

Matthew 14:22-36

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[0 : 00] What do you do immediately? Now, we've already posed a very similar question to the children, and maybe at that point you were giving a little thought to it yourselves. It's maybe a little bit of a cryptic question, so allow me to expand a little. I'm of the view that we can learn a lot about ourselves and indeed others if we pause and consider what matters or circumstances command our immediate attention. We hear of somebody in our circle, of family or friends, in difficulty of one kind or another. Do we immediately do what we can to help them?

Now, we're made aware or become aware of something in our own lives that is awry, perhaps a duty and neglected, a sin that we are persisting in, a relationship that needs attention. Do we act immediately as we become aware of those matters? Or perhaps an opportunity for service presents itself, or the opportunity to give of our time or money to the Lord's cause, or perhaps a worthy and urgent request for prayer? Is our response an immediate one? I suspect that in many of these matters we are, if you'll forgive the racial stereotyping, good Latinos with a fondness for mañana. Tomorrow will do. No need for any precipitate action. Tomorrow will do. Now, this morning I want us to consider an event that, as with last week, involves Jesus, Peter, and the Sea of Galilee, the occasion when Jesus and Peter walked on water. Now, it's a familiar narrative, but I want to think about it this morning from a slightly unusual perspective that will, I trust, shed helpful light on the story. While, and this I readily recognize, will leave unattended or unconsidered significant aspects of the passage.

What we're going to do is we're going to focus on the three occasions in the passage where Jesus is said to do something immediately. We can notice there where that happens. In verse 22, at the very beginning of the account, we read, immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him.

And then we look forward and find in verse 27, but Jesus immediately said to them, and He goes on to speak. And then again in verse 31, immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught Him. So, these three occasions where Matthew employs this word to describe the actions of Jesus, Jesus acting immediately in the circumstances that presented themselves to Him. Now, I'm not suggesting that the threefold occurrence of the word is intended by Matthew to provide the key to understanding the passage. I suspect that it's quite fortuitous and simply reflects the reality that, as it happens, Jesus did do three things immediately in the course of the events recorded. But fortuitous or not, the threefold repetition of the word will, this morning, provide for us our template for considering the passage. And what I want to do with each occurrence of the word is to draw out two important reflections. First of all, what do we learn about

Jesus from the fact that He acted immediately in these three circumstances? What do we learn about Jesus? Now, learning about Jesus, and this may seem a very obvious thing to say, but it's worth stressing, learning about Jesus is important, I think, for two reasons. First of all, that we might better appreciate Him and trust in Him as our Savior, but also that we might be better informed in our calling to be like Him. For these two very connected reasons, it's very important for us as Christians to learn about Jesus.

[4 : 52] Now, this morning, of those two, though both are relevant, the first will take prominence, learning about Jesus in order that we might better appreciate Him and trust in Him. So, that's the first thing we want to do on each of these three occasions. What do we learn about Jesus from the fact that He acted immediately? But secondly, we also want to consider how we should respond to a Savior who acts immediately and invariably on our behalf. Certainly, on the occasions that we'll look at this morning in this passage, we'll find that at heart, on each of the occasions, Jesus is acting on behalf of His disciples. Well, how do we as disciples respond to such a Savior, and what can we learn from those who on this occasion had to respond to Jesus as He acted immediately?

Now, we'll treat each occasion where Jesus acts immediately as a little vignette within the whole story. So, three scenes that we'll look at each in turn, drawing the lessons and the application, and then moving on to the next occasion.

So, we'll begin with the first occasion. Immediately, Mark 1, verse 22, immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side.

What do we learn about Jesus from the fact that He acts in this way? Immediately. Of the three, this is the one that is least obvious as to why there was the urgency to act immediately as we're told that Jesus does. And in order for us to learn about Jesus from this fact, the first thing we need to do is to establish why Jesus made the disciples get into the boat in the manner described. And we need to be very clear that the language that Matthew uses is the language of urgent compulsion.

Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. He compelled the disciples to get into the boat and to go, to go to the other side. Now, in the absence of context, that seems quite strange. Why was it so urgent for the disciples to get into the boat and to head off into the Sea of Galilee, to get away from the crowds? Why was that something that was urgent? Why did it require Jesus to compel them to get into the boat? That really is something we need to establish. Only then will we be able to draw insights into who Jesus is and what He is like. So, why did Jesus do this? And I think we can identify two connected reasons that explain Jesus' urgency. And the first concerns the intentions of the crowd.

Now, in Matthew's gospel, we're not given information that would help us. But in John's gospel, where we have a parallel passage describing this same occasion, we are given information that will help us.

So, if we turn to John's gospel in chapter 6 and reading verses 14 and 15. Notice there that, you know, we're in... there's no doubt that this is the same occasion. John chapter 6 begins with Jesus feeding the 5,000 and then moves on following the same order as in Matthew to Jesus walking on the water. But notice what we read in verses 14 and 15. This is immediately following the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. And what do we read? After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, surely this is the prophet who is to come into the world. And then notice what we're told.

[9 : 07] Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself. So, there we have a much better appreciation of what's going on and what is driving Jesus in not only withdrawing to the mountain that John explicitly makes reference to, but also in Him compelling the disciples to get into the boat to the disciples to get into the boat and to leave and to head over to the other side.

Given what was afoot, this intention of the crowds to by force spring Jesus to that prominence and to grant Him that place as an earthly king. It was imperative that Jesus remove the disciples from the scene, that they might not be caught up in this foolish project and endeavor.

And I wonder if also, and this I can only suggest very tentatively, I wonder if there was not also, perhaps in some measure, a concern on the part of Jesus that He would protect Himself from the possible temptation of being drawn in to the crowds. So, this explains why Jesus immediately compels the disciples to get into the boat and to go away from this great crowd with the plans that they have, as John informs us.

But then together with that, and very much connected to that, these very circumstances intensify the need that Jesus has to pray, to spend time with His heavenly Father. And so, what He does, immediately sending the disciples away, in that way allowing Him to then dismiss the crowds and to withdraw to the mountainside to be with His Father and to pray with His Father, is what explains what He does and what He does immediately.

So, having, I hope, established that, with this explanation of why Jesus acted immediately, what can we say that this reveals about Jesus? And let me suggest two things that it tells us about Jesus.

[11 : 39] His unwavering commitment to do the Father's will, to do His Father's will. What the crowds wanted did not coincide with what God wanted. And Jesus was stubbornly, we might say, fixed on doing His Father's will. And for this to happen, to ensure that the Father's will did indeed take place, Jesus needed to take action.

And this is precisely what He does, by compelling the disciples to go, and also by withdrawing to pray. And this unwavering commitment to do His Father's will. And for this, each and every one of us, for this every believer has reason to be eternally thankful.

It was this same commitment, this same unwavering commitment to do His Father's will that took Jesus to Calvary, that took Jesus to the cross to die in the place of sinners. We know how often there were attempts and endeavors to distract Him from that way.

But He demonstrated on each of those occasions the very same unwavering commitment that we find here. No, what has been proposed is not what my Father wills, and so this is not what I will do. And whatever I need to do to ensure that I carry on in the path that the Father has marked out for me, that is what I will do. But you know, we don't only need to look back and say, well, isn't it a wonderful thing that Jesus was so committed to doing the Father's will?

[13:37] We can think of Jesus today as the head of the church and be persuaded and convinced and comforted by the reality that He continues to do all that is required to ensure that His Father's will is done for His people and for His church and for the extension of His kingdom.

And whatever might stand in the way or distract those purposes being fulfilled, He as head of the church will ensure that His Father's will is done for His is a continuing unwavering commitment to do His Father's will.

And so, this seemingly innocuous description of Jesus compelling the disciples to go into the boat, as we dig a little deeper, reveals to us this Jesus and His unwavering commitment to do His Father's will.

But I think we can also say this, it reveals to us His conscious dependence on His Father's help. And so, He goes to the mountain to pray.

He is conscious that He is a man and that He is a man who can be tempted and was tempted, tempted in all ways as we are. And in the face of this cry to take on a worldly fame and glory, He recognizes, I must go to my Father and spend time with my Father and seek His help and seek His company that I might continue in the way that He has marked out for me.

[15:11] He recognized He was dependent on His Father's help. And so, I would say to you this morning, behold your Savior, and give thanks for such a Savior, a Savior who acts immediately, that His Father's will might be done.

But I suggested that there's something else that we can draw from each of these occasions. Not only can we draw lessons concerning who Jesus is and what He is like, but also how we should respond to a Savior who acts immediately.

Well, what about the disciples? They're the ones who are being compelled by Jesus to go into the boat and to head across the Sea of Galilee. What do they do?

Well, very simply, they obey as Jesus commands them. Now, I imagine as I try and place myself in their shoes, and of course, we don't have an exhaustive account of all that happened or certainly all that was said.

But I imagine, and I think reasonably, I imagine that they go along, they obey Jesus in going into the boat and heading across according to His schedule.

[16:29] I imagine they did so with very little understanding as to why Jesus was compelling them in the manner that He did. I wonder if they were puzzled and even disappointed at His unwillingness, as they saw it, to accompany Him.

Why couldn't He join them? Why couldn't He come with them in the boat across to the other side? Why did they need to be separated from Him? And as the storm emerges and as the storm rages, did they, I wonder, lament His distance from them?

Jesus safe on terra firma, as they imagined, while they were struggling here in the middle of the lake. Well, I don't know to what extent they were very unclear as to what was going on and why Jesus had compelled them in the manner that He did.

But what we do know is that they obeyed. Of course, the reality is that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing and why He was doing it. It was His intention that they face the storm.

And He was praying for them in the midst of the storm. When we work out the timetable of events, and time doesn't allow us to do that as we compare the different gospel accounts, but we can state with confidence that the disciples were several hours on the lake before Jesus appears in the fourth watch of the night, between six and nine in the morning.

[17:58] This all began as evening drew near. So you can work it out. Several hours have passed. Several hours, I imagine, struggling in the storm. How do we respond to a Savior who acts immediately?

Well, certainly we would always do well to obey unquestioningly. The Lord knows what He's doing and why He is doing it. He knows, and He even orders the storms in our life, and He does so for our own good.

But let's move on to the second occasion in the passage where we find Jesus acting immediately. Immediately, Mark 2. Jesus immediately said, picking up the reading from verse 25, during the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. It's a ghost, they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them, Take courage, it is I.

Don't be afraid. What do we learn about Jesus? Well, again, we ask the question, why did He act on this occasion immediately?

[19 : 17] What provoked Jesus to speak immediately? Well, from the account, it's clear that it was the fear of the disciples that provokes the words of Jesus that He addresses to them.

They cried out in fear. They were terrified. But Jesus immediately said to them, Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid. But while recognizing that this is why Jesus responds immediately to their fear, there's also an intriguing aspect to this particular immediately, namely the fact that Jesus did not immediately help them in their battle with the storm.

As we've just mentioned a moment ago, everything would suggest that they'd been battling with the storm for several hours. And you might say, Well, you're making great gallop of how Jesus acts immediately.

Well, He didn't act immediately when the storm broke. He was nowhere to be seen as the disciples struggled with the waves and with the prospect of what the storm might ultimately bring for them. It's also interesting that given the information that we have, it's not clear if the storm was a source of significant fear for them. We might imagine or assume that it was, but we're simply not told.

[20 : 46] It wouldn't have been the first time that as fishermen, they would have had to deal with a storm. Perhaps they felt that they could handle the storm in their own strength. But when Jesus appears to help them, and when He appears to help them in this very unexpected manner, things begin to change.

Before just thinking about that and why now we find them afraid, it's also interesting, and I think revealing to note, that the disciples seem to have been so focused on their own efforts to save themselves that at first they don't even notice Jesus.

Now, that's not something that we can pick up from the account in Matthew. But if you turn with me to Mark 6, and verse 48, where we have another account of this same occasion.

Notice a little detail there that I think is quite revealing. Mark 6, and verse 48. Notice what it says. He, that is Jesus, saw the disciples straining at the oars because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night He went out to them walking in the lake. And then notice what it says.

[21 : 59] He was about to pass by them. But when they saw Him walking in the lake, they thought He was a ghost. Just that little detail. He was about to pass by them.

Now, as I picture the scene as it's presented for us, what that would suggest is that, you know, there had been some time when He had been approaching the boat, but they didn't even notice. You see, they were so focused on this great task of remaining afloat, of saving themselves in the midst of the storm, that He almost passed by before.

He was so close, close enough that they look up, and there He is. There, this figure, this ghost-like figure, certainly as they perceived Him.

But when they do see Him, we're told very eloquently by each of the gospel writers that they were well scared.

[22 : 57] They were terrified by what they saw. They were terrified by the experience that was confronting them. But terrified of what? Terrified, perhaps, of the unknown.

This was something just completely beyond their experience. Outwith not only their experience, but their understanding. And so we are told they were terrified.

And what does Jesus do? Well, this is where we come to our word that is governing, in a sense, what we say this morning. What does Jesus do?

Well, Jesus immediately said to them, take courage. Literally, be of good cheer. And it seems such an incongruous thing to say that it's translated in this fashion, take courage.

But literally, it's be cheerful. Be of good cheer. It is I. Don't be afraid. Jesus immediately assures them and encourages them.

[24 : 00] Well, what does this tell us about Jesus? Having thought about the circumstances and the reason why He speaks and acts immediately, what does this tell us about Jesus?

Well, it speaks eloquently of His permanent desire to quell our fears and His ability to do so. On what grounds can Jesus not only urge us to not be afraid, but to be of good cheer?

Well, the grounds are solid grounds, and the grounds of who He is. Notice what He says in these few words, take courage. And then perhaps the most significant words in these few words, it is I. I am. It's me. It is I. That is why you need not be afraid. Never mind the storm. Never mind all those things that are coming in around you.

It is I. I am here. Now, as we've seen, and we're not going to dwell on this this morning, we've done so on other occasions, but the actual language that Jesus uses here, I am.

[25 : 10] Ego I me. I am. I am. It's language that often, intentionally, and possibly here also, has overtones of deity, the divine name, Yahweh, I am that I am.

So, the grounds for these words that Jesus addresses immediately to terrified disciples, that they be not afraid, that they be of good cheer, grounded in who He is, but grounded also, and these two things go together, grounded in what He can do.

He can walk on water. Yes, there's this great storm raging, but here is one who can walk above the storm. Even the fiercest storm is under His feet, literally and metaphorically, under His feet, the greatest storm under His feet, under His authority.

And so, I say to you, behold your Savior, and give thanks to such a Savior, and trust in such a Savior, the one who comes to you in the midst of whatever storm you are experiencing, and He says, it is I.

It is I. It's me. Here I am. But also, how should we respond to a Savior who acts immediately?

[26 : 37] Well, here Peter comes on stage to help us. Notice two aspects of Peter's response. First of all, his touching honesty. Verse 28, Lord, if it's You, if it's You, it seems to be You.

I think it's You, but I'm just not sure. I can't think straight. But if it's You, there's a refreshing and touching honesty in Peter's words, but coupled with that touching honesty, there's also what we might describe as His tremendous ambition.

And I say that in responding to the question, why does Peter want to walk on water? Why does he want to do something that he's never done and I imagine never even considered doing?

And I think there are two intertwined and perhaps even unconscious desires that answer that question, why does Peter want to walk on water? Maybe the obvious one is to be with Jesus, to be closer to Jesus, to embrace Jesus.

Jesus is coming. If He waited in the boat, He'd be there soon enough. But such is His desire to be with Jesus that He wants to walk on water and so approach Him.

[27 : 52] But I wonder if also in Peter, there's not also the desire to be like Jesus, to do what Jesus does. And if Jesus walks on water, well, He wants to do what His Master does.

He too wants to walk on water. We might even smile at that ambition if we can call it that. But are these not at heart worthy aspirations?

To be with Jesus and to be like Jesus and to do what Jesus does. And of course we know there comes a time when we cannot and are not intended to do all that Jesus does.

He's the Savior. We are the saved. But is it not the case that as disciples of Jesus, it is a healthy and a worthy thing to want to be with Him and to be like Him and to do that which He does?

As you appreciate who Jesus is and His great desire to quell your fears and to help you in your deepest troubles and storms, do you respond with a childlike but intense desire to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus?

[29 : 06] Jesus immediately said. But then thirdly and finally, we have the last occasion in this passage where Jesus is said to act immediately.

Jesus immediately reached out. Verses 30 through to 33. But when he saw the wind, that is Peter, when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me.

Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. What do we learn about Jesus? In this case, we don't really need to spend time asking the question, why did He act immediately?

It's pretty obvious why He acted immediately. Peter is about to sink and immediate action is required. But what does his immediate action tell us about Jesus?

Well, I think it announces with unequivocal certainty His loving preoccupation to save. The words of Peter, Lord, save me, would be, could be, met with only one response.

[30 : 20] Jesus immediately reaches out to save Peter. You can almost imagine the firm yet tender grip of the carpenter from Nazareth.

At that very moment, Peter knew he was safe. His fears were dispelled as that hand took hold of him and lifted him up from his descent into the waves.

The waves could do nothing to harm Peter. The raging waters, often a symbol of death in the Bible, were powerless to touch Peter because Peter immediately reaches out to grab hold of sinking at Peter.

And so again, I say to you, behold your Savior, able to save, willing to save, immediately. But then also, how should we respond to a Savior who acts immediately?

Well, we can do no better than to do what Peter did. Indeed, even before, Jesus reached out his hand, cry out with Peter, Lord, save me, Lord, save me.

[31 : 40] Now, Peter cried out those words in his own particular circumstances, threatened by this physical threat of the waves that were drawing him down. But we can cry out these same words in our own circumstances, though they be different to Peter's.

Save me from my sin. Save me from myself. Deliver me from my fears and doubts. Cry out immediately, Lord, save me.

And maybe somebody here this morning says, well, I don't know if I've got enough faith to cry out, Lord, save me. I have so many doubts, I don't know if I can do that. Well, you've got lots of doubts. If anything is taught by this occasion is that that's not a problem. If you have doubts, that is not a problem. Because, as we see so clearly and eloquently described for us, Peter had plenty doubts, and yet that was no reason for him not to cry out, Lord, save me.

Indeed, what does Jesus say to him even as he reaches out his hand to save him? Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. You of little faith, he said.

[32 : 56] Why did you doubt? Peter had doubts. Peter did not have a great faith but sufficient to cry out, Lord, save me. Then, the Lord would deal with his doubts.

After saving him, after reaching out and rescuing him, there would be time enough to deal with Peter's doubts. Don't try and resolve all your doubts before you cry out, Lord, save me.

There will be time enough for the Lord to deal with them after he has reached out his hand and rescued you as he did Peter. Cry out with Peter but also as you consider, as we consider how we respond to a Savior who acts immediately, I think we must also with the disciples bow down and worship such a Savior.

Verse 33, Then those who were in the boat worshipped him saying, Truly, you are the Son of God. Cry out with Peter. Bow down with the disciples.

But also, can I suggest one other thing that we don't have here in this passage? Lovingly and urgently direct others who are sinking to the one, the only one, who is able to save and to save to the uttermost.

[34 : 16] Jesus immediately reached out. There is one final immediately but that we don't have recorded here in Matthew's Gospel.

But we can find it in John's account of this same occasion. Let's just very briefly notice this final immediately as we draw things to a close in John chapter 6 and verse 21.

In John chapter 6 and verse 21, we read, Then they were willing to take him into the boat. This is coming to the close of the event.

And then notice what we were told by John. And immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. So, everything that we've already thought about, the storm begins, the disciples are seeking to row out the storm, Jesus appears, they see him, he looks like a ghost, Peter cries out, he endeavors to reach him, he sinks, or he's sinking, Jesus reaches out, and now he's on the boat.

And John tells us, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. Now, as we do the calculations, and this isn't an exact science, but from what we're told about the time they'd been rowing and the location, and we have some indications, at the very least we'd have to say that they were some distance from the shore when this occurs.

[35 : 48] And yet, John tells us, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. What is John saying? Is this another miracle?

Or simply a condensed version of a journey to shore that appeared to be in an instant in the experience of the disciples, given their reverent fascination with the one who had come on board,

they simply weren't considering or thinking about how long it took for them to make their way from where they were to the shore.

How is it that John can speak in these terms? Immediately the boat reached the shore. Well, it's not really that important if this was in any way miraculous or simply the disciples' perception of what happened.

What is important is that the disciples, each and every one of them, reach their destination. They reach the shore where they were heading, the shore to where Jesus himself had embarked them when he had hours before compelled them to go.

And this is the ultimate hope and security of all those gripped by grace, gripped by Jesus.

[37 : 12] When Jesus takes hold, he never lets go, and he always leads us home. And praise him for that.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we're going to see you next time.