

Boat Potatoes: When Life Leaves You Feeling Stuck
March 9, 2011 Ash Wednesday
Matthew 14:22-33
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Pastor John Ortberg has a book entitled, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. He tells the story of his first and only hot-air balloon ride. His wife had given him the ride for a birthday present. They invited another couple to go along with them on the adventure.

Early one morning the pilot began the ascent over the Canejo Valley in southern California. The air was crisp and clear. They could see the entire valley, from craggy canyons to the deep blue Pacific Ocean. It was majestic and awe inspiring. But they also experienced an emotion they were not expecting: fear. They'd always thought those baskets under the balloon were about chest high, but this one only came up to their knees. One good lurch and they'd be overboard. So they held on with white knuckles and grim determination.

After several minutes, Pastor Ortberg decided he really should get to know the young man who was flying the balloon. The main reason—as he remembers it—was a growing realization that they'd placed their lives in the hands of this pilot. Ortberg asked him what he did for a living. He was really hoping the guy would say something like “Teacher or astronaut.” He knew they were in trouble when the guy responded, “Dude, it's like this...”

Turns out the guy didn't even have a job. He mostly surfed. The reason he started flying hot-air balloons was because he'd been driving around in his pickup after having too much to drink. He got into a crash and badly injured his brother. His brother still couldn't get around very well, so watching hot-air balloons gave him something to do. “By the way,” he added, “Don't be alarmed if things get a little choppy on the way down. I've never flown this particular balloon before, and I'm not sure how it's going to handle the descent.”

Ortberg's wife flashed him one of those looks that could kill. It was as if to say, “You mean to tell me we're a thousand feet up in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying hot-air balloons because he got drunk, crashed his truck, and injured his brother. And now he's not sure how to get this thing down.”

Just then the wife of the other couple looked at him and spoke—the only words either of them managed to utter through the entire flight. “You’re a pastor. Do something religious.” “So,” says Ortberg, I took an offering.”

It’s Lent. It’s time to do something religious. Every day you and I head out on another leg of this journey we call life. The fact of the matter is: we only get one trip. We long to take this trip with a spirit of adventure. But sometimes the ride can be a little unnerving. We get anxious. Whether we’re riding in a hot-air balloon or starting with a new boss or heading into retirement, the real issue is the dependability of the dude who’s doing the flying. Can we trust the pilot? Can we confidently place our destiny in his hands?

One afternoon Peter and his friends get into a fishing boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Jesus stays behind to pray. There are some clouds forming in the west but Peter doesn’t give it a second thought. He’s a fisherman, after all. He’s seen just about everything the Sea of Galilee has to offer. Pretty soon a storm comes up. It’s no minor squall. Their tiny fishing boat is battered by the wind and the waves. When it gets bad enough, they start wishing the sides of the boat were a little higher and the wood a little thicker. They fear for their lives.

Suddenly they notice a shadow moving across the water. As it gets closer, it becomes apparent that the shadow is actually a person—a *person walking on the water*. They can’t breathe. Is it a ghost? Is this some sort of premonition that they’re going to die?

In hindsight, we might wonder how they could have failed to see it was Jesus. I think we know why. It takes eyes of faith to see Jesus. You have to be looking. In the middle of life’s storms, battered by waves of disappointment and doubt, we miss Jesus all the time.

In Mark’s version of this story, he describes Jesus’ actions by using a verb meaning “to pass by.” It’s a verb that shows up at other times in the Bible: God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock so Moses can see God’s glory passing by. God tells Elijah to wait in a cave because the Lord is about to pass by. These are *theophanies*, literally “stories of God’s appearance.”

This storm is another of these theophanies. You know how it works. God uses the events of life to get our attention: a burning bush, a violent storm, wind and fire. Or, closer to home, God uses the loss of a job, the illness of a child, a bitter disappointment. We find ourselves hanging on with white knuckles and grim determination. We begin to wonder if we can trust the pilot.

To help his disciples learn to trust, Jesus decides it's time for them to get to know him better. *It's like this, dudes*, he reassures them. *You can trust me. You can safely place your destiny in my hands. Don't be afraid.*

What happens next is truly remarkable. Put yourself in Peter's place for a minute. As Jesus passes by, you have a tiny flash of insight into who he really is. You get caught up in the moment. You feel like doing something religious...maybe even trying a little water-walking yourself. But at the same time, you're scared to death. Common sense says, "Stay put!" So what's it going to be for you: the boat or the water? The boat is safer. The water is rough and unpredictable. Only one thing is certain: *if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.*

Friends, I believe there's something inside of us—Someone inside of us—who's telling us there's more to life than sitting in a boat. There's more to life than being a boat potato: living comfortably, minimizing risk, avoiding failure. Isn't it true? Isn't there a part of us that wants to walk on the water—to leave the comfort of routine existence and abandon ourselves to the high adventure of following God?

If it is true, let me ask you an important question: *What's your boat?* What is it that holds you back? Your boat is whatever represents safety and security apart from God. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when the waves get choppy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up, even if it's keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves....because that's where Jesus is, by the way.

For Tom, his boat is his daily work. He's been stuck at a dead-end job for years and he's afraid that he's missed his calling, but he can't leave it. *For Kathy, it's a relationship.* She's been involved for as long as she can remember with a guy that's afraid of commitment, yet she's too timid to confront him about it. *For Doug, it's secrecy.* He's worried that he might have a problem with gambling, but he vehemently denies it whenever anybody asks him about it.

What's your boat? In what area of life are you shrinking back from fully and courageously trusting God? Your fears will tell you what it is. Leaving it may be the hardest thing you ever do. But if you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.

During the season of Lent, I invite you to join me on a journey of discovery. If you aren't sure what your boat is, there will be a chance to figure it out. Once you do, you'll be

invited to leave the boat behind and step out in faith. Along the way, we'll explore a number of pertinent questions such as: How do we decide if this is faith or foolishness? What if we fail? Where do we find an anchor? How do we learn to wait? How can we develop a deeper trust in the One who holds our destiny in his hands?

So, what is it going to be for you this Lent, the boat or the water? You can stay behind if you want to. Then again, being a boat potato is not it's cracked up to be. It can lead to stagnation. It can lead to a sense that you're not living the life you're supposed to be living. It can lead to what Gregg Levoy calls "the common cold of the soul." Levoy writes:

To sinful patterns of behavior that never get confronted and changed,
 Abilities and gifts that never get cultivated and deployed—
 Until weeks become months
 And months turn into years,
 And one day you're looking back on a life of
 Deep, honest conversations you never had;
 Great, bold prayers you never prayed,
 Exhilarating risks you never took,
 Sacrificial gifts you never offered,
 Lives you never touched,
 And you're sitting in a recliner with a shriveled soul,
 And forgotten dreams,
 And you realize there was a world of desperate need,
 And a great God calling you to be part of something bigger than yourself—
 You see the person you could have become but did not;
 You never followed your calling.
 You never got out of the boat.

My friends, that's my challenge for you this Lent: to do something religious, to get out of the boat. AMEN