

August 9, 2026 – Matthew 14:22-33

*“Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.”*

There are a lot of important moments in Jesus’ ministry that happen on top of mountains. The Mount of the Transfiguration. The Sermon on the Mount. The Garden of Gethsemane was on the Mount of Olives. The Great Commission took place on a mountain. And, of course, Jesus’ death on Mount Calvary.

But the very first of the mountains that Jesus stands upon in his entire ministry was of a very different sort. It was the mountain that Satan took him to during his temptation in the wilderness. There, Satan paraded before him the glories of the world.

Satan did this because he understood neither Jesus nor his mission. Satan thought that Jesus had come to be a king like all other kings. He thought Jesus would be interested in the riches and the power of the world. Every other human being is, after all. And Jesus is indeed fully man. So why wouldn’t Jesus fall to that temptation too? Obviously, Satan couldn’t have been further from the truth.

The mountain that Jesus stands upon in this passage is really the polar opposite. You see, the crowds that Jesus is dismissing at the beginning of his passage are the crowds that he has just fed with five loaves and two fish, like we heard about last week. And I can imagine that, from on top of this mountain, Jesus can still see the stream of people, heading back before it gets too dark.

Satan thought he knew what Jesus wanted, but it’s here, on this mountain, that Jesus has a superb view of the world he has come to save. He’s come to be not with those who would bring him gifts, but those who only bring him their burdens. He’s come to be with those who suffer and need his healing touch. He’s come to show them God’s love and compassion. He has come to gather those who are like sheep without a shepherd. To heal and teach and feed.

Of course, that’s also a daunting challenge. Because for every five thousand he healed, there were another five thousand still in need of healing. For every five thousand he fed, there were another fifty thousand still in need of food. For every five thousand he taught, there were still another five hundred thousand in need of teaching. And so Jesus does what we should all do when the suffering of this world becomes too overwhelming, when the challenge just feels too big for one person: he turns to his Father in prayer.

*“But the boat [carrying the disciples] by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.”*

As Jesus prays on the mountain, he doesn’t just see the needs of the crowds who are leaving. He also sees the needs of his own disciples. The boat has gone a long distance from the land and is now being pummeled by the wind and the waves. The crowds looked like sheep without a shepherd and these 12 disciples now look like sailors without a captain.

But, for whatever reason, Jesus doesn’t choose to appear suddenly before his disciples. He decides to come to them by walking. Maybe he just wants to more time alone. He walks down the mountain, he walks to the shore, he walks on the water, and he walks into the storm.

When he was on the mountain, evening was just beginning. Now it’s early in the morning. He has walked all night to be with his disciples. But when they see him, they’re afraid. Afraid that he might be a ghost. So to calm their fear, Jesus speaks a word of comfort. *“Have courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.”* But what he hears in reply is still filled with doubt and fear.

*“If it is you, Lord, tell me to come to you on the water.”* If it is you. Not since it is you. Not because it is you. But if it is you. Peter is doubting. After all of the healings and all of the teachings, even after Jesus has walked to them on the water in the middle of the night in the middle of a storm, Peter is doubting. And like those crowds he has just healed and fed and taught, Jesus sees one more broken, suffering soul. Weak and fallen and filled with fear.

Because Jesus has heard words like these before. Peter's "if it is you, Lord" is an echo of the last time Jesus stood on a mountain: "If you are the Son of God," Satan said. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Again and again, Satan denied Jesus' divinity. And now, that same doubt and denial have taken hold in Peter's heart.

When Jesus was faced by Satan's temptation, he didn't take the bait. Ultimately, Jesus said, "Begone, Satan," and Satan had to flee. But here, with Peter, Jesus does something different. Jesus says to Peter, "Come." Come to me on the water. Come to me in the storm. Come to me with your heart filled with fear and anxiety and doubt. Come.

Why? Why does Jesus respond one way to Satan and another way to Peter? Well, that gets right back to Jesus' mission. Because, frankly, Satan wasn't worth Jesus' time. He had no need to match wits with the father of lies. Satan made his bed a long, long time ago. And Jesus' only obligation was to see Satan defeated.

But Peter? Peter is exactly who Jesus has come to save. Peter is a sinner. And Jesus came to save sinners. So when Peter, in fear and doubt, calls out to Jesus with a test, Jesus doesn't say, "Begone, Peter," like he did to Satan. Instead, Jesus responds by saying, "Come."

And when Peter begins to sink and cries out, "Lord, save me," Jesus reaches out his hand and saves him. And when one of his disciples betrays him and another denies him and all flee from him, Jesus hangs on the cross and says, "Come." "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Come, for I have died for your sins and defeated your enemy Satan, and I will rise to welcome you into the kingdom of God.

Here, in the middle of the night in the middle of the storm in the middle of the gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus' entire mission in one word. He has come to call people to himself. Call them to repentance and deliver to them the forgiveness of sins.

We call out to Jesus with doubt and fear. We call out with tests of his divinity. If you really are the Son of God, do something about my pain. Do something about my poverty. Do something about my wants and my needs and my fears and my doubts.

And He has every reason to respond to those prayers just like he responded to Satan in the wilderness. Begone. Go away! You're not worth my time. I don't have any obligation to help a sinner like you.

But, instead, he says, "Come." Come and hear my Word to you this day. Feed on this Word as bread from heaven. Drink up this Word as living water welling up inside you to eternal life. Come.

Come and receive my sacrament. Come and be washed with water that gives rebirth to your soul and the promise of new life at the resurrection. Come and eat of My Body and My Blood for the forgiveness of your sins and taste of the banquet that is coming that will last forever. Come, like a sheep without a shepherd, and hear my under-shepherd proclaim my forgiveness to you.

We poor sinners call out to Jesus in doubt and fear. And Jesus simply says, "Come. I'm right here. I'm not far away on a mountain. I'm not paying more attention to the crowds than I am to you. I've walked all night to reach you. I've done the miraculous, the impossible, to be by your side. I've died and risen again that I might be with you always to the very end of the age. So come, because I'm not going anywhere."

"When [Peter] saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.'" And what did Jesus do? He saved him. Peter, of little faith. Peter, who had no reason to doubt. Jesus saved him. He saved all of them, in fact. "And when Peter and Jesus got into the boat, the wind ceased."

Because that's what Jesus does. He saves. Not because we're so faithful. Not because our prayers are so perfect. Not because we're so courageous. He saves us because that was his mission all along. He never wanted the riches and the power of the world. No, he came for the poor, the suffering, the broken, the doubting. He came for you. Amen.