

Matthew 14:22-34

'Til the Storm Passes By©
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When I was growing up, every Sunday morning while we were getting ready for church, my stepdad would turn on the television to a gospel hour with the Happy Goodman Family. He called them “the boys” but they weren’t all men. Vestal Goodman was the woman in the group and what a powerful voice she had!

Because my dad liked this southern gospel music I, being the teenager with determination to disagree with everything, would roll my eyes – which would make him laugh. But, I admit, I secretly liked this music. Actually, I still like it today.

One of the songs that I thought of with this focus today on storms was a song by Vestal Goodman titled *'Til the Storm Passes By*. It says:

Verse 1

In the dark of the midnight
Have I oft hid my face
While the storms howl above me
And there's no hiding place
'Mid the crash of the thunder
Precious Lord hear my cry
Keep me safe 'til the storm passes by

Verse 2

Many times Satan whispered
There is no use to try
For there's no end of sorrow
There's no hope by and by
But I know Thou art with me
And tomorrow I'll rise
Where the storms never darken the skies

Verse 3

When the long night has ended
And the storms come no more
Let me stand in Thy presence
On that bright peaceful shore
In that land where the tempest never comes
Lord may I dwell with Thee
When the storm passes by

Chorus

'Til the storm passes over
'Til the thunder sounds no more
'Til the clouds roll forever from the sky
Hold me fast let me stand
In the hollow of Thy hand
Keep me safe 'til the storm passes by

And Vestal, in her southern accent, would end by saying:

And they will pass, darlin.'

Our study on Simon Peter this week takes us out on the Sea of Galilee at night. Jesus, after some very important events taking place – in grief over the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, and exhausted after healing and feeding the multitudes of people, sends his disciples out in the boat to go ahead of him to the other side. It is getting dark and Jesus dismisses the crowds of people, then goes to the mountain for some time of prayer and reflection; some time for grieving; time with the Father.

Meanwhile, out in the boat in the dark, the disciples are experiencing a storm that has suddenly come up and their boat is being tossed around on the waves.

Sudden storms are not unusual and happen often on the Sea of Galilee. It's interesting that it is called a sea, when actually, it is a lake – and not a real big lake either. It's also known as Lake Kenneret. In Bible times it was 13 miles from north to south and just 8 miles across at its widest point. But it was deep – 141 feet deep – although at the time of Jesus, no one really knew how deep it was. In their mind it was unfathomable – endlessly deep, going all the way down to the underworld where the realm of the dead were.

People were very superstitious in that day and they believed spirits – ghosts – could come up from that underworld.

So the disciples – especially Simon and those who were fishermen by trade – were very familiar with the sea and even with storms. But this particular night was like no other.

Jesus – up on that mountain – knew the disciples were in distress and so he went to them. Did he take another boat to get there? Nope. Did he swim out to them? No, he did not.

He took a very unusual way to get to the disciples. He walked. Not around the lake but walked right out on the water; walked onto the raging waves. Jesus walked to where the disciples were battling the wind and waves. And I imagine in the crash of thunder and the sudden flash of lighting they saw this unusual sight – a man walking on the water.

And they were terrified. Why? Because they thought a ghost had come up from the abyss – emerged up from the underworld, the land of the dead. And Jesus calmed them – not the storm, yet – but the disciples. He said to them, “Be encouraged. It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

And here is a little hint as to who Jesus really is: *ego eimi* is Greek for “I Am.” And it’s the same words as what Moses heard in Hebrew when he asked God in the burning bush to identify himself.

“I am,” said God. “I am who I am.” And it’s translated as Yahweh.

Jesus was saying “Don’t be afraid. It’s me – I am.” Of course, it is! He just healed multitudes of people. He just fed over 5,000 men, plus women and children with 2 fish and 3 loaves of bread. He’s just walking on the water in a storm. Of course, it is Jesus – the Son of the Great I Am.

And Peter says, “If it is really you, Lord, tell me to come out to you. Tell me to walk to you.”

And Jesus says “come.” And Peter steps out of the boat – out into the raging sea of waves amidst the thunder, wind and lightening and he starts walking to Jesus.

What would you do? If you were there in the little boat in the storm and you saw Jesus walking on the water and you knew it was Jesus – and you had witnessed all the amazing things Jesus had done in the last couple of days – would you be like Simon Peter and get out of the boat? Or would you be like the other 11 and stay put where it seemed safer.

In Bible study there were a few hands that went up to indicate they would step out of the boat, knowing who Jesus is. The majority of us, however, indicated that we would probably stay in the boat.

But even though Simon Peter was brave and bold in his desire to walk on the water to Jesus; even though he was doing it for a while, he suddenly had a moment of realization. He must have looked around and saw the huge waves, the boat that was being tossed around, the lightening flashes. He must have had a sudden “Come to Jesus” moment (no pun intended) but when he did, he lost his focus on Jesus and began to focus on himself and his surroundings and the impossibility of it all.

And he began to sink. He was suddenly in over his head. He began to cry out to Jesus to rescue him. And of course, Jesus immediately reached out and took Simon Peter by the hand and got him safely in the boat. And then, and only then, did Jesus calm the storm.

He said to Peter, “You man of weak faith. Why did you doubt?”

Adam Hamilton, the author of our study on Simon Peter says what I have often thought – that Jesus wasn't really reprimanding Peter so much as he was expressing perhaps a little disappointment. Because Peter was doing it. He had stepped out of that boat with amazing faith and because he was trusting Jesus so much, he actually was walking on the water in the storm. But then, he took his eyes off Jesus and lost his faith and courage and began to sink.

But the thing is, Jesus still rescued him. And he did not scold the other 11 who did not even suggest that they follow Peter in getting out of the boat. Jesus just got into the boat with them all and calmed the storm; calmed the wind and the waves.

And they worshipped him. They recognized Jesus as the Son of the God. The great I Am. They fell to their knees and worshipped him.

What great metaphors we have, here in this story. We never know when a storm is going to suddenly come. Sometimes we have some warning. There's something just not right – we start not feeling good and eventually we find out the reasons why and it becomes one of those big storms in life.

I was around 10 when we moved out onto the prairie on the little ranch in Oklahoma. We were used to tornado watches pretty much every evening in the spring. Seldom did we actually have a tornado come to the exact place where we were, though. We kept watch, but for the most part, just went about our business.

But this particular evening was different. The sky turned green and dark and it got eerily quiet and very hot and heavy feeling. That was the calm before the storm. And then it came crashing in on us.

The tornado went over our little farmhouse, raising the carpet up off the floor about 2 inches (it was an old stretched out carpet). There was a whistle that went through the house. We all got into the room that seemed the most sturdy and safe but I remember my knees shaking and knocking. Probably everyone could hear it.

After the storm passed, my dad went out looking to see what the damage was. The roof had blown off the barn that wasn't very far from the house. We were lucky it didn't damage the house or carry it away like in the Wizard of Oz.

The next day, dad had contractors out to get started on a storm cellar. We were all relieved to have that cellar and we did not take the storms for granted anymore.

That night, we had some warning but we didn't pay much attention to it. And then it hit. Sometimes I think we are like that – we don't pay a lot of attention to the warning signs that tell us a storm is coming.

And sometimes, like the one in our story in Matthew, the storm comes up with no warning at all.

My brother, David and I got pretty brave after the storm cellar was built. When there were storm warnings and all the rest of the family hid down in the fraidy hole, David and I boldly sat up on top of the cellar keeping watch. I don't think you call that having faith, though, because if it looked like the storm was going to hit us, we would have taken a dive down to the cellar with the rest of them.

Thing is, we all react different to the storms in our lives. Sometimes we hide from them; we just want to stay in the safety of the boat – or the storm cellar. We choose to wait it out in the most secure place.

Sometimes we boldly taunt the storm, willing it to come on over. Even though we know we will most likely end up in the same place as everyone else.

But Jesus is the focus here. Jesus, who reaches out and tells us to come to him, to step out of the boat, to try walking on the water. Jesus, who rescues us when we start to sink. Jesus who never judges us for choosing to stay in the boat – or in the safety of the cellar.

Jesus says, "don't be afraid. It's me. I'm here with you no matter what the storm is in your life. *Don't be afraid.* Those three words are the most frequently spoken words from God to human beings in Scripture. It is written more than 140 times in the Bible.

What is the storm you are going through? It might be an illness; it might be fear of what is going to happen as you are having some storm warnings. It might be a financial storm; or a huge life transition to adjust to, not knowing what the future really looks like.

Don't be afraid, Jesus says. I am here. It is I. The Son of God. Your Savior. The one who holds you and rescues you from the storm. Whether you bravely step out in faith or stay in the shelter of safety I am with you until the storm passes by – and even forever more.

This hymn we're going to sing was one that was written by Thomas Dorsey, known as the father of black gospel music, after his beloved wife, Nettie, died in childbirth. Adam Hamilton writes about Dorsey:

Part of the lyric in the first verse takes us back to Dorsey's story: "Through the storm, through the night/Lead me on to the light." When he wrote this hymn, Thomas Dorsey was sinking, and the only one who might rescue him from his inconsolable grief was the one who took Simon Peter's hand. Sometimes, that's our only prayer, too, when the storms of life are raging around us: "Save me, Lord. Rescue me. Help!

Call out to him. For Jesus promises to stay with us 'til the storm passes by. And it will pass, darlin.'