

Launching Out When Fear Wants To Keep You in the Boat

We are in a series called *Launching Out With God* and this morning we're going to be looking at the launching out when we're afraid. Our launching passage this morning is **Matt 14:22-33**.

This account has two launches: Jesus tells the disciples to launch out for the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and then invites Peter to launch out of the boat and walk on water. What I mean by launching is any movement from where we are to a new place the Lord is calling us to go. It can be a major launch, like changing jobs, moving to a new city, or asking someone to marry you. If you're facing one of those major launch decisions, I pray these messages will be a help to you. But we don't want to limit this to just the major, life changing launches because there are countless smaller ways that we can launch out into new opportunities and new challenges that may be less life impacting but still have a significant effect on the trajectory of our lives. Things like witnessing to someone about your faith, getting involved in a church ministry or community project. Launching out can be making a lifestyle change such as eating healthier or exercising more regularly or getting organized. We can launch from here to there by making a commitment to get financially healthy: getting out of debt, curbing spending, making a budget, tithing to God's work. It can be a relational launch like making a new friend or taking an old friendship to a new level.

Major launches don't come around every day. They're not meant to: you shouldn't be moving and changing jobs and getting married every other week. But following Jesus will provide frequent smaller opportunities and challenges to launch with faith from here to there. One of the goals for this series is to stir our faith to be looking and ready for those opportunities. The other goal is to massage wisdom into the process because I've seen the damage that can come from foolishness disguised as faith. Last week I closed with a few safety checks to consider before launching to make sure you're launching wisely.

If you will allow me to apply this passage more metaphorically than usual, launching out with faith can feel a little like getting out of the boat and walking on water. We all have our boats: our boats are where we're comfortable – it's what we're used to, what we're good at, what we know. Launching out can feel like getting out of our comfort-zone boats and walking in a way that is unknown, uncomfortable, and a little scary to us. Peter was a fisherman, he knew his way around boats. He was comfortable and competent in the boat. But getting out of the boat was a whole new thing for Peter and he needed to trust Jesus in a whole new way outside the boat then he had to inside the boat and he soon became afraid. When the Lord invites us to get out of the boat of our comfort zone few things will keep us in the boat more powerfully than fear. Fear of the new, fear of change, fear of failure, fear of what people will think, fear of looking foolish. Fear says "you're comfortable in the boat, why would you want to get out of it? Why take the risk? Why lose the security of what you know?" If we listen to fear, one day we'll look back with regret at all the times Jesus invited us to get out of the boat and trust him and we refused. If the Lord is inviting you to take a new step with him, to get out of your comfort zone boat in some way – even a small way – it's pretty likely that fear is in the boat with you trying to convince you to stay in the boat. How do we find the faith and courage to launch when fear wants to keep us in the boat?

I think the answer begins with a new understanding of the relationship between fear and faith.

I. Fear is often God's launchpad for faith

I'm so glad the gospels are honest about how often the disciples wrestled with fear. In this passage, the disciples were terrified. Terror is fear on steroids. Peter was afraid. Fear was a real issue for them. And it's a real issue for most of us too.

When I look back over my life, fear got in my boat early in my life. I was a timid kid, particularly in new situations. Pre-school scared the bejeebers out of me! Sunday school with all its felt Jesus' intimidated me. Pretty sure there was a felt Peter climbing out of a felt boat in one of them. And I never remember getting comfortable in preschool or early Sunday School – I was always nervous going to them. New situations overwhelmed me and I had new situations a lot. Between the ages of 7-11 my dad and I moved five times in five years. Every year for those five years I had to walk into a new school and join classes where most of the kids had known each other for years, and try to fit in and make new friends. Jump ahead a few years when I was a teen I began to write songs and wanted to sing in public, but I'd get so afraid my voice would quiver. When I had to do public speaking for high school and college assignments I'd get so nervous that my voice and my hands would shake. When I was in my twenties fear found a new way to get into my boat: I was singing in a wedding and I was so nervous that my voice broke for the first two or three words. The rest of the song went pretty well but all I could think about were those first few words and I felt like I really messed up. After that, any time I sang, I was so afraid that my voice would break with the first few words that it pretty much insured that it did. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy – fear was saying in my head: your voice is going to break, your voice is going to break". But it got worse: I began to focus on the first words I would speak when talking to people, afraid that my voice would break. When I'd meet someone new, I'd be totally focused on and fearful about my first words which more often than not meant I choked. That particular battle with fear went on for years. I haven't thought about that manifestation of fear for a long time, but it was a very real thing at the time.

Most of you probably feel fear in your boat in one way or another. Maybe you're not afraid of your voice breaking but maybe you're afraid of meeting new people or trying new things. Maybe you're afraid of change. Maybe you're afraid of failure. Maybe you're afraid of looking foolish. Maybe you're afraid of the unknown. Maybe you're afraid of letting go of the secure for the less secure. Maybe you're afraid of what people think about you.

The problem isn't fear, the problem is when we allow fear to dictate when we do or do not get out of the boat. The problem isn't that fear says, "don't get out of the boat – don't try that new thing, you're gonna fail. Don't reach out to that person, they're not going to accept you. Don't even start getting your finances in order, or manage your time better, or get involved in that ministry because you know it's not going to work out so why even try?" The problem isn't that fear says these things; the problem is when we listen to it and agree with it. The problem is when we think that if we feel fear it must mean that God isn't in something, that if God wanted us to get out of the boat, we wouldn't feel fear.

Rather than fear being an indication that God isn't leading us, fear is often the launchpad God has designed for our faith to take off and grow. Fear is all over this account in Matt. 14, but not where we might expect. Their fear wasn't when the storm was blowing and Jesus was nowhere in sight. Most of them were veteran sailors, certainly Peter, James, and John were – and the storm didn't scare them. It made their progress hard, it knocked them off course, but it didn't scare them. What scared them is recorded in verses 25-26:

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.

What terrified them wasn't the storm, what scared them was Jesus walking on water. They thought he was a ghost and they were terrified. Peter was terrified too but when Jesus said, "don't be afraid, it's me", Peter responded to his terror by asking Jesus to call him out of the boat. That's pretty gutsy! He saw his fear as a launchpad for faith!

But as so often happens, even when we step out in faith things can get messy and Peter got his eyes off of Jesus and onto his circumstances – the wind and waves – and fear got back into his boat. Peter didn't cry out in fear when he was doing something the Lord didn't intend for him to do, the fear hit him when he was doing exactly what Jesus told him to do. Fear can't be our guide for what God does or doesn't want us to do. Don't think, "if I feel afraid, it must mean God doesn't want me to step out." Often fear is God's launchpad for our faith to take off.

My point isn't that any time we feel fear it means we should do the thing we fear. My point is that fear shouldn't be the determiner one way or the other. If I had made my fears my guide when I was younger, two things I'd know I wasn't called to do are 1) public speaking and 2) meeting new people. But God used those fears in my life as a launchpad – and it was often a sloppy launchpad – for my faith in Him to grow.

Is there a boat you're sitting in but you find yourself wondering if the Lord might be calling you to climb out of it and walk towards Jesus with a new faith? Before you launch out, there are good questions to ask first: Is it wise? Is it a biblical direction? Do you think Jesus is calling you to do it? Have you sought wise counsel about it? Have you checked your motives to make sure it isn't pride or greed or some other ungodly thing motivating you, but a sincere desire to follow the Lord? It's wise to give careful thought before launching out. But don't let fear be the reason you do or don't get out of the boat. General Patton once said that he often felt fear, but he learned very early in life never to take counsel of his fears. Fear is often God's launchpad for our faith to take off.

II. Often it's where fear and faith collide that we see Jesus most clearly

When we launch out with faith in God, trusting Him outside of our comfort zone, making Him our security in the midst of change and newness and unknown, we see God working in our life in ways we never will if we never get out of the boat of our comfort zone. Like the disciples, we will see his glory and his faithfulness displayed in our lives.

a. We see his glory

There are some strange and fascinating aspects to this account. Have you ever wondered why Jesus came out to them walking on the water? Walking on water is a miracle, but it can seem like a random miracle. Why didn't Jesus just get into the boat with them to travel to the other side like all the other times? To make it even more strange, Mark's account makes it very clear that Jesus had no intention of getting in the boat with them:

*And he [Jesus] saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He **meant to pass by them**, but*

when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. (Mark 6:48-50).

Jesus saw them struggling with the winds and waves and yet he meant to pass right by them. Why would Jesus head to the struggling disciples and then just walk on by without helping them, as if he didn't care about their plight? Mark's wording is very specific and unusual, and to understand its deeper meaning we need to look at this miracle through the lens of the OT and what we'll find is that there is much in this miracle of walking on water that speaks of the glory and deity of Christ. Speaking of the awesomeness of God, Job 9 says,

*He [God] moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. 6 He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble. 7 He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. 8 He alone stretches out the heavens and **treads on the waves of the sea**. 9 He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. 10 He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. 11 When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him. Job 9:5-11*

Two interesting things in this passage: God treads on the waves of the sea. And when he passes me, I cannot see him, when he goes by, I cannot perceive him. Jesus was treading on the waves of the sea but the disciples couldn't perceive that it was Jesus – they thought it was a ghost. The idea of “passing by” has deep OT roots in the glory of God.

In Exodus 33 when Moses asks God to show him His glory, the Lord answers in verse 21: *Behold there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, **and while my glory passes by** I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by...*

In 1 Kings 19 when Elijah is hiding from Jezebel in a cave, the Lord says to Elijah ¹¹...*“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, **for the Lord is about to pass by.**”*

Mark uses these specific words to show that this was an epiphany – a revealing of the deity of Christ. Jesus doesn't mean to “pass by” them because he doesn't care about them, or because he's competing to see who can get to shore first. It was to show them His glory. They were meant to see Jesus treading on the waves and see his glory, but in their fear and lack of faith they don't perceive it, think it's a water spirit and cry out in fear.

Jesus' response to their fear, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” is once again a subtle echo of OT reassurances from God.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; Isa. 41:10

This shows us a beautiful aspect of Jesus' glory and the glory of God: His glory doesn't hold us at a distance, it draws us close to him. If we think God's glory is cold and impersonal we don't know Jesus. Yes, he meant to pass them by as a symbol of the glory of God passing them by, but in response to their fear and need, he drew near to them. And isn't that always the response of our God? He draws near to

the broken, He bends His ear to the desperate. This is why the cross displays the glory of God so beautifully: not because it displays Him in untouchable light and power, but because it displays God the Son drawing near to our brokenness and weakness and need to the point that he was rejected and broken and crucified for us, so that we could be forgiven and cleansed and draw near to him with confidence. We see Jesus' glory and it draws us to him. It was always Jesus' plan when he had them launch out that it would be an opportunity for them to see his glory. Launching out in faith gives us opportunities to see our Lord's glory in ways that we won't if fear paralyzes us from launching out.

b. We see his faithfulness

Peter displayed an unusual degree of launching faith when he got out of the boat and began to walk to Jesus. None of the other disciples did it. His fear turned to faith...and then it turned back to fear again. He saw the wind and waves and became afraid.

This whole concept of faith to launch out, to step out, to get out of the boat, can seem neat and tidy in a message, but it can get messy in real life. We mess up, we miss God, we get out of the boat and take a few wobbly steps and then we get our eyes on the wind and waves of our circumstances and we start to sink. We get out of the boat...and everything starts to go wrong. We wonder if the Lord is with us, and fear can creep back in.

Peter cried out "Lord, save me!" and Matthew records that immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Immediately. He doesn't wait and watch Peter squirm a while, he doesn't lecture him, he doesn't scold him by saying, "why get out of the boat if you're just going to stop trusting?" He doesn't even give Peter the gentle rebuke of "Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?" *until* he catches him.

If we want to see Jesus' faithfulness in new ways, we have to step out of more boats. If we play it safe and never launch, we will miss opportunities to see our Lord's faithfulness. I don't want to encourage recklessness – I've seen the damage that foolishness in the name of faith can do – but if our hearts are sincerely and humbly seeking his will and we have biblical direction and we've sought wise counsel (in the bigger things) and we step out, Jesus will be faithful to uphold us.

I have actually found that some of the sweetest times in my walk with the Lord have been the times I was sinking. When everything is going well, I'm like, "I've got this Lord. If I need you, I'll call you." But when things are going wrong, when I am sinking, I feel my need for Jesus and he has always been faithful to catch me. I am sure you can look back and say the same thing.

Often where fear and faith collide, we see our Lord Jesus working more clearly and more closely in our lives. Let's not let fear keep us from experiencing new opportunities to trust our Lord to use us, to enable us, to bless us, and yes, to catch us, as we launch out in faith and step out of the boat of what's familiar and comfortable and secure, unto what's unfamiliar and uncomfortable and insecure, and trust Jesus to be there with us every step of the way.

We don't want to look back on our life and see countless times when we heard the Lord inviting us to launch out, to get out of the boat, and fear kept us in. We want to trust the Lord by getting out of the boat when he calls, and see his glory and his faithfulness at work in new ways in us and through us. Let's pray.