he wanted him to learn that living by faith involves risk. It involves stepping out of the boat when it would be a lot safer inside the boat. He wanted Peter and the disciples to not let fear overwhelm their faith.

Proverbs 28:1 says, "The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion." Toby and Anna now have two dogs. One of them, Doc, is a mini Australian Shepherd. One aspect of his character that is a bit of a

surprise to me is that he is timid. Recently we had the joy of not only dog-sitting Doc and Banjo, his partner in crime, but bunny sitting Lily Belle, Carissa's rabbit. Lily was in a room upstairs caged off for her own protection. We brought the two dogs up just to see her. When we opened the door so they could see her Lily had an interesting reaction. We were trying to be careful because we didn't want to scare the poor rabbit to death. But when Lily saw Doc she immediately charged a couple of steps. Doc darted away in terror.

We said, "Doc, come on! Have a little self-respect. You're running away from a rabbit!" Proverbs 28:1 says that's what the wicked, those who do not have a relationship with God are like. Their fear overwhelms them. They run though no one is chasing them. Those who are righteous, those who trust in God, will be like lions. They won't be like Doc, they'll be like that fearless rabbit Lily Belle, confronted with an obvious threat she charges even though the dog could easily kill her. She was bold like a lion.

Jesus was teaching not only the disciples, but us, that he doesn't want us to be like the wicked who run when no one pursues. He wants us to be bold like lions. He doesn't want us to play it safe, to play not to lose. He wants us to step out of the boat. He wants us to act in faith, and acting in faith means taking a risk.

I want to challenge you today as you look forward to the beginning of the new year to think boldly. What are you going to attempt in 2013? Will you step out of the boat? Author and former pastor Francis Chan says, "I want to push you to do something scary because that's when we experience the Holy Spirit of God." We most experience the Holy Spirit when we step out in faith and do that which is bigger than us, that which is beyond us. In his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat*, John Ortberg echoes that sentiment when he urges us to ask ourselves, "What am I doing that I could not do apart from the power of God?"

There's a scene in the movie *Miracle* that I thought of as I was preparing for this talk. The movie is about one of the great moments in sports history when the 1980 USA hockey team played the great Soviet Union team. The US team was made up of second and third tier players from our nation while the Soviets were the best in the world. It was a total mismatch. In his talk just before that game Coach Herb Brooks told the team that if they played 10 games against the Soviets they would lose 9 of them. But he said, "But not this game." He said to his players, "You were born to play this game." You followers of Jesus Christ were not born to live in fear. You were born to be as bold as lions.

Romans 8:15 says to Christians, “You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear.” 2 Timothy 1:7 says, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” The Greek word translated “timidity” is stronger than that. It meant “cowardice.” That fear that makes you cower, to back off from doing what is right, or makes you afraid to take that risky step of faith, that’s not from God. He gives you a spirit of power, a spirit of sound thinking that sees God’s power as bigger than the wind and the waves.

What would you do if you weren’t afraid? What might you want to attempt in 2013 that would clearly be taking a step out of the boat? At the beginning of *The Hobbit* Gandalf the wizard shows up at the home of Bilbo Baggins, a respectable hobbit, though Bilbo doesn’t at first realize who Gandalf is. Gandalf tells him that he is looking for someone to share in an adventure he is arranging but that he is not finding any takers in the Shire where Bilbo lives. Bilbo says, “I should think so in these parts. We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner. I can’t think what anybody sees in them.”

I fear that’s how we so easily become. We have no use for adventures. They are uncomfortable and well might make us late for dinner. But Bilbo gives himself away when Gandalf reveals his identity. Bilbo says, “Not the Gandalf who was responsible for many quiet lads and lasses going off into the blue for mad adventures... Bless me, life used to be quite inter—I mean, you used to upset things badly in these parts once upon a time.” Yes, he used to make life more interesting, whether Bilbo was willing to admit it or not. Jesus calls us to an adventure that might well get out there near the edge of life.

My guess is that this all sounds like brave talk on a Sunday morning, but when it comes down to actually defining what that means most of us are somewhat at a loss. We’re not exactly sure what God might want us to do. I don’t know what that is for you. I will mention a few ideas, but these are mostly to spark your thinking, and maybe more than your thinking, your listening to God.

Start by asking God to show you what he wants you to do. Ask him if there is some way that you are trying to stay safe by staying in the boat rather than stepping out in faith. That’s actually a good thing to ask of him every day, but I want to encourage you to take some time as the new year is beginning to listen to God on the subject of what he might want you to do this new year.

Perhaps you will choose to love a person who is difficult in your life. Instead of responding out of anger, annoyance, self protection or selfish interest, choose to be a channel of God's love to that person.

Perhaps this year you will suffer a setback or go through some trial. Step out of the boat and choose to see that hardship as an opportunity to man the barricade. Think of it as a chance to display grace under pressure, to show that you are confident in God's love and goodness to you in a situation where it is not obvious. That is a powerful sign that you believe God is real and good. Why do we respect Job? Because when he experienced terrible tragedy he said, "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

You might choose to step out of your comfort zone to be a friend to a neighbor or co-worker or classmate that God seems to be making you aware of. You don't need to convert that person, but maybe you need to just care about him or her. It could be reaching out to a group of people, perhaps inviting neighbors into your home to get to know them and to bring the grace of Jesus Christ into their lives. It might be telling someone you know about Jesus, even though the thought of doing that makes your palms sweat. Or perhaps it is just inviting a person to church or to some event.

It could be taking the opportunity to go to another country to participate in a missions trip or visit some missionaries and encourage them in what they are doing. It could mean starting a new ministry or maybe taking on a ministry responsibility that might actually tie you down a little bit. Perhaps it will mean giving more money than you have ever given before to further the kingdom of God on this earth. It could mean just living with joy in a stressful situation. Perhaps it will mean not being defeated by the downs of life you will deal with this year but just praising God and caring about others despite what happens.

THE KEY ISN'T BIG FAITH BUT A BIG GOD

Peter wasn't able to walk on water for those brief moments because he was so strong or such huge faith. He was able to walk on water because he had just a little bit of faith and Jesus had more than enough power.

It is crucial for us to remember that whatever happens this new year, wherever you go, God will already be there. He will be with us and will go before us, wherever he leads us. Because of this we can be at peace. We can know that we will have all the time, all the strength, all the wisdom, and all the money we need to do everything that God wants us to do.

John Ortberg related a great story I told once before, but it is a good reminder as we are on the verge of a new year. It starts with Doug Coe, a man who has had a ministry mostly with people involved in politics in Washington D. C. Doug had a big impact on the late Chuck Colson. A guy named Bob, a new Christian, got involved in Doug's ministry. Bob was an insurance salesman unconnected with government or politics. One day Bob asked about the verse where Jesus said, "Ask whatever you will in my name, and you shall receive it." He said, "Is that really true?" Doug explained that it is not a blank check, but that Jesus really does answer prayer. Bob said, "Great. I think I'll pray for Africa." Doug suggested he narrow that a bit, so Bob said he would pray for Kenya. Did he have ties to Kenya? No. Had he ever been there? No. Did he know anyone there? No. He just wanted to pray for Kenya. This is where Doug went out on a limb. He challenged Bob to go ahead and pray for Kenya. He said Bob should pray for Kenya every day for 6 months. Then he said if nothing extraordinary happened Doug would pay him \$500. But if something remarkable happened, Bob would pay Doug the \$500.

That was a rather unusual plan but Bob agreed. He prayed every day and for a long time nothing at all happened. But one night he was at a dinner in D. C. and the people sitting around the table introduced themselves to the others and explained what they did. One woman said she helped run the largest orphanage...in Kenya. Bob had an instant inkling that he was about to lose \$500. He peppered the woman with questions. She noted he seemed awfully interested in Kenya and asked if he had ever been there. No. Did he know anyone there? No. Then she asked if he would like to go and visit the orphanage. It wasn't long before Bob was on his way to Kenya. The trip profoundly impacted him. He was appalled by the poverty and lack of health care. When he got home he began writing to pharmaceutical companies describing the huge need he had seen. He said he knew that every year they threw away large amounts of unsold medical supplies. Why not send them to the orphanage in Kenya. Some responded. The orphanage received more than a million dollars worth of medical supplies. The woman Bob had met was astounded. She called Bob and asked if he would come visit again so they could have a big party to celebrate. Back he went. The president of Kenya attended the celebration and invited Bob to go on a tour of Nairobi, the capital. In the course of the tour they saw a prison. Bob asked about a particular group of prisoners and the president told him they were political prisoners. Bob said, "That's a really bad idea. You should let them out."

After Bob got home he received a phone call from the State Department. He was asked, “Were you recently in Kenya?” “Yes.” “Did you say anything to the president about political prisoners?” “Yes.” “What did you say?” “I told them he should let them out.” The official then told him that the State Department had been working for years to free those prisoners and had tried every channel and maneuver they could think of, all to no avail. They’d hit a dead end. But now the prisoners had been released, apparently largely because of Bob. They were calling to say thanks. It all happened because Bob prayed. We have a big God. Let’s trust him this year and step out of the boat.