

Sermon for Sunday, April 1, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"THE OUTSTRETCHED HAND"
St. Matthew 14:22-33

Text: "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'O man of little faith, why did you doubt?'" St. Matthew 14:31

If one were asked to give a descriptive phrase that would best characterize the story of Peter walking on the water to meet Jesus, one might come up with a descriptive phrase such as, "The Pioneer Venture of Faith." Never before in the history of mankind had anyone attempted to do what Peter did that day. It was an act of pure, raw faith. Yet, to call that scene the pioneer venture of faith would leave out the most important element of the story. It is true that Peter exhibited a pioneer spirit; it is true that it was a great venture; and it is true that it was done in utter faith. Yet, the point of the whole matter is that Peter's pioneer spirit faltered, his great faith waivered and cracked, and the venture which began so strongly threatened to end in catastrophe. Like most of us, impetuous Peter began with enthusiasm, but when the security of the boat was behind him, when the waves rolled about him, and when the wind tore and whipped at his clothing with tremendous force, his faith began to disintegrate. The fact is, Peter was sinking! It was then, you see, that Jesus acted. We read that, "Immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him." A better and more accurate caption for this scene--a caption that would catch the true essence of what is going on--would be, "The Outstretched Hand." Here we see the one distinctive element that makes Christianity truly unique.

Let us note in the first place, that in this small fishing boat, caught far from shore, helplessly blown by the winds and washed over and about by the crashing waves, these ancient sailors were in dire need of some assistance. As long as the wind gently filled their sails, as long as the soft roll of the waves was quiet, these sailors were able to handle their own boat. They could set their own course, chart their own destination, determine their own port. But with the descent of the storm, they lost control of the situation. With the wind tearing through the rigging, with the waves threatening to swamp them, they were no longer able to stand at the helm and set their own course. They were at the mercy of the forces of nature and at best could only turn and run before the storm.

Now, if I may allegorize a bit, it seems to me that in this picture we have the life of man typified. We can chart our own course, set our own destination, and pick our own ports of call in life as long as things are placid and smooth. As long as the storm holds off, we can ply the sea of life with calm assurance. But when the storms of life descend upon us, when the waves of calamity hammer us, when the winds of adversity are whipping and roaring through the rigging of life, it is then that we need an anchor of faith; it is there that we need the firm security of a life-line that will hold us safely--hold even though the storm sweeps over and around us.

You see, the fact is a man can go through most of life without any meaningful or any apparent faith. But, if he is going to meet all of life successfully, he must have a faith upon which he can anchor his very existence. The nurse who took care of the famous Voltaire during his last illness was asked by her hospital to take another patient. The nurse refused to take the case until she had determined whether or not the patient was a Christian. When the doctor asked her why, she replied, "Because as long as I live, I never want to see another atheist die." You simply cannot meet the storms of life successfully if you do not have a faith to which you can anchor your soul. Not so many years ago a famous New York newspaper man was in Mexico City and there he committed suicide. He had lived by a philosophy which says there is no God, that man controls his own destiny. The note he left behind said that he was

tired of running from wife to wife, from country to country, simply trying to fill up 24 hours a day. This note of pessimism fills much of the literature today. We have heard that God is dead and in the play "J. P." that man is really on his own. A famous writer like Camus who has written out of a philosophy of despair ends up driving his car at full speed into a tree. The newspaper man ended his suicide note this way, "I have discovered that I cannot live any longer on the basis of the philosophy I have created. I am too old to try to learn a new faith and there is no recourse left to me but death." He had discovered that a man must believe in something or life simply turns to dust in one's hands.

But not only must man have a faith to live by, notice in the second place that he must also make a decision as to what that faith will be. You see, if a man believes in something or someone, he can rise to the heights of grandeur. See how it works. In 1933 the German nation was still beaten and defeated. Its great industrial machinery lay idle and rusting, its people were starving, and the nation was caught up in the grips of a great depression. At the end of World War I, it had conceded its great fleet of merchant ships to the enemy and its great colonial empire had been set free. Her great army had been routed and her mighty navy lay at the bottom of the sea. They were a beaten and dejected people. Yet, within the span of six short years the Germans were sufficiently strong that they felt capable of taking on the whole of continental Europe. Then, for six more long, bitter years, they held off the collective might of the industrial powers of the world. And what was it that transformed these people in such a short time? It was faith. The German people began to believe in something and in someone. It is true their faith was monstrous and fantastically evil--yet they believed. And in the power of their faith they accomplished the seemingly impossible.

Or take again the Russian nation. Only a few short decades ago they caught the vision of a cosmic drama--the rule of the proletariat, the common man. In the power of that faith, they have become one of the super powers of our age. Today all of the world must reckon with a people who only a short time ago were crude peasants of no consequence or significance. Yes, when man is inspired with a vision, when he is captivated by a faith, he can rise to do the seemingly impossible.

Or go back into history for a moment. At the time of the birth of Christ the Roman Empire ruled the known world. They had placed their faith in the power of their armies and in the superiority of their generals. With deadly precision and with relentless determination, they marched from victory to victory until the whole world lay beaten and subdued at their feet. They had a faith--and in that faith they ruled the world.

You see, man must believe in something or someone. The question that faces us today is not whether we shall believe, the real question is what or whom we shall believe. The question that faced Peter that night as he clambered over the side of the boat was not whether he needed a faith in the midst of the storm--that was obvious--but the question that faced him was what or whom he would have faith in. He was faced with the decision of faith.

That is the decision that faces us in our complex world today; not whether we need faith, but what we shall have faith on--on what shall we bet our very lives. The Germans had faith in themselves as the superior race and in their leader. As a consequence their faith failed them and today they are still a nation divided. The Russians have faith in the proletariat and in the inevitable course of history. But that faith will not sustain them for it is based on finite man. Three centuries after the death of Jesus the Roman Empire had been overrun with barbarians and the power that was Rome ceased to exist forever. When the crisis came, the things in which they had placed their faith failed them. Truly he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword.

Notice in the third place, then, that Jesus offers us the only adequate faith. The German dream collapsed in rubble; the splendor of Rome is a museum curiosity; the future of Russia is dark and forboding. Each of these philosophies of life offered a faith--a faith that did and has and will lead to the accomplishment of the seemingly impossible--yet each has failed or will fail. And why? Because any faith based on man is an inadequate faith.

Look at Peter as he clammers over the side of the boat and steps down upon the water. As long as Peter had faith, he was secure. But when the safety of the boat was behind him, when the wind tore at his clothing, when the waves rolled about him, Peter lost confidence in himself. He began to sink. He was in danger of drowning. It is then we read, "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him." Yes, Jesus with the outstretched hand. When our own faith begins to crack and crumble; when our confidence in our own ability begins to waiver and we are on the point of sinking, when the storms of life whistle through the rigging and threaten to overwhelm us, Jesus stands there with his hand stretched out to catch us. Behind our faith stands Jesus, holding out his hand to us--and when the storms of life overwhelm us, when our hearts are filled with despair and tears, there he stands... holding out his hand to catch us and to pull us to safety.

That's how it is with us humans. We must have a faith, we must decide who or what we will have faith in, but the only adequate faith is faith in Jesus. See how it works. In the days when Rome was at her greatest, eleven men waited quietly in an upper room. They were not particularly significant as the world counted significance. For the most part, they were unlettered fishermen, men of no consequence. Their leader was already dead and they themselves were hunted men. In the years that followed they were to be persecuted, tortured--they and more who followed them were to be nailed to cruel crosses, they were to be fed to wild beasts and burned at the stake. Yet, when the Roman Empire lay in tragic, bitter ruins, from those ruins a new empire had come into being that was to be known for centuries as the Holy Roman Empire. Behind the faith of those early Christians stood the Jesus of the outstretched hand. And when the storm of persecution and bitter death rolled about them and whipped through the rigging of their lives, their anchor held--their faith was adequate.

At the turn of the 19th century, a man named Joe Scriven had gone to Canada. No one knew much about his life--he had come from Dublin apparently an orphan and somehow scratching and digging for a living in the gutters of Dublin he had become soured on life. He stood alone against the world, afraid of making friends. But there in Canada Joe Scriven found a beautiful young lady and fell in love with her. To this girl he pledged his troth, forgetting his distrust, his loneliness; giving to her his faith and his confidence. A few days before the wedding she went to a town across the bay to buy her wedding clothes, and the day before the wedding she took the boat for home. The boat never reached port. A sudden storm caught her in the open waters and the boat was lost with all hands. Joseph Scriven stood alone in the world again--he had tried to make sure that life could never hurt him, but now he was plunged into the deepest anguish; a pain too great to be borne. In the loneliness of his room he fell upon his knees and cried out to God. In the darkness the tears came and in faith he reached out his trembling hand to find that the hand of Jesus was already stretched out to his. He arose that night strengthened and deepened by his loss. He was to spend the rest of his life helping others--using his money to help the poor, cutting wood for widows, repairing the homes of those who could not help themselves. Then, one night in the solitude of his frugal room, Joe Scriven wrote a poem that somehow summed up all that had happened to him. Since then that poem has been set to music and Christians around the world have sung it. Out of the depths of his anguish and sorrow and loneliness, when his heart was broken, Joe Scriven wrote, "What A Friend We Have in Jesus."

Yes, what a friend we have in Jesus. When the dark of night is upon us, when the storms rage about us and our hearts within us are breaking, there stands Jesus with his hand outstretched. No, you cannot live your life without a faith, but you can decide, you can make the decision of what or whom you will believe and trust. I hold up for you Jesus--I challenge you to give your life to him. He will never fail you for there he stands, with his hand outstretched. Put your hand in his--you will never have a friend like Jesus.