

## “That Sinking Feeling”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC  
10:55 a.m. Sunday, November 11, 2007

Text: I Samuel 21:10 – 22:1

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 receive your truth for our lives today. Amen.

### PETER SEES THE WIND

John Ortberg tells about a friend who attended the same graduate school in psychology. This friend wanted to get married. He was quite healthy himself emotionally but seemed to attract dating partners who were not that healthy emotionally. This became discouraging after a while. When he became a university professor, he used to teach abnormal psychology with a twist. He would illustrate each major category of abnormal psychology by describing one of his old girlfriends. It was one of the most highly attended classes on campus. He refused to make a foolish choice and rush into marriage.

He finally met the woman who would become his wife. She was a vibrant, devoted Christian and an emotionally healthy person with superb relational skills. She, like him, had a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

After they were married, the two of them wanted to have children very much. Because she had breast cancer, it looked as though it would not happen. But then she recovered! Eventually they had a beautiful baby girl. A few years later they had another child.

Then one day John received a phone call. After seven years, the breast cancer had returned. This time it was in her bones and was inoperable. She left a message on his answering machine. Along with the pain, anxiety and fear, this is what she expressed: “I have never felt

God's presence more strongly or have been more sure of God's goodness than I am now."

Today we are going to consider what we do when bad things happen. Living by faith in God means knowing who to call on when you are sinking.

Our gospel lesson is an intriguing story of Jesus interacting with his disciples and particularly Peter. Two 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 begins to sink beneath the waves of the stormy sea.

When the disciples see this figure walking on the sea toward them in the midst of a storm in the middle of the night, they are terrified. Jesus tells the disciples, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." Peter responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus replies, "Come."

In a demonstration of faith, Peter climbs out of the boat and starts walking on the water to Jesus. When he sees the wind, he becomes afraid. He begins to sink. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" Have you ever been at that place? Scared? Frightened? And sinking? Have you had that sinking feeling? Living by faith in God means knowing who to call on when you are sinking. Peter knew to call on Jesus.

Peter sees the wind. Reality sets in, and Peter asks himself, "What was I thinking?" He realized he was on the water in the middle of a storm with no boat beneath him – and he was terrified. Nothing has really changed, though. The storm should have come as no surprise. It's

been there all along. What has really happened is that Peter's focus has shifted from Jesus to the storm.

We all know what it is to "see the wind." You begin a new adventure full of hope. Maybe it is a new job. Maybe you are testing an area of spiritual giftedness. Maybe you are trying to serve God in a new way. At the beginning you are full of faith – it's blue skies. Then reality sets in. Setbacks. Opposition. Unexpected obstacles. You see the wind. It should be expected – the world is a pretty stormy place. But somehow trouble still has the power to catch us by surprise.

When Peter saw the wind, he became frightened. His response to the wind and the storm was to give in to fear. He lost his sense of confidence that Jesus was master of the situation. He did not just sink in the water, but sank in his own anxiety and worry.

Sometimes we sink because of the way we view what happens to us. Before Jonas Salk developed a vaccine for polio that finally worked, he tried 200 unsuccessful ones. Somebody once asked him, "How did it feel to fail 200 times?" Salk replied, "I never failed 200 times in my life. I was taught not to use the word 'failure.' I just discovered 200 ways how not to vaccinate for polio."

Somebody once asked Winston Churchill what most prepared him to risk political suicide by speaking out against Hitler during the years of appeasement in the mid-1930s, then to lead Great Britain against Nazi Germany. Churchill said it was the time he had to repeat the sixth grade. "You mean you failed a year in elementary school?" he was asked. Churchill replied, "I never failed anything in my life. I was given a second opportunity to get it right."

Optimism requires a belief that things will in fact get better for you and me. Hope includes the psychological advantages of optimism but is rooted in something deeper. When we hope, we believe that God is at work to redeem all things -- regardless of how things happen to be turning out for us today. Hope is very important. Many of us have heard a familiar

statement, “As long as there is life, there is hope.” Dr. Norman Vincent Peale stressed the corollary to that statement, “As long as there is hope, there is life.” Hope is crucial. Therefore, the capacity to stay focused on the presence and power of God in our lives becomes supremely important. When Peter turned his eyes off of Jesus, he began to sink.

#### DAVID DESCENDS TO THE CAVE

Our Old Testament lesson tells about a time of failure in the life of one of the most adventurous men who ever lived – King David. The book of I Samuel tells us that for a long time David experienced a glittering string of successes. He was anointed by Samuel to be king of Israel. As a boy he defeated Israel’s most formidable enemy – Goliath. King Saul chose him as a warrior and musician. The army loved him.

Then a strange thing happened. One by one all those wonderful things he had been given were stripped away. David lost his job as the most successful warrior in the army. King Saul became jealous. When David lost his job, he lost his income and his security. Next, he lost his wife. David had married Saul’s daughter, Michal. When Saul sent soldiers to kill David, Michal helped David escape, but she was taken back by Saul.

David fled to Ramah, where Samuel, his spiritual mentor, lived. Samuel was the one who anointed David when he was young. Samuel was the one through whom God spoke to David. But Saul heard where David went and sent soldiers after him. David had to make another escape, and Samuel could not go with him. He was an old man. In fact, Samuel died not long afterward.

Then David ran to his best friend, Jonathan, who had stood up to his father, Saul, and risked his life for David. But Jonathan would not raise the sword against his own father. So once more David was on his own and had to run for his life. His job and marriage had ended in failure. His mentor had died. His best friend was out of his life. Then it became worse.

David fled his home and ran to Gath, hometown of the late giant Goliath. David had nowhere to go but to the Philistines, his mortal enemies. David was very much afraid of King Achish of Gath, so he could not find refuge there either.

When he could not find refuge in Gath, David escaped to the cave of Adullam. Once David had wealth, power, fame, friends, security, and what he thought was a guaranteed future. Now he was running for his life and living in a cave.

Perhaps you are in a cave right now. Maybe it is because you have lost your job, or you are under financial pressure. Maybe it is because your dreams about family life have been shattered. Maybe you have lost a mentor or a best friend. There was a relationship you counted on, and now it is gone. Maybe it involves a physical condition – you have lost your health. Or maybe you simply find yourself alone.

The hardest thing about being in the cave is that you begin to wonder whether God has lost track of you. Did God forget his promises? Does God remember where I am?

Even David's loyal soldiers later spoke of stoning him. Then the Bible records, "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God." (I Samuel 30:6) When David reached the point of utter failure, he encouraged himself in the Lord.

How did this happen? David dealt with his situation by honestly facing and naming his discouragement. We read about this in Psalm 142. This psalm is described in its superscription as "A Maskil of David. When he was in the cave." This psalm of lament begins this way: "With my voice I cry to the Lord; with my voice I make supplication to the Lord. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him." (Psalm 142:1-2)

This is what David does in the cave. He gets quiet enough before the Lord to get to the bottom of his pain and discouragement. He feels it in his gut. Failure in our day often carries with it shame – the shame not just of having experienced failure, but of being a failure. Facing this feeling is one of the hardest things a human being can do.

However, we can risk being fully honest with God because God is never a God of discouragement. Sometimes God brings us conviction of sin, or repentance over bad choices. God can give us challenges that scare us or visions of his holiness that overwhelm us, but God never brings discouragement. His guidance leads to motivation and to life. “As long as there is hope, there is life.” Our God is a God of hope.

#### WHO TO CALL?

Failure can be a tremendous motivator. When we allow ourselves to experience the pain of failure, it can drive us to make the changes that will lead to new learning.

You may be like Peter. You may be sinking into the sea right now. Perhaps you are not sinking at all. Maybe you never have experienced sinking. But sooner or later, you will.

We can't fix, heal or escape all of our bad situations. Relationships fall apart. Marriages fail. Children disappoint. Illnesses debilitate. Jobs terminate. Our deepest dreams and desires remain unfulfilled. People we love die. The list could go on and on. Sometimes we are going to sink. But during those times, we can refuge and hope in God. The apostle Paul proclaims in his letter to the Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

One of the most beloved and colorful sports personalities of our time was a man named Jim Valvano. “Jimmy V” as he was known affectionately to sports fans around the country, tragically died some years ago after a year-long battle with cancer. He was just 47 years old. He is remembered as a great basketball coach. His North Carolina State team won the national championship in 1983, upsetting the Houston Cougars in the final game. I have this image of Coach Valvano etched in my mind after the final buzzer sounded. He is running back and forth across the court. He is so excited. He can hardly believe it.

Jim Valvano was an outstanding TV sports analyst, an eloquent inspirational speaker, and

a loveable, wisecracking humorist. Most of all, he is remembered for the courageous way he faced a debilitating illness.

A few weeks before he died, he was honored on national television. This is what he said to that vast viewing audience, “Today, I fight a different battle. You see, I have trouble walking and I have trouble standing for a long period of time. Cancer has taken away a lot of my physical abilities. Cancer is attacking and destroying my body, but what cancer cannot touch is my mind, my heart, and my soul. I have faith in God and hope that things might get better for me. But even if they don’t, I promise you this: I will never, ever give up. I will never, ever quit. And if cancer gets me, then I’ll just try my best to go to heaven and I’ll try my best to be the best coach they’ve ever seen up there.” Then, pointing to his 1983 championship team, he said, “I learned a great lesson from these guys. They amazed me. They did things I was not sure they could do because they absolutely refused to give up. That was the theme of our championship season: ‘Never, ever give up!’ That’s the lesson I learned from them, and that’s the message I leave with you. Never give up. Never, ever give up!”

Peter climbed out of the boat and began to walk on the water to Jesus. When he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened. He began to sink. Then he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

When you are sinking, always know who to call on. Never forget to call on God. Next Sunday we will learn what happens when Peter cries out, “Lord, save me!”

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we sin and fail and mess up. Sometimes devastating things happen in our lives that we have no control over. When that happens and we start sinking, help us to remember to call on you. Amen.