

More Than a Miracle: Standing Atop the Chaos
Matthew 14:22-33

Chaos. We all know what it is. We've all experienced it before in our lives. Some of us may be experiencing it now. Chaos is, by definition, complete disorder and confusion. The thesaurus helps further identify this anxiety-producing presence in our lives. Stop me when you hear the word that best describes your life or what you see in the world: disarray, disorganization, mayhem, pandemonium, turmoil, uproar, anarchy, lawlessness, upheaval. In our house, it's a two year old with a bowl of spaghetti all to himself. Of course, it's been more serious things as well and I'm sure it has been for you too. It's like a problem so big you can't wrap your mind or arms around it. It's when nothing seems under control. It's when all the plates you had spinning start to fall, you don't know which one to catch first, so they all shatter on the floor around you. It's when your checks bounce and bills are due. It's the increased violence in major cities across America. It's when the political class can't get its act together and you suffer because of it. It's trying to figure out school policy while balancing the needs of teachers, students, and working parents during the threat of coronavirus. Am I making you anxious? I'm sorry, you get the picture. Chaos creates inner angst because of how powerless we feel. All you can really do is sit back and watch everything come apart.

We are in the middle of a three week series talking about miracles. A miracle is a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency. That's the official definition. You and I know them as God's momentary interventions in our lives. It is the surprise rescue that we need to deliver us from impending doom, inevitable pain, a threat to our daily lives. Yet, we know that there is more to miracles than just the moment. "Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see." That's the quote from C.S. Lewis that helps us lift our head off these miraculous moments to see more. In our anxiety, our problems become too big to manage. In our upheaval, we are overwhelmed by the pressures of today. Our physical and mental health is threatened as we live day to day, especially in these past few months. Last week we talked about the physical and mental toll that the shutdown and its results have taken on people. These miracles provide hope to those affected in this way. The banner message that these miracles point to is bigger. If we can, for a moment, look past our problems we can see God's greater power in our lives. We don't have to feel overpowered, alone, desperate or useless. Even though we are often helpless, our great God stands atop our chaos.

We continue in the book of Matthew today with another miracle of Jesus. It's another miracle that happens after Jesus has withdrawn for some mental rest. Last week, we saw Jesus providing abundantly in a desolate place as he fed over 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. The banner message from this miraculous moment is that God provides abundantly. He provides to us directly and through others. This helps ease our anxiety because we know God still sees, he still hears, he still cares, and he still delivers. What Jesus shows us today also helps ease the stresses on our minds and bodies. Jesus walks on water. In the middle of the night, in the midst of strong winds and high waves Jesus walks across the surface of the sea. Now, each of these miracles points us to Jesus as God. We know he is the King of all creation. He is the master of wind and wave. We also know that it is physically impossible to do what he did. We can't walk on top of water yet he does. That's miraculous in and of itself. All of those facts are but what else are we to learn? What bigger message is hanging above? What banner truth is shown in this moment that helps us in our moments of mental and physical weakness?

To better understand the current scene on the Sea of Galilee we need to go back to the beginning. Back to beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. Back when the earth was without form and void, when darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Do you know what was happening right below the Spirit of God in the first verses of scripture? Chaos! It was chaos down below. God was hovering over the chaos about to do something incredible. In the following verses God

brought order to that formless void. He called everything into being. He shaped and formed that chaotic mess until it was very good. He took the clay of the earth and molded it by hand, breathed life into it to bring life from that confusion and chaos. He brought order to the disorder. He arranged what was in disarray. And from that moment on, the mysteries that lay beneath the water's surface represented chaos that only God could control.

Scripture gives us miraculous moment after miraculous moment of God controlling the waters to accomplish his purposes. In Genesis, God embraces the chaos by flooding the earth but sparing Noah and his family, eight souls in all. He uses the water to cleanse the earth and start over because of how bad the people had become. In Exodus, God pushes those chaotic waters of the Red Sea back so that Israel could officially escape slavery. He allowed them to collapse upon the armies of Pharaoh to seal the deal. He parts waters again at the River Jordan as the people of God finally enter the Promised Land on dry ground. In the New Testament, Jesus turns water into wine as his first miracle. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters as Jesus is plunged below them at his baptism. Jesus calms the storms of this same body of water he is walking on now. He tells the waters where they can and cannot go. He tells them to stop and they do. The chaos of water flows throughout scripture but God is always in charge. Today, Jesus walks on top of that water and, for a moment, so does Peter.

Water represents chaos all throughout scripture, going all the way back to creation, and it is always something that is under God's control. So what are the chaotic things in your life? What kind of physical and mental toll are they taking on you? Remember, chaos is things that are out of control, that you can't handle, that are so overwhelming that you can't even put together a system to manage it. So what is chaotic in your life? I know I've admitted to you before that I've felt like the things that are going on politically and socially in our country right now are chaotic. It doesn't matter what political figure you look at or even what American city you look at, it's chaotic. It's a chaotic mess. It's out of control, out of hand. No one seems to have an answer to any of it. Look globally. Now some states and countries are claiming they have a handle on coronavirus. But I know there are many people, even people in our own congregation, who are terrified of this virus. It's chaotic. It's out of our hands. It's out of control. It's like a tsunami wave coming at us. All you can do is bear down and hope to survive it as it crashes around you. That's what it is. That's what chaos does.

Maybe chaos for you is that your spending has gotten out of hand or unexpected emergencies have drained your bank account. Now you can't manage your credit card balance and the monstrous interest that mounts and mounts. Maybe chaos for you is family relationships that are just so strained, so far gone, so far apart that you have no idea how to bring them back together. Maybe chaos for you is your job, or lack thereof. You were low man on the totem pole so you were furloughed and it doesn't seem like there's any hope to get back any time soon. Meanwhile, you're waiting on the government to send you a check and those aren't coming either. It's chaos. It's out of control. It's a disorganized mess. Everything is in disarray. Mayhem. Pandemonium. All of it affecting mental well being of the average American, the average citizen, the average person in our world today. It's affecting everyone and the statistics I told you last week still ring true. Anxiety leads to despair. Despair leads to depression. Depression leads to death. Chaos is an ever present reality in our world. It's not just water but just like water when it spills it can get into every area of our life. Every nook and cranny. It gets into every available space and wreaks havoc, causing permanent damage.

So, what does God have to say to that in this miraculous moment? Well, the banner message spoken over this miraculous moment today is this: Jesus stands on top of your chaos. Jesus tramples your chaos underfoot. Jesus walks on top of it and is lord over it. God is in control over every aspect of life. I know it's hard to believe that at times. It's like being out on a boat in the middle of an ocean. You look down below into the dark water and it's chaotic. You don't know what's down there, what's lurking just below, how far down it goes. It's scary that it could swallow you up in a moment. You don't know if or when a storm will hit. You don't know if you'd survive such a blow. I understand if you feel that way. Yet here Jesus walks on water. He calmly strides across the chaos to address the disciples in their boat. Now, he's not calming the storm in this moment. As he walks on the water he is calming his disciples. Think about

that for a moment. The turmoil is still swirling around them. The waves are still rising. The wind is still howling. Jesus doesn't stop the storm. He calms his disciples and they believe he can do it because he is standing atop the chaos speaking to them.

The same is true for you today. No matter what you see around you. No matter what is there below you or above you, Jesus is standing on top of all of it. He is lord over the chaos. He is in control of all these things and he has a greater end in mind. He has a different ending in mind other than you being overwhelmed by the storms. He doesn't leave you alone to give in to the despair and doubts creeping into your mind, haunting and taunting you. It's great that we get to see Peter in this story because it allows us to see ourselves there in the story too. Jesus calls Peter out onto the water, after Peter had insisted of course. But Peter steps out onto the water at the sound of his savior's voice and as he keeps his eyes on Jesus, the lord over all the chaos, he's fine. He is walking on top of it too. The storm still rages. The water still slaps against the boat. The wind still blows furiously around them. But Peter is on top of it too! But you know what he does? Peter forgets who is in charge. Peter gets scared because he looks around and sees that the chaos is still happening. It's as if he thinks that the moment he stepped out onto the water everything would calm down, all the problems would go away. That's now how it works. As he lowers his eyes off of Jesus he begins to sink back into the chaos. Back into the mess letting it all overwhelm him again. His eyes are off the savior. His eyes are off of the lord of all creation. His eyes are off the God who is over all chaos and so he begins to drown. And the only way he is saved is by Jesus reaching down and pulling him up.

That same Jesus is standing on top of your chaos, too. He's still calling you out to trust in him amidst the waves and the wind. The point isn't that he will eliminate all the chaos right that second, in that moment. As much as we'd like it to be, that's not the miracle. The point is that when you stand with him you can bear it, you can withstand the storm. He's reaching down to you as you sink deeper in the chaos, the turmoil swirling around you like a storm. He's there for you too and that's the truth. That's the gospel banner in the midst of chaos. And that is the answer to your mental and physical suffering and anguish and pain. Jesus stands there with you. Keep your eyes on him and it won't be just a miraculous moment. He will hold you for a lifetime. He will protect you for all eternity.

This is the picture of the cross, too, as it is planted into lawless dirt like a flag of victory. Jesus hangs above the chaos. He hovers over the chaotic depths on the cross. His kingship is clear in that moment. The miracle in that moment isn't that the pain and the insults and the death was halted. Death still came for Jesus. It's that Jesus withstood it all. He embraced the chaos and came out victorious on the other side of death on Easter morning. The banner message is that Jesus was in control even as he bled and died for you. He was Lord over his own death as he rose victoriously three days later. Because of what he did then and there we are saved. We are cared for. We are held tightly for all eternity. Kept safely above the waves as our eyes stay fixated on him, our rescuer. Please, believe this today. Believe it for yourself. Believe it in the upheaval you are surrounded by. Believe it for your loved ones who feel so overwhelmed and lost and left behind in all that is going on in the world today in their own lives. That is the banner message in this miraculous moment. The bigger truth is: God stands atop your chaos. And even as it rages on you are safe with him forever. Amen.