

## **“Getting Out of the Boat”**

**Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 14:22-33**

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Diana Nyad, an American author, journalist, motivational speaker, and long-distance swimmer, provides a real-life account of pursuing seemingly impossible dreams. In 2013, at the age of 64, Nyad successfully swam from Cuba to Florida, a distance of 110 miles, without the protection of a shark cage, on her fifth attempt. Her first four attempts, spanning 35 years, were marred by challenges such as powerful storms, venomous jellyfish, and sheer physical exhaustion, all contributing to what some might deem as "failures." Yet, these setbacks did not define her journey. After each attempt, she revisited her strategy, learned from her failures, and pressed forward with unyielding resolve. Nyad's repeated failures and her determination to press forward brought about a ripple effect of inspiration across the globe. She became a living testament that it's never too late to pursue your dreams, embodying her mantra: "Find a way." Her story is not just about reaching a destination but embracing the journey, with all its setbacks and lessons. Her attempts, failures, and eventual success mirrored a message similar to the aforementioned fictional scenario, reflecting real-life determination, resilience, and profound impact. Nyad's steadfastness, even in the face of repeated failures, speaks to our spiritual walk with Christ. The treacherous waters, venomous stings, and relentless waves can be seen as metaphors for the trials and tribulations we face. Just as Diana never lost sight of the distant shore, we too are called to fix our eyes on Jesus amidst life's tumultuous seas, understanding that our struggles, doubts, and even our failures are all integral parts of our journey of faith.

You know, it seems rather fitting to begin with a nautically minded introduction as our passage from Scripture details a rather eventful journey undertaken by the apostles and their leader, Jesus Christ. Now, one of the things that we're likely to miss just reading this passage this morning apart from its broader context is how eventful this particular day would've been in the life of Jesus' earliest followers. Right before getting on the boat, they would've been privy to a real miracle.

Taking just five measly loaves of bread and two paltry fish, Jesus was able to feed a crowd of well over five thousand people. Why do I say well-over? Because at the time, it was the case that only the men were counted. Thus, in that 5000 number you've not counted all the women and children that would've necessarily been there as well. But regardless of the actual number of people involved, the fact of the matter remains that what Jesus did was far and beyond the capability of anyone quote-unquote normal. No, such a miraculous feeding had to be exactly that - a miracle, which necessarily means that Jesus Christ himself possesses powers well beyond what ordinary men and women possess. That's an important reminder that bears closer examination in our lives. So, these men that watched Jesus feed so many people miraculously find themselves tossed about on a stormy sea. That they're scared definitely speaks to the ferocity of the storm. After all, many of Jesus' earliest disciples were fishermen on this very same sea. Because of that, they would've necessarily been exposed through the years to numerous storms, just like this one. The reason – the Sea of Galilee sits in a place that allows for storms to whip up rapidly and frequently with little or no warning before the rains starts and the sea surges. So, this wasn't a typical, everyday storm. No, those could've been handled without much consternation whatsoever. We know this storm was powerful but it's really the appearance of a strange figure on the water that adds additional fears to these salty sailors. This makes complete sense when you know a little about how the ancient Jews thought of the sea. Understandably, the sea was considered a rather mysterious place, filled with creatures large and small. It was also a belief in Jewish culture at the time that the sea was where ghosts and apparitions dwelled. So, in the midst of the storm, they see a figure out on the shore. I'm sure, with the boat rocking and swaying in the wind, it would've been hard to identify Jesus at first.

I can only imagine how frightened they must've been. I mean, there you are, it's dark as, well, night. But it isn't just that you can't see very well, what you can see is just as frightening as what you can, perhaps. The sea bubbles and brews, tossing the ship around. The winds screech as the thunder peals strike deeper worry into your heart. The stakes are very real, your life is on the line. And then, in your limited vision, you see a figure on the waves. It can't be, you think at first but as your eyes strain to see more, you grow more and more convinced. It is someone, and not just anyone. It's

Jesus. The very same man you've been following and have only just recently seen perform a latest miracle for the masses.

Two things that I think are absolutely essential to understanding this story in its fullness. First, remember how and why they got onto the boat in the first place. Jesus puts them there. Now, considering Jesus is all-knowing, Jesus would've known of the events that were coming into the lives of His disciples. Sometimes we think Jesus will only lead us to places of calm tranquility. We couldn't be more incorrect. To be a follower of Jesus is to be willing to be sent into whatever fray necessary to shine the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of this world. Another thing that we shouldn't miss in the context of this story is just how quickly the change happens. After all, seemingly in a moment, life takes a major 180-degree turn. One moment, this group of followers is literally witnessing one of the greatest miracles that has ever been recorded in the history of humanity. The very next thing you know, life sees their lives in peril, tossed about on an inhospitable sea. It's a jarring change of events. To be taken from what was sure to have been a spiritual high and land with an unfortunate thud right into the middle of difficult circumstances.

For me, I can't help but remember a time when I was working at River Hills Community Church. The family was all doing great and I really, really loved my job and the people I worked with. It was such a good time. As a matter of fact, one Sunday came and I preached a great sermon, saw some really neat things going on with the youth group of the church. Then came Monday. The call came as I was in the middle of a counselling session. My sister had gone into some sort of medical emergency and was being rushed to the hospital. I remember driving frantically towards Atrium Hospital, praying and hoping all would be well when the second call came. Amy had passed. There was no longer any need to rush to the hospital. It was literally like you'd taken the wind out of my sails. I pulled into the parking lot at a local restaurant and just let the moment wash over me.

Life changes in an instant. We all know that. It's what we do following the changes that really matter. Sometimes, it just takes us a moment to get our bearings straightened out. That's what happened to Peter, it seems like, doesn't it? I mean, there, once Jesus is clearly seen on the waves, Peter rises to the occasion, doesn't he? Calling out to Jesus, Peter says, "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*"

It was the Roman poet, Horace who originally conjured the expression we all carry around in our breasts. "Seize the day" he wrote. Well actually he didn't. It's one of history's great crimes against the written word, perhaps. The phrase actually means 'pluck the day' and has a slightly different connotation than we associate with it but, for the sake of this sermon, let's just stay with the traditional rendering.

At first, the fear is overwhelming. Notice that the apostles cry out in fear. You can certainly understand that. But, thankfully, Jesus answers, announcing that it's Him. It's then that things get interesting, don't they? Peter, there in the boat being tossed by the waves, calls out in reply to Jesus. **Matthew 14:28** – "*And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."* Now look, it's a gutsy ask. But it shows Peter's desire to expand his faith and his abilities. In that moment, Peter's faith was great, wasn't it? I mean, here he is after being tossed around in a boat and thinking he saw a ghost to asking for what should seemingly be impossible. But consider what Peter has experienced at this point in his life. He's seen healings, he's seen feedings, he's seen wondrous things, all done by the power of Jesus Christ. That is to say that Peter is coming to trust Jesus more and more. And, I think if we're honest about it, something similar happens to us as we age with our faith in Jesus Christ. As you walk more and more days, the thing I've finding is that it becomes easier to trust God, not harder. When you've not made it through much of life, much less life's more difficult stuff, it's fairly difficult to trust Jesus on your own experience. But, as you age, you see more and more the goodness of God's hand moving in and through your life as well as the lives of countless other people.

And, at some point, we all know that we're called to take on things on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Teresa of Avila, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian thinker once wrote – "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which He walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which He

blesses all the world.” So, I hope that we all, like Peter find ourselves filling with the Holy Spirit and God’s moxie and find ourselves asking such audacious questions to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And may Christ respond in just the same way as He does to Peter. “*Come,*” says Jesus Christ to Peter’s request.

So then, once he’s got Jesus’ approval, notice what Peter does next. **Matthew 14:29b** – “*So Peter got out of the boat and walked on water and came to Jesus.*” No dithering, no overthinking, just action.

It reminds me of the story of a social media platform known as Friendster. In the early 2000s, a computer programmer named Jonathan Abrams launched Friendster, a pioneering social networking platform that quickly amassed a significant user base, particularly in Southeast Asia. It was a revolutionary concept at the time, opening up new vistas for online interaction and social connection. At its inception, Friendster was poised to become what could have been the leading global social network, having been developed even before platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn became ubiquitous. However, a series of missed opportunities and missteps led to its gradual downfall. In a particularly illustrative instance in 2003, Google offered to purchase Friendster for a staggering \$30 million. Abrams, potentially overthinking the future trajectory and inherent worth of his creation, declined the offer, harboring the belief that Friendster could independently burgeon into something even more valuable. As Friendster navigated through the digital landscape, it was plagued by technical difficulties, notably issues with scalability that severely impacted user experience. Rather than directing focus towards rectifying these critical issues, the team prioritized introducing new features, perhaps overthinking solutions without addressing the immediate, fundamental problems. This oversight and lack of strategic focus paved the way for other platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which, with their streamlined user experiences, not only attracted Friendster’s user base but also ascended to the zenith of the social networking world. Friendster, in contrast, unable to adapt to the swiftly evolving digital realm, and having missed the opportunity to align with a tech giant like Google, gradually faded into obsolescence. In 2011, it rebranded as a gaming site before finally shutting down in 2018. Abrams and the Friendster team encountered a crucial moment, a definitive opportunity, but hesitated and perhaps overthought, eventually missing a chance that could have significantly altered its story. This narrative of Friendster exemplifies how overthinking, coupled with an inability or unwillingness to seize opportunities promptly, can catalyze a downfall, even when the path forward appears clear and the requisite action is evident.

In the context of our spiritual journey, it underscores the profound importance of heeding God’s call, stepping out in faith, and navigating through our fears, even amidst the stormy and uncertain seas of life. It’s a secular echo of Peter’s initial hesitation to step onto the tumultuous waves, reflecting our own reservations and what it means when we decide to move forward, trusting in God’s plan and promise. While the failure of Friendster made headlines, chances are the opportunities you’ve missed by overthinking are known only in the recesses of our own minds. But they’re there, I know they are for me.

If we will allow Him to come into our lives, and direct our wills and our actions, we will discover that He will lead us to take action, just like Peter did. He gives us the fortitude and clarity to overcome our doubts and fears and move into the things and places that Christ would have us do. First, like Peter, we must look back on our lives and recall the ways and occasions that we’ve seen God move in our lives. That is to say that, as Christians, we need to be mindful of the many ways that Jesus has moved in our lives to this point. After all, Peter had a track record with Jesus when he made his bold request and found himself walking on water. We have seen God’s work and miracles in our own lives. Each step, every trial, and triumph are a testament to the power and love of God moving through us, similar to how Peter witnessed Christ’s miracles and acted upon his faith, stepping onto the turbulent sea.

Let’s look at Paul’s journey, once a staunch opponent of the followers of Christ, only to be transformed into one of the greatest apostles, spreading the message of Christ across lands and generations. His experiences, the struggles he faced, and the resilience he demonstrated are encapsulated in **2 Corinthians 4:8-9** – “*We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed;*

*perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*" Paul exemplifies the unyielding faith and perseverance that, despite our struggles, despairs, and challenges, the light of Christ perpetually shines, guiding us through our darkest moments. His journeys, fraught with perils and persecutions, did not deter him from his purpose and mission. Like Diana Nyad, he "found a way," even when the path seemed insurmountable.

This lesson from Paul and the courage of Peter – unshaken by the fierce tempest – is what we're beckoned to embody. **James 1:2-4** reminds us, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*" This is not a message championing self-reliance or sheer willpower, but a proclamation of utter reliance on the Lord, acknowledging that it is through His strength that we navigate the stormy waters of our lives. The beautiful reality is that when we "walk on water" with Jesus, we are bound to confront waves that try to pull us down, but the saving grace of Christ is always there to lift us up, just as He did with Peter.

In contemporary life, there's an inspirational example of a woman named Deshun Wang, a Chinese model, and actor who started her runway career at the age of 79. She stated, "It's possible to tell people how to gain longevity. But no one can tell you how to keep on living." Deshun's audacity to step onto the runway, defying societal expectations and norms, echoes the scriptural exemplars who dared to tread where others hesitated, entrusting their journey to God's love and providence. In Deshun's case, it's a reminder that we are never too old, never too late to the call of God in our lives. Her story aligns with Abraham and Sarah, who were well advanced in age when God promised them descendants as numerous as the stars. In **Genesis 18:14**, the Lord says, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.*"

So, dear brothers and sisters, may our lives be filled with this spirit – a spirit that does not cower in the face of life's tempests but steps forth with faith, knowing that Christ is there to hold us when we falter. In doing so, we find a way, just like Diana did, just like Peter, Paul, Abraham, and Sarah did, just like many others who, in their faith journey, discovered that the love of God does not promise a life without storms but assures a steadfast presence amidst them. May we, through our journey of faith, inspire others to seek Christ, be a beacon of His unending love, and live our lives with the resilient spirit that we find in Scripture and the world around us. May our eyes ever be fixed on Jesus, our Savior, who commands the seas to be still and guides us safely through life's storms, until we reach the eternal calm and tranquility of His kingdom.

In the powerful and precious name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.

