

Matthew 14:22-33

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Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." ²⁸ And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Have you ever had red herring before? There's no such thing as a "red" herring. A herring is a type of fish, and a "red" herring is just herring that's been heavily smoked until it turns red. Maybe you have tried that. But there's another type of red herring that I really want to discuss today, one which we all have a lot of experience with. A red herring is a common logical fallacy used in arguments intended to distract the hearer with another topic. The origin of the term comes from the 19th century, when hunters would train their hounds to follow the scent of rabbits or other animals. When the hound was on the scent of the trail, the hunter would drag a red herring across the path as a distraction, and a *good* hound dog would ignore the much stronger scent of the smoked fish, instead staying on task.

A red herring argument is used the same way. It's intended to be a distraction to throw you off the scent, to change the topic so that you might not even realize the subject has changed. Politicians use red herrings all the time when answering difficult questions, trying to pivot their answers to something seemingly relevant, but that is actually totally unrelated to the original subject. So, for instance, say a politician is arguing for raising taxes, they might say, "We *have* to raise taxes to pay for all the important government programs that we'd like to provide! We can't let these fail, because children are our future! We have to support the children!" And if you're listening, you might think, "Yes, children are our future! And I want to support children too!" Except, that isn't really related to the original argument about raising taxes at all. The idea of children was a red herring, intended to throw you off the scent.

As Christians, we are confronted with lots of red herrings every day, intended to throw you off the scent and distract you, particularly from following God's Word. And so, today in our text, we will see examples of:

Red Herring on the Sea of Galilee—Keep on the Scent of God's Word

Red Herring 1: Of Bodily Distraction

Red Herring 2: Of Fear

Red Herring 3: Of wind and waves

Are you hungry this morning? If you're like me, the hungrier you are, the harder it is to focus on anything. I don't always notice when I'm hungry, but when I become aware of it, I find it almost

impossible to do anything else until I've gone and found something to eat. And there's nothing wrong with eating, obviously. But hunger and other bodily needs can be a red herring when it distracts us from God's Word. For example, right before our text is the account of the Feeding of the 5,000. There they were, that large crowd of people, hungry and needing food. And Jesus provided it for them! He took five loaves of bread and two small fish, and continued to break and distribute them until everyone had their fill. The evidence was clear, Jesus had to be the Messiah. Only God Himself could do this great miracle, clearly this is the one whom God had promised to save His people from their sins!

But, that red herring of bodily distraction threw the people off the scent. At the end of that account, we're told that the people sought to make Jesus their bread king. He had provided for them, and they wanted Him to stay with them and continue to feed them. Think of how much easier their lives would be if they didn't have to worry about food! And that was *all* they could think about. The red herring of bodily distraction took their focus off of what Jesus was saying and the salvation He was offering, and instead they could only focus on what their bodies were telling them.

That happens to us all the time as well. When we're sitting in church, you have those bodily red herrings, like a growling stomach, or general tiredness, and they can distract us from God's Word. Or consider your own prayer life, or devotional life? How high up the priority list for you is time with God? For you, is it the sort of thing that is "if I have time, I'll read a devotion"? "I should spend some time in prayer, but I'm really tired, I'd better just go to sleep." Our bodies present us with red herring after red herring, which the devil loves to use to distract us from God's Word.

But let's consider Jesus, to see what He did when the red herring of bodily distraction tried to throw Him off the trail. He'd already sent the disciples across the lake, and He would then dismiss the crowds. And if you recall, the whole reason He and His disciples had come to this location was to try to get away. They needed a retreat of sorts. Both He and the disciples had been very busy teaching, now they'd just heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded. They needed to get away and rest. But when they arrived at this location, there was a huge crowd waiting, which led to another full day of teaching, ending with the miracle feeding.

And now, Jesus has sent the crowds away, sent the disciples on ahead; He's gotten the kids all in bed, so to speak. So, what does He do? Does He grab a bowl of ice cream, kick up his feet, and turn on Netflix? No, obviously not. Because although Jesus is tired, His body screaming out to Him to just give it a rest, He knows that what He needs most of all is some time with His Father in prayer. And if Jesus, perfect and holy God, needed prayer more than anything else, how can sinners like us so willingly neglect to pray in favor of sleep and food and work?

Seeing Jesus' example, staying on the scent even with His body trying to distract Him, that's a call to repentance for us. Because we see just how easily we get distracted, just how far down our list of priorities time with the Savior really is for us. But as we take these sins to the Lord and ask for forgiveness, let's remember Jesus again, praying there on that mountain. Jesus remained on the right scent, He prayed, He fortified Himself through a heart-to-heart talk with His Father. He did this for us. He did this so that He *wouldn't* be distracted by His bodily needs and fall into sin, but so that He could come to us with a word of peace. A word of forgiveness. He did this so that we can come to Him, wearied and burdened by our sins, and so that He can give us rest. And that is what He does for you.

So, after praying, our Lord still does not rest, but instead takes an evening stroll across the surface of the water to where the disciples were in their boat. And there was a storm on the sea, which was not uncommon on the Sea of Galilee. In fact, there's two different accounts of a stormy sea in the Gospels. In the other account, the disciples see the *storm* and are terrified; this time, it's not the storm that scares them. It's actually Jesus. ***"But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear."*** And that brings us to the second red herring trying to throw you off the scent of God's Word: fear.

I grew up in a house with an unfinished basement, and I used to hate it when I needed to go downstairs all by myself. So, I would always turn on the lights, then stomp down the stairs as loudly as I could, making lots of noise. My hope was that if there were any monsters or bad guys down there, that they'd be scared off by *my* loud noises. And my mom, of course, always knew what I was doing, and she'd say, "You don't need to be scared, Jesus will protect you." And I knew that to be true, but knowing and believing are different things, and fear frequently distracted me from the love my Savior had for me.

The disciples were distracted by fear as well. They saw Jesus walking on the sea, and they were terrified, thought they were seeing a ghost. And it's ironic, isn't it, that the one that was causing them such fear was also the one who gave them good reason to never be afraid! Of all the things to be scared of that night on the stormy sea, they were actually afraid of the God who would calm the stormy sea. Which seems ridiculous, until you realize that we really do the same thing every time we're afraid. Again and again in Scripture, God refers to Himself as our shield, as our protector. Such as in Proverbs: ***"Every word of God proves true; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him."*** (Proverbs 30:5) Or in the Psalms: ***"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."*** (Psalm 46:1)

And, if God is our shield and our refuge, that means of course that anything that could come and cause us fear can only arrive on our doorstep *because* the Lord allowed it through. We know His good will for us is that we are drawn to Him in faith and spend eternity with Him in heaven, and so His promise is that even those things that could terrify ***"work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*** (Romans 8:28) But we so easily get thrown off the scent. We get distracted by fears, and we are afraid. And we worry. And so, what we really are afraid of, then, is the God who is in control. We're no different than the disciples.

So, we need to hear what Jesus said to that fearful bunch. ***"They cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'"*** It doesn't really come across in the English, but when Jesus says, ***"It is I,"*** He's really saying, ***"I AM."*** ***"Do not be afraid. I AM."*** And that is the answer to every red herring of fear. What does anyone have to be afraid of, if Jesus, the Son of God, the I AM God—if He is here? What do the disciples have to fear from the storm or the wind or the waves, or even if there *were* a ghost—what do they have to be afraid of if Jesus refuses to be separated from them, if He comes to *them*? What do *we* have to be afraid of if the one who ***"laid the foundation of the earth"*** and says to the waves, ***"Thus far shall you come, and no farther"***—if He is with us? (cf. Job 38:4, 11) What can any terror, any sorrow, any trouble do to us if Jehovah God is here *with* us?

If there's money problems, do we have anything to fear when the one who fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish is with us? If there's bodily pain or impending death, do we have *anything* to fear when the One who suffered bodily and rose from the dead is with *us*?

There's nothing to fear at all when Jesus, the I AM God is with you. So, stay on the scent! Don't be distracted by the red herring of fear. You know, Peter was staying on the scent, at least at first. He stopped being distracted by fear and was focused on Jesus instead. **"And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'"** And that might seem to be a sort of brazen request on the surface, asking to walk on the water, but it's really a beautiful example of Christian faith. You see Peter is aware of the laws of nature, he knows that if he stepped out of the boat he would sink beneath the waves. So, He asks Jesus for a promise, because if Jesus gives Him a promise, then he can depend on that. Even if it means defying physics—if Jesus says it, the rules are thrown out.

So, Peter clings to that promise. He knows what Jesus has said, and he believes it. **"So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.'"** Peter was thrown off the scent, wasn't he? He had His eyes fixed on Jesus' promise, but then the red herring of the wind and the waves distracted him. He took His eyes off Jesus' promise, and he started to doubt whether *he* could make it through. His faith in Jesus' Word was suddenly gone, and now his faith had nothing to stand on.

The world, even the Christian world, generally gets it wrong when it talks about faith. Faith is often spoken of as this generic feeling that things will work out. It's this idea that if you just believe things will get better, they'll get better. But that's not faith. Faith isn't generic. Faith clings to *Jesus'* promises. When Jesus has given you a promise of sins forgiven, of a home in heaven, then it doesn't matter what storms of life rise up around you, because you have a promise to hold onto! But if you have faith in your own faith, if your faith is in your own strength of faith, then the waves come, and you sink.

Now faith in faith doesn't sound like a problem that we would have, but it can happen to us easily. I'll give you an example. Sometimes, we *feel* very spiritual. Sometimes our emotions can be stirred up in church, we can really *feel* forgiven, *feel* like we're children of God. And that's nice when you feel that way. But if you depend on that feeling, and then it goes away, then you can begin to doubt. Then the wind and the waves rise up and you wonder whether or not you're a believer after all, since it doesn't really *feel* like it anymore. *That's* faith in faith, and that's faith that doesn't last.

Rather than putting any sort of confidence in your own faith or in how you feel, look to Jesus' promises. Like when God said, **"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you."** (Isaiah 43:1-2) Those are promises that will never change, regardless of how you feel at a given moment. In any storm there's nothing to fear. You have Jesus! You have His Word.

But what if, like Peter, you have faith in that Word, but it's a weak faith? That's a distinct possibility. But remember this: Christ's Word saves the one who trusts in it, even if our faith is very small. The power of salvation is in the *promise* that faith grabs hold of. That's why the Scripture says, **"Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."** (Acts 2:21) That's what Peter did. He started sinking and cried out, **"Lord, save me!"** And Jesus reached out and saved Him. And much more important than the strength of our grip on Jesus is the strength of Jesus' grip on us. And He's given you the promise that He holds you in His hand, and **"no one will snatch [you] out of [His] hand."** (John 10:28) And if Jesus, the I AM God who calms the storms on the sea with a Word, has us, then what is there to fear? Nothing at all. Keep your eyes on Him. *He'll* bring you safely home. Amen.