

“Focusing on Jesus”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, November 18, 2007

Text: II Corinthians 1:16-22 Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our minds and hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that we may focus on your truth for our lives today. Amen.

CRY OUT TO JESUS

The contemporary Christian singing group *Third Day* sings a popular track titled, “Cry Out to Jesus.”

“To everyone who’s lost someone they love/ Long before it was their time.

You feel like the days you had were not enough/ When you said goodbye.

And to all of the people with burdens and pains/ Keeping you back from your life.

You believe that there’s nothing and there is no one/ Who can make it right.

There is hope for the helpless/ Rest for the weary/ Love for the broken heart.

There is grace and forgiveness/ Mercy and healing/ He’ll meet you wherever you are.

Cry out to Jesus, Cry out to Jesus.

For the marriage that’s struggling just to hang on/ They lost all of their faith in love.

They’ve done all they can to make it right again/ Still it’s not enough.

For the ones who can’t break the addictions and chains/ You try to give up but you come back again.

Just remember that you’re not alone in your shame/ And your suffering.

To the widow who struggles with being alone/ Wiping the tears from her eyes.
For the children around the world without a home/ Say a prayer tonight.

When you're lonely/ And it feels like the whole world is falling on you,
You just reach out, you just cry out to Jesus/ Cry to Jesus."

That is what Peter did when he was sinking beneath the waves. Peter cried out to Jesus. He yelled, "Lord, save me!"

When Jesus saved Peter, it was the words of the prophet Isaiah coming to life: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. . . For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . . and I love you." (Isaiah 43:1-3)

Living by faith is trusting Jesus to save us and worshiping him.

Our gospel lesson is an intriguing story of Jesus interacting with his disciples and particularly Peter. Three weeks ago we considered where we are in the story. Like the disciples, are we terrified of the storm and the ghost we see walking toward us? Are we like Peter? We have heard God's call and are willing to step out in faith to move toward Jesus.

Or are we like Peter when he begins to sink beneath the waves? The strong winds of problems overcome our faith. Or are we like Peter and the disciples once Jesus saves Peter and gets into the boat. We have experienced salvation and proclaim to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Today we focus on what happens when Peter cries out to Jesus. There are three movements to the climax of this account. Peter cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Jesus saves Peter. Peter and the other disciples worship Jesus.

These movements form a pattern that recurs repeatedly in the Bible and that is important to become a part of our lives as well: God reveals himself. So we reflect on what God has done,

and we respond in worship. Then our understanding of God grows.

It begins with Peter's cry. Peter believed that Jesus could save him, or he would not have cried out. Many of us live today as if everything depends on us. We are not convinced that we are absolutely safe in the hands of a fully-competent, all-knowing, ever-present God. Our God is too small. Years ago, J. B. Phillips even wrote a book with this title, *Your God Is Too Small*.

Our God is a saving God, a God of salvation. We can cry out to him.

JESUS IMMEDIATELY CAUGHT HIM

When Peter cries out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.

My Granddaddy Proctor was a man of devout faith in God. He was a hard-working farmer in eastern South Carolina. He and my grandmother had ten children. My mother was the tenth child. When she was born at their home, tragedy struck their family. Her mother died soon after giving birth. My grandfather was left with ten children, ranging in age from 17 years to one day. Can you imagine being in such a situation? I am sure that he must have prayed, "Lord, help me."

About two years after my mother was born, my grandfather remarried. It was a joyous time. He and his second wife had two daughters of their own. When those two daughters were teenagers, his wife contracted leukemia. After suffering terribly, she died. I am sure that Granddaddy cried out to God, "Lord, help me. Lord, save me!" Jesus caught him. Jesus sustained him through another tragedy. God saved him from despair and hopelessness and bitterness.

When we focus on Jesus, Jesus can save us in the challenges of life. How can we do this? Frank Laubach, a missionary to the Philippine Islands in the early 20th century, devoted his life to seeking to live each moment in conscious awareness of God's presence and carrying on a

rich friendship with him. Here are some ideas from Dr. Laubach for staying focused on Christ:

In a social setting, whisper “God” or “Jesus” quietly as you glance at each person near you. Practice “double vision” as Christ does – see the person as he is and the person as Christ wants him to be. At mealtime, have an extra chair at the table to remind you of the presence of Christ. While reading a book or magazine, or letter or email, read it with Jesus, realizing that he smiles with us at the fun, rejoices with us in the successes, and weeps with us in the tragedies. When problem-solving at work, instead of talking to yourself about the problem, develop a new habit of talking to Christ. Keep a picture of Christ or a cross or a word from Scripture someplace where you will see it just as you’re going to sleep. Allow God to have the last word of the day. Then let your eyes and mind begin there in the morning.

As we practice these spiritual disciplines, we experience God’s presence in our lives.

There is a prayer attributed to St. Patrick. It is called “Lorica” – named for a Roman coat of armor that is meant for the protection of the one wearing it:

“I arise today through God’s strength to pilot me:
 God’s might to uphold me, / God’s wisdom to guide me, / God’s eye to look before me
 God’s ear to hear me, / God’s word to speak for me, / God’s hand to guard me.
 Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
 Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise.
 Christ in the heart of every one who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me, / Christ in every ear that hears me.
 I arise today, / Through a mighty strength. . . .”

When we have that focus, Christ can be a mighty strength for our lives.

When I was the pastor of Hampstead United Methodist Church, I had the privilege of getting to know a man named Bob Jones. Bob served his country in the Army infantry during World War II. He was part of an anti-tank unit in France. Early in January of 1945 he and his squad were in a small village north of Strasbourg. German troops in white snow gear swarmed into the village and captured the squad. For the next four months Bob survived on watery potato soup and dark bread. He landed in a prison camp northeast of Munich where he was liberated that May.

He returned to the United States, completed his college education and began working in a job in sales. Then he was drafted again during the Korean War. He was stationed in a position northeast of Seoul. Bob was commanding a rifle squad at an advanced outpost when the Chinese army surged across the 38th parallel in January of 1951. Nine of the twelve men in his squad were killed in the sudden attack. Bob and two others were captured. Can you imagine how Bob felt when he realized he was going to be a prisoner of war for the second time? I can imagine him crying out, "Lord, help me!"

The communists would practically starve the American prisoners, place them on month-long marches and put them through conditions too terrible to mention. Hundreds of prisoners died.

Bob never lost his encouraging, thankful spirit, though. It rubbed off on many of his fellow prisoners. He would recite scripture to them, especially Psalm 23. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." (23:4) He taught almost everybody in the prison camp to play bridge. He became the camp disc jockey, playing records on the public address system. For 2 and ½ long years, Bob survived as a prisoner of war until he was freed.

Several months after he was freed, Bob went back to his church, First Presbyterian Church in Evanston, Illinois. Bob dropped into the church office to pay up his church pledge for

all the years he was away. He was grateful for how the faith he had discovered in that church had sustained him through those years in the POW camp. He was also grateful for the countless prayers that people had lifted up on his behalf. Jesus saved him from despair and hopelessness and bitterness.

Martin Seligman writes, “Each of us carries a word in his heart, a “no,” or a “yes.” The apostle Paul writes, “In (Christ) it is always ‘Yes.’ For in (Christ) every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (II Corinthians 1:19-20)

E. Stanley Jones was one of the greatest Methodist missionaries and evangelists of the 20th century. At the age of 87, he suffered a paralyzing stroke. After that stroke, Dr. Jones wrote a book titled *The Divine Yes*. This is what he wrote about Jesus, the divine yes:

“Jesus is the Yes to all of God’s promises: that there is a God, a Father lying behind this universe caring for all creation; that this Father is manifested in the face of Jesus Christ; . . . that humankind can be different, and life can be utterly changed; that our emptiness can become fullness as every recess of our inner and outer lives is invaded and empowered by the Holy Spirit.” Jesus can save us like he saved Peter.

THEY WORSHIPED HIM

Peter cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him. When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. The disciples in the boat worshiped Jesus. They said, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Suddenly the disciples have a deeper understanding of who is in the boat with them. They worship Jesus.

Worship is the process by which we come to perceive and declare the vastness, worthiness and strength of God. When we experience something incredible, we have a need to praise God for it. Without worship, we forget that we have a big God beside us, and we live in

fear. Without worship, we forget God's calling and begin to live in a spirit of self-reliance and stubborn independence. ("I can do it myself, God!") Without worship, we lose our sense of wonder and gratitude to God. We plod through life with blinders on, unaware of God's work in our lives. As we reflect on what God has done for us, our understanding of God grows, and we respond in worship.

Dallas Willard writes this about worship, "Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is a wellspring of genuine gratitude – the kind that starts at our toes and blasts off from our loins and diaphragm through the top of our head, flinging our arms and our eyes and our voice upward toward our good God."

As we worship God, our appreciation of the goodness and the greatness of God grows, year after year.

C. S. Lewis wrote a series of enchanting books titled *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In one of the books, *Prince Caspian*, one of the children comes upon Aslan, the Christ-figure, after a prolonged absence. She says, "Aslan, you're bigger." He answers, "That is because you're older, little one." The girl replies, "Not because you are?" He answers, "I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." So it is with us and God. That is why this story of Peter and Jesus ends in worship.

The final word today comes from a source none other than William Shakespeare. Listen carefully because this is English from the 16th century: "God's goodness hath been great to thee; Let never day or night unhallowed pass, But still remember what the Lord hath done."

I don't know what your individual situation is today, but God does. You or a family member or a friend may be confronting some serious issues, and you want to pray, "Lord, save me. Lord, help me!" Or you may be overwhelmed by gratitude at what Jesus has done for you in your life. You may wish to fall on your knees and worship God, and pray, "Thank you!"

Whatever your situation, I invite you to take the next few minutes and come to the

chancel rail and pray to the Lord. If you would like Frank or me to pray with you, simply kneel beside where we are praying, and we will be glad to pray with you. Come and pray as we sing our hymn. Amen.