

Choppy Water

Leonce Crump – May 25, 2014

How are you doing? If this is your first time with The Village Church, my name is Matt Chandler. I'm one of the elders here. What? I went on vacation, I bought a suit, I got a tan, I lifted weights, and I'm back! He is going to love that. I mean, I kind of inadvertently called him white, skinny, and suit-less, but I did not mean that, because that's my dude.

I appreciate you guys having me this morning from Atlanta. It really is a great grace. I know you're wondering what *this* is. I sweat when I talk. Last night they were concerned, so they brought me a towel this morning. The first towel they brought me last night was a beach towel, and I almost wore it out here draped across my shoulder like a clerical robe, but I didn't want to do that to you.

It's a great grace to be here and a joy. I've been a friend of The Village from afar for a long time, ever since you guys spent 16 years navigating Luke. I had two children and bought three homes during that series. Ever since then, I've been a fan and a friend. Pastor Matt has become a good friend of mine. What a joy to share life with The Village Church.

Thank you for blessing us in so many ways, including helping us to purchase a new building in Downtown Atlanta. I wanted to thank you for that personally before we jump in today. So, this morning, John, chapter 6. If you don't have a Bible, there should be one near you somewhere (one of those black hardback Bibles). You can use your device. I'm going to use mine this morning. There's something old school about holding *this* for a little while, but I usually jump to my device as well.

If you're a good church kid, you are familiar with this story already. There won't be anything special this morning and anything super. I just want to talk about the simplicity of Jesus' presence and what that means for those who put their trust in him. John, chapter 6. We're going to pick it up in verse 16 where Jesus walks on water.

"When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'"

If you have a pen, you want to underline that. That's kind of the heart of the passage. **"It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going."** If you would, pray for me. I'm going to pray for you. We're going to ask for God's help this morning as we seek to divide his Word.

Father, what a great grace it is to sit under your hand. I have little to offer here other than the good news you have already handed down to us. Father God, I pray you would move me out of the way. Hide me behind your hand. Make me disappear in your majesty so we would hear directly from you today so we would know when we leave here that we have been face-to-face with the living God. We ask these things in the matchless name of Jesus, the love of our Father God, and the power of the Holy Spirit. All God's children said, "Amen."

Now listen. Pastor Matt promised me you were going to accommodate my blackness, which means you can't just sit there and stare at me. Fifty percent of my church is Anglo-American. That's the PC term for white, southern, and Republican. I have a training course where I teach them how to respond to a sermon. I'm going to give you a few things here. Okay? There's one. He is ready! He has black friends, okay? You can do a deacon, "Hmm." Y'all are prepared! Y'all are Baptist. I forgot. Y'all have been doing this for years.

Listen. Several years ago now... Time really does fly I'm learning. I feel like I was 22 yesterday. One of my good friends and my college roommate is here. Every time I see him, I reminisce about our younger years and some of the foolish things we did and the strange nicknames we gave each other. He called me Big Red Silky. I still don't know what that means. Several years ago, I was sitting with one of my friends. We were having coffee. We'll call it *coffee* because you're Baptist.

He was kind of tracking through this list of tragedies he was experiencing. He had lost his father. His father was old, and he was sick. He knew it was coming, but you can't prepare your heart for that. Then just a few months later, he lost his mother-in-law. That was a total surprise. Then six or seven

months later, he lost thousands of dollars on an investment he had made in a business he thought was going to make it, but it didn't make it.

He began to just kind of lay out for me this successive list of both great and small tragedies. He began to tell me all of the ways he had tried to navigate that, how he had tried to mitigate these circumstances and control the outcomes. He had gone to counseling, and then counseling didn't work. He started meditating, and meditating didn't work. He started doing yoga, which is great for your lower back but not much else.

He started going through all of these methods. He wasn't a follower of Jesus but a good friend. He started going through all of these different things he was doing to kind of accomplish one thing. I didn't know that until we got kind of to the end of our conversation, and he said, "Crump, if I could do something to get a little bit of peace...just a *little* bit of peace...maybe my heart would not hurt so deeply."

The frank reality is that for most of us here, we may not be in the midst of that kind of successive pattern of tragedies. Maybe we're in a good *season*, as good church people say. I would wager, I would bet, that if I could sit across from you, even asking you now, none of us here have had a perfect year. Is there one of us? Even a perfect month, week. No! Some of y'all, your day didn't even start off right. You got into it with your spouse on the way here. Y'all have been married 20 years. You know he drives slowly. Just let it go! Let it go! You're not going to change him.

The reality is that at a human level, we can very much identify with that narrative, this longing that, "If I could just have a little bit of peace, if I could just have a chaos-free moment, if I could just navigate these storms, I think life could be vastly different." My good friend, Dr. Mason, who you guys are familiar with... That might be the only other time a suit has been on *this* stage.

He said to me once (and I take him at his word because I see it kind of not only through the Word but through the human narrative) that at all times people are either stepping into, in the midst of, or coming out of some type of trial. It doesn't matter if you're urban or suburban, black or white or Hispanic, wealthy or poor, educated or not. At all times, we are either stepping into some difficult, tumultuous, seemingly overwhelming situation, standing in the middle of it, or coming off of the backside of it.

At the end of the day, if you're honest, all of us are thinking the same thing: "If I could just have a little bit of peace..." Then you can relate to the disciples here. Let me give you a little bit of a background. You probably know it already. John, chapter 6. Jesus does something incredible. He feeds what the Bible says is 5,000 people in the literal text, but we know from historical background that they only counted men back then.

All the ladies said, "Nuh-uh." Right? Not *amen*. "Nuh-uh." You get it. Okay. In reality, it was about 20,000 people he fed with a can of sardines and a box of cornbread, right? Loaves...fish. Come on, guys. Keep up! The disciples are watching all of this unfold, and their minds are blown. The people freak out. They're like, "Oh my, God! You're amazing! Be our king!"

Jesus doesn't want to be their king because he has said over and over again, "My kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is of a world to come. My kingdom is transcendent of time. My kingdom is the full reign of God where everything that is broken is made new again. It's not for me to just overthrow Rome." What does he do? He does what he always does.

We know Jesus was fully man, right? But he had a propensity for disappearing in crowds like I have never seen. I mean, you know, we all had that friend who could disappear at parties. It's like, "Where did Jimmy go?" That's Jesus! He'd just be gone! As they were trying to press in and make him king, he disappeared. It says he went off to be alone with the Father. Where we pick up is at the end of the day. Here's what John tells us.

John tells us at the end of the day (verse 16), evening had come, and Jesus' disciples went down to the sea. Verse 17: "...[they] **got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.**" What they were likely doing is heading across the sea to try to find Jesus because, again, if you go back and read where we are in the narrative, they had been back and forth across the sea a couple of times doing ministry, watching Jesus do his thing and miracles happen, etc.

They were likely going to try and find Jesus across the sea, but it says, "**It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.**" This is the first thing we need to see in the text today, particularly for those of us who say we are disciples of Jesus. We respond the same way in seemingly un noble situations. When we have not heard from Jesus, when Jesus has not yet come to us, what do we do? We take things into our own hands. Can we be honest? That's what we do!

You know, we throw up kind of a "Hail Mary" prayer. "Jesus didn't show up. Pastor didn't have a word for me. Billy Joe didn't know what to do. I'm going to take things into my own hands." Billy. That's a Texas name, right? Joe John. I always liked people with two first names. You never know what they're going to do. There's always entertainment on the backside of that.

If we're honest, we have a tendency (just like the disciples here) that when God does not show up when we want, how we want, the way we think he will, when evening comes and we have not yet heard from Jesus, we immediately take things into our own hands. We try to start to mitigate the outcomes, control the circumstances. Is that true? Is that fair? Very rarely (again, if we're honest)... Either if you're dishonest or you're, like, a super-Christian and you're just waiting to be taken up like Enoch... "Random, obscure Old Testament reference. That boy went to school."

If you're one of those people, then maybe you don't know what I'm talking about, but for the rest of us, very often prayer, the way we communicate with Jesus because we can't walk with him like the disciples did... There's no more flesh and blood. Prayer is very often the last resort and not the first. Whenever we have a decision to make, whenever we have circumstances to navigate, whenever we have a storm to traverse, very rarely do we wait for God to show up. We call him in after the drama has already started, if we call him in at all. Instead, we take matters into our own hands.

This is what it cost them. It says in verse 18 that after they got into the boat, after they took matters into their own hands instead of waiting on Jesus, **"The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing."** Now not that you're interested in this... Maybe you are. Maybe you're a nerd. I'm a secret nerd. That's what I tell people. It's like, "Oh, look at that big guy. I bet he can do stuff." I'm like, "Yes! I read books, because I'm a nerd." Right?

The sea they were crossing set kind of in a valley. There was mountainous terrain all around it. You know, most of us grew up believing Jesus was a carpenter. That's fine, but there wasn't a whole lot of wood in Lebanon, and I don't want to mess up your whole theological framework right now, so I won't go there. But there was a mountainous terrain around it, so every single day these violent storms would happen because the wind would come down out of the mountains and sweep across the water and create kind of a vortex situation.

This is what they were crossing. They weren't doing it in some speedboat. This is not your weekend fishing boat with the name on the back of it. This is a wooden raft. This is a Gilligan's Island, "We're

trying to escape" boat. They're crossing the sea in it. What does it say? It says the sea became rough because the wind began to blow strongly.

I have a vivid imagination. I always have. What I see when I read this is the disciples kind of huddled down, trying to brace themselves, just hoping they're going to survive at this point as their small fishing vessel is whipped from side to side. It says for three or four miles, John tells us, they rode in this, fighting the wind and fighting the waves and fighting their fear and fighting their anxiety, probably at some point just hoping they would all not die.

I need you to put yourself there. Maybe it doesn't take much for you to put yourself there. You know, the only relatable experience I have to this was several months ago now. My wife won a cruise. That's the only way pastors get to take cruises, when we win them for free. Free cruises are an interesting thing. I don't even have time to go into that, but 80 percent of the passengers were from Tennessee. That should tell you all you need to know.

We're on this cruise ship, and we're heading back. It's two nights before we dock back in Florida. We're sitting by a window on a bench seat having a drink together of *milk*. What? We're all good Baptists here. We're looking into each other's eyes. We're having a really intimate moment. There's a storm going on outside. We're watching the lightning and hearing the thunder. I'm leaning in, being really smooth, like, "Yeah, girl. See that storm out there? That's what's going on in my heart."

You know? She is like, "Uh-huh." Then all of a sudden, the waves hit the side of the boat, and the boat pitches hard to the left. I've never felt that much fear in my life. The cruise director comes over, and he says, "Attention, everyone. Attention, everyone. You need to get back to your staterooms immediately." He was a British guy, but I have a terrible British accent, so I'm not even going to try.

We start to make our way back to our stateroom sideways, just trying to stand. That's how hard our boat was rocking from side to side. The only comedic relief we had in this moment was there was one guy walking down the middle of the aisle standing straight up. I'm like, "How is he doing that?" When he got up to us, he was like, "Get drunk. Then you'll be able to walk straight." "That is not good advice, sir. Sir, that is *not* good advice!" But I couldn't argue because I was walking like *this*, and he was walking like *this*. I'm serious! I can't make this stuff up. It was amazing.

We get back to our stateroom, and stuff is tossing from side to side all over. I remember holding my wife that night, and we were genuinely... I mean, we wanted to believe God was going to let us get

back to our children, but we were genuinely terrified. We were in a giant ship! I mean, albeit it was Carnival Cruise Lines, but we were in a giant ship.

I want you to imagine for a moment being in this little wooden raft. No protection. No coverage. No steel. No metal. No engine. Just wood and water and storm. How high would your anxiety be? How palpable would your terror be? How tangible your fear? Then out of the blue, John says Jesus comes walking across the water.

At first, they were afraid. The parallel accounts tell you why. They thought he might be a ghost. I don't know why, but that's just kind of what they thought. He might be a ghost. They didn't know who it was. They couldn't believe a man was walking across the water. That's kind of the two ways our minds would go with that.

If we're here and we're skeptical (which is kind of my tendency) and we are acolytes of Discovery Channel, then we're like, "Well, how *did* he walk on the water? Is that possibly true?" That's my professor voice. Or we swing the other way, especially if we're familiar with the parallel accounts, and we make it about Peter's faith and that God called Peter out onto the water. You got that old southern preacher in the back of your mind who is like, "Keep your eyes on Jesus and navigate the water. Make your check out for \$99.99, and God will give you a blessing."

Do you know what I mean? There are kind of two ways we tend to want to see this narrative, but that's not what John has in focus here. John is not concerned with whether you believe Jesus actually walked on water or not. John is not concerned with Peter's faith. John is not concerned with the disciples' fear. What John is concerned with is the immediate alleviation of that fear the moment they hear Jesus' voice. That's what it says there.

Read with me. John tells us they see Jesus walking on the sea, and they were terrified. Look at verse 20. "**But he [Jesus] said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'**" "It is I. Everything is okay. It is I. I know you are in an overwhelming situation with seemingly insurmountable circumstances, and you can't even fully recognize my face through the wind and through the waves and through the storm. You can't even fully grasp it's me, but hear my voice. It is I! It's okay. Don't be afraid. Everything is fine."

What's the parallel for us there? I think you're smart people. I think you're already there. We very much find ourselves in these situations. Some of you are there right now, and you, like Peter, think

you just need more faith. "If I just believed harder, then I could get out on the storm and walk with Jesus." To some degree, that is a shade of truth. Some of you are sitting here, and it's like, "Well, I don't even believe he walked on water. I don't know what that has to do with my life."

The reality is whether we are disciples of Jesus, whether we think we need faith or we think this is his folly, at the end of the day, we are all craving the same thing: a little bit of peace. What we see here is that in the midst of the most violent of storms, in the most overwhelming circumstances, in the most unlikely place you could even seek survival, all they had to do was hear his voice, experience his presence, and receive the promise of peace. It washed over them immediately.

That's the point, isn't it? Jesus' presence is a promise of peace. His presence is a promise of peace. What's so beautiful about this is not only did their hearts obey, but the storm obeyed as well at the voice of Jesus. Not only did their hearts obey, not only did the anxiety flood from them and the fear flood from them, but the storm calmed at the sound of his voice. At the end of this little section, of course, it says they immediately received him into the boat when they knew it was Jesus, and the boat immediately arrived on the land where they were going.

Jesus' presence is a promise of peace. What do we do with that? Right now it's just information, at least for some of us. Some of us are cynical. We've been in church our whole lives, and it's like, "Yeah. Well, yeah. But I don't experience that." Some of us, this is our first time, and it's like, "Okay, so how do I experience Jesus' presence? How do I appropriate this peace? How do I make this my own?" I think there are several ways we can respond to this.

1. *Practice pursuing the presence of Jesus.* This is not a sports analogy. I'm not talking about practice making perfect. I'm not talking about trying harder and doing more, motivated by some self-willed understanding of what it means for God to be present in your life. Here's what I mean.

Because of the goodness of the gospel, the good news of the gospel, that God would step down into human history rejecting the perfection of heaven in the person of Jesus, live perfectly, die tragically at the hands of the very people he came to save, rise triumphantly, sit at the right hand of the Father, and intercede for all those who would believe, because of that good news, then we incline our hearts to put him at the center of our reality. Jesus is not an addendum to a life already figured out. He is not an add-on.

(If we were in an old black church, that's when the organ player would come out, because it would be time to preach. "Now I said that..." You know, y'all are not ready for that, so I can't do it. Y'all run me up out of here. "Get him back to Atlanta. We don't know what he said.")

Jesus is at the center of reality, not an addendum, not an add-on. If we're honest, even for those of us who have been disciples of Jesus for a long time, we spend a lot of our time living as functional atheists. We live that way. What do I mean by that? We live as though God does not exist until we think we need him. We make our decisions. We make our business deals. We live our lives. We raise our children. We go to our gyms. We go on our vacations. We progress through life.

As long as we don't hit a bump... "Oh, I'm sure God is up there somewhere, but I have it figured out. I mean, he only created me and the world, but I will consult him on a need-to-know basis." None of us would say that out loud. I would never say that out loud, but I very much live that way in my life. Planting Renovation Church. We moved to Atlanta in 2008. I had this grand plan. I'm a schemer. I had this grand plan of how I was going to plant this amazing church.

I started to execute my plan. The only problem is I never asked Jesus about the plan. Then when things started to blow up, I started to blame him. Right? We do that, don't we? Things started to blow up. "Why are you doing this to me, God?" He is like, "Oh, you want to talk? Well, it's good to hear from you. We have some catching up to do. First, *you* did that to you because you didn't talk to me."

How do we navigate the storms in our life? The first thing we do is practice pursuing the presence of Jesus, meaning we put him at the center of our reality, not as an addendum, not as an afterthought, not as the last resort solution, after we've exhausted all of our resources and all of our talent and all of our money and all of our ability. Not *after...first*. How do we respond to this?

2. *Call on God before freaking out*. I mean, there's nothing deeply theological about that, and yet at the same time, it is. What do we do? Something bad happens. That's what goes on in your mind. You may not do it physically. I mean, sometimes I do. I'm in my office. I'm like, "Argh!" Just freaking out. Our school kicked us out for no apparent reason, and we can't move into our new building until September. We have a summertime problem we have to figure out.

I'm ashamed to say I didn't call on God; I freaked out. I was in California, supposed to be on vacation, supposed to be resting. I was in a bare room, throwing stuff, punching pillows, screaming.

You know, just full panic mode. Whether we have a physical expression of that or not, we do it. If you're a disciple of Jesus and you believe the crazy things you believe, how could you believe you would be better at figuring out what to do next better than God would? I mean, think about some of the stuff we believe. Have you ever said it out loud?

Genesis, chapter 1. God makes a man, opens him up, takes a rib, makes a woman. Man sees naked woman and sings a song. Right? It's a song in Hebrew. "Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones. My God! Look what you did!" That's my translation. Man and woman living in naked bliss, talking to God, and he is talking to them. "How are you doing?"

"How *you* doing?"

"I'm good. You good? Cultivate. Do your thing."

Snake comes up. "Hey, Snake. What's happening?"

"Want to eat an apple?"

"God said *no*."

"Did he really say that?"

"No, Snake. He didn't."

Do you see what I'm saying? This is what we believe, but we don't believe God will be sufficient? We don't believe God has the solution? We don't believe God can help us navigate the storm? We believe a snake talked to two naked people to defy God? Call on God first *before* freaking out.

3. *Practice a life of frequent repentance.* How do you keep Jesus at the center? Practice a life of frequent repentance. Martin Luther said all of life is repentance. I would hate to add anything to the guy who started the Reformation and everything like that. You know, the reason why we're not all Catholic.

But what I would add to that is if you are not repenting *daily*, then I would do a heart check. Because if you believe Jesus is perfect and he has called us to follow him, to walk like him, to live like him,

and you know we're not perfect and you're not asking God for help and forgiveness every single day, then you may not belong to him. That's why he is not at the center of your life. That's why every storm sends you reeling rather than leaning into the peace that surpasses all understanding, as Paul writes in Philippians 4:7. Practice repentance every single day.

4. *Talk about him joyfully in good times and bad.* That's how you navigate the storm. That's how you keep Jesus at the center. Talk about him joyfully in good times and bad. We have a tendency to have bandwagon faith. Anybody here who has a sports team knows what I mean by that. I mean, I grew up a Saints fan, okay? I'm traumatized. Going to the games. "Come on, son. Do you have your bag?"

"I have my bag. What's the bag for, Daddy?"

"Put it on your head, son. Put it on. Put it on your head."

One Super Bowl doesn't cure that. How do you come back from that? We have a bandwagon mentality. God is not a bandwagon. God is reality. If he is not a bandwagon, then we talk about him joyfully in good times and bad times, for so many reasons but not the least of which is that it continues to cultivate in our hearts a faith that is not dependent on the circumstances in which I am existing. It's dependent on the promises of God.

Jesus' presence is a promise of peace. If you're a disciple of Jesus, then you've heard that before, but are you living that way? Are you living that way, or would you, like I have so many times, sit there and arrogantly think, "Well, I've heard this. This is simple gospel. Thank you, black man"? You know? I don't know what you're thinking. I just make up stuff in my head as I go.

If you're not a disciple of Jesus, I would ask you where you go for peace. Because the world is tumultuous. The market is tumultuous. The housing market is tumultuous. Our jobs are tumultuous. Raising children alone should make you want to believe in God. Right? Several years ago (they're 7 and 5 now), I remember looking at my youngest who was 9 months old. She had been crying for four hours straight. I was like, "What do you want from me? Argh!" That alone...

Where do you go for peace? Where do you go for peace, because your job is not providing, your things are not providing it? The presence of God is a promise. It's a promise of a peace that can be yours, that can be possessed, that transcends every storm and every circumstance. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the good news of the gospel. It is indeed good news. You are a loving God who, in your sacrifice, has granted us abundant life. I pray now for those of us who are not yet disciples of Jesus, we just kind of wander through cultural Christianity or southern ideology. God is some ethereal being we've attached some significance to. I pray now our hearts would be overturned by the gospel, that we'd realize we've been self-medicating and self-managing our circumstances and our anxiety.

We've been trying to mitigate outcomes so we don't have to navigate storms. You say, "I have peace for you." For those of us who are disciples of Jesus, but we often live as functional atheists and we know it, I pray you'd make our hearts tender, that we would repent now of that, that we would appropriate the peace you promise, knowing all life is in your hands. We ask these things in Christ's name, amen.