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Pursuing the Kingdom: The Cost of Following Jesus

Matthew 8:18-27

Vernon Advent Christian Church

As we continue through the Gospel of Matthew, we are watching the kingdom of God unfold before us through both the words and works of Jesus. In chs. 5–7, Jesus preached the kingdom with all authority where He described the character of its citizens. Then in ch. 8, Jesus begins to reveal His authority through His miraculous works as He cleanses a leper, heals the centurion's servant, restores Peter's mother-in-law and demonstrates His power over every sickness, disease and demonic power as He healed those brought to Him at Peter's house demonstrating that everything that was broken was now being restored by the only One who could.

Now, Matthew shifts our attention again. This time from the very public miracles in the first half of ch. 8 to personal discipleship. And the transition here is intentional. Because it is one thing to follow Jesus with the crowd on the mountaintop. It is quite another thing entirely to follow Him when it becomes costly and your faith is tested by fear.

And that is the heart of the passage we're going to look at today. Matthew is teaching us that pursuing the kingdom of God requires more than being amazed at Jesus. There were lots of people who were in the crowds following Jesus that marveled at His teaching and were amazed by His miracles. But that is not enough. Pursuing the kingdom by following Jesus requires surrender, perseverance and trust in the authority of Christ even when life gets hard and feels uncertain.

And what makes the passage we're going to look at today so powerful is that it addresses two realities every believer eventually faces: the cost of following Jesus and the storms that test our faith. Because many people want a Savior who calms storms, but not too many are prepared to follow Him into them. That is where Jesus takes His disciples in this passage.

You see, the kingdom of God is not simply about the moments on the mountain top. It is about trusting the King in the middle of real life, sacrifice and fear. And that's what we're going to look at today. So, if you are able, please stand with me as I read God's word found in the Book of Matthew 8:18-27. [Read Passage]

The first truth we see in this passage is this, pursuing the kingdom requires a willingness to follow Jesus above our comfort. Matthew begins by telling us that large crowds surrounded Jesus. We saw this last week in Matt. 8:1 and later we're told in vs. 16 that "many" were brought to Him. And now, we read that when He saw the crowds, He told the disciples to prepare the boat to go to the other side.

The popularity of Christ's ministry is growing rapidly. People are amazed by His miracles and authority. But right away, Jesus begins going beyond this surface enthusiasm to expose the true nature of discipleship.

Vs. 19 says, "And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'" At first glance, this sounds incredibly admirable. The scribe sounds passionate, committed and sincere. With the miracles associated with the ministry of

Jesus, following Him might have seemed more glamorous than it really was. Perhaps this man thought that since he was a scribe and those closest to Him were just some ordinary fisherman that he could make something of them and take a place of leadership among them. But Jesus immediately strips away any romanticized view of discipleship. Following Christ is not built upon our comfort.

And, so, Jesus responds in vs. 20 by saying, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Notice that Jesus didn’t tell the man “No, you can’t follow Me.” But He told him the truth. Jesus wanted the man to know what it would really be like.

Why would Jesus answer like this? Because He knows the human heart. He understands that many people are attracted to the excitement of following Him without counting the cost of discipleship. This is why so many people who seem sincere in their relationship with Christ at the beginning end up walking away. Because at some point the word of God is going to confront them in a way that is going to force them to make a decision. Am I going to follow Jesus and trust the word of God or am I going to reject it and follow my own desires? They realize that following Jesus wasn't what they thought it would be, because they had a false view of what it meant. They really hadn't considered the cost.

Now, notice that Jesus uses the title “Son of Man” here to describe himself, which is the favorite title that He used to describe Himself, used 81 times in the Gospels. It's a title rich with messianic implications from the book of Daniel and Jesus points out that even He, God's Messiah, lived without earthly security or status. So, Jesus is not promising luxury, ease or worldly success. He is calling people to surrender.

And honestly, this confronts many modern ideas in the Church today. In some circles, faith is presented almost entirely as a way to personal fulfillment, comfort and/or success. Almost like a religious “quid pro quo.” If I’m a good person and I give my money to the Church, I “sow my seed of faith,” then God is going to bless me. But Jesus never hid the difficulty of discipleship. He never promised there wouldn’t be hardship.

The truth is, following Jesus may cost you relationships. It may cost you popularity. It may even cost you earthly security. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously wrote in his book, “Cost of Discipleship,” a quote I used a few weeks ago but, again, its appropriate here, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

That sounds extreme to our modern ears, but this is the honest truth. Superficial discipleship, or outward religion, collapses when trials come. Jesus already made this point back in Matt. 7:24-27 when He gave the example of two foundations, the rock and the sand. The foolish man built his house on the sand and when the storm came, his house fell because it wasn't anchored to anything.

But the wise man builds his house on the rock and when the storm came, his house stood firm because it was anchored to the rock. Jesus wants His followers to understand that the kingdom of God requires trust and full surrender to Him as the rock that we can anchor our lives to.

Well, then another disciple says in vs. 21, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,” implying he will follow Jesus but he has to take care of a few things first. Now, we have to ask ourselves, “what's really going on here?” Well, first of all, this man is not ask for permission to dig a grave for his deceased father. No, what's going on is his father is still

alive and he wants to remain in his father's house and care for him until his father has died. This was obviously an indefinite period of time which could drag on and on.

The man wanted to follow Jesus, but just not yet. The timing wasn't quite right. He knew it was good and that he should do it, but he felt there was a good reason why he could not do it now. So, if the scribe was being too quick and rash in his promising to follow Jesus, this man is the opposite. He is too slow and calculating with his desire to follow.

And Jesus responds with these difficult words, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." Again, at first, this sounds harsh. But Jesus is emphasizing priorities here. The kingdom of God cannot become secondary to every other obligation in our lives. Jesus is not condemning honoring our parents for the Scripture affirms that clearly, namely the fourth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother."

Rather, He is confronting divided loyalty. The point is, the call of the kingdom is urgent. There will always be reasons to delay our obedience to follow Jesus. "I'll follow Jesus later." "When life settles down." "When my career is secure." "When I have more time." "When following Him becomes easier." But Jesus continually calls people to decisive surrender now, while today is still today for tomorrow is never promised.

Jesus pressed the man to follow Him now, and clearly stated the principle that family obligations, or any other obligation, must not be put ahead of following Jesus. Jesus must come first in our lives.

You see, kingdom discipleship is not worship from a distance. It is full surrender that follows the King wherever He leads. And once the disciples choose to follow Jesus, Matthew immediately shows us what that journey can look like. Following Jesus doesn't always remove storms from life. Sometimes it leads directly into them for pursuing the Kingdom requires trusting Jesus in the middle of the storm.

Matthew writes in vs. 23, "And when he [Jesus] got into the boat, his disciples followed him." That sentence is important. The disciples are in the storm precisely because they obeyed Jesus. Sometimes we wrongly assume that obedience to God should automatically produce smooth sailing. But throughout Scripture, faithful obedience often leads people directly into difficult situations.

Moses obeyed God and faced Pharaoh. David obeyed God and had to flee for his life from Saul. The Apostle Paul obeyed God and endured countless beatings, imprisonment and, ultimately, it led to his death. In our text, the disciples followed Jesus and end up in the middle of a violent storm as Matthew says in vs. 24, "And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea."

Now, the Sea of Galilee was known for its sudden, violent storms because of its geography. The cold air would rush down from the surrounding mountains and would collide with the warm air over the water, creating these dangerous storms with little, to no, warning. Now, we know that several disciples were experienced fishermen. So, these were not cowardly men panicking over light rain. This was serious. We're told that the waves are crashing into the boat and the boat begins to fill with water.

And then Matthew gives one of the most astonishing details in this entire story at the end of vs. 24, "...but he [Jesus] was asleep." Jesus sleeps during the storm. At one level, this reminds us of His humanity. He is exhausted. He just spent the last few days traveling and ministering and was healing people all evening in Peter's home just before getting into the

boat with the disciples. The King of glory had entered fully into our human experience of weakness and fatigue.

But His sleep also reveals His perfect trust in the Father. While the disciples are overwhelmed with fear, Jesus rests in complete confidence. His mind and heart were at peace, trusting in the love and care of His Heavenly Father, that He could sleep in the middle of the storm.

In stark contrast, the disciples are in full panic and they wake Jesus crying out, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” Now before we criticize them too quickly, we should see ourselves in them. How often do we panic when things begin to get outside of our control? Financial uncertainty. Health crises. Family struggles. Unexpected loss. Anxiety about the future. Storms expose what we are truly trusting in.

And, if we're honest with ourselves, often our fear reveals that we are more controlled by circumstances than by our confidence in Christ. I heard a pastor once say, “You do not truly know what is in your heart until pressure squeezes it out.” You see, the storms that come into our lives reveal which foundation we're building our life upon and what, or who, we're really trusting in.

Now, to their credit, the disciples do believe Jesus can help. But their fear shows they still do not fully understand who is in the boat with them. And that leads us to the central message of the passage. The greatest miracle is not simply that Jesus calms the storm, but that the Creator Himself is standing in the boat. And it's a reminder that pursuing the Kingdom requires recognizing the authority of the King.

Jesus responds in vs. 26, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Remember Jesus' response to the Roman Centurion's faith that we saw last week in Matt. 8:10, He marveled and said, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such [great] faith.”

The centurion demonstrated great faith by trusting entirely in the absolute authority of Jesus' spoken word from a distance, while the disciples reveal little faith by panicking despite His presence in their boat. The centurion looks past physical limitations to recognize Christ's sovereignty. On the other hand, the disciples allow the immediate storm to overshadow their trust. Ultimately, while the disciples marvel and wonder who Jesus is, the centurion's confidence in Jesus' command is what causes Jesus Himself to marvel at his faith. And we will see more of this contrast as we make our way through the Book of Matthew.

But notice Jesus does not say the disciples have no faith, but that they have little faith. After all, they did come to Him for help. But their faith is small, shaky and overwhelmed by fear. And honestly, that should be encouraging for us as believers. Jesus does not reject weak faith. He strengthens it. The disciples still have much to learn, but Jesus is patiently revealing Himself to them and this, too, we will see play out over the course of Matthew's Gospel.

Well, its at this point, when the storm is still raging, that Matthew says, “...he [Jesus] rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.” Now, notice what has happened here. There was a great storm. Again, some of these guys are experienced fishermen, they know what a “great” storm looks like. But then Jesus speaks and there was great calm. Instantly. Jesus speaks to creation as its sovereign King and Creator and the wind and waves obey His voice.

And this is where Matthew wants us to pause in awe. In the Old Testament, calming the sea was something associated with only God Himself. Psalm 107 says God stills the storm and hushes the waves. In Psalm 65, from the passage that was read earlier this morning, we hear of “the One who by His strength...stills the roaring of the seas and the roaring of their waves.” Now Jesus stands in the boat and does what only God can do.

And the disciples respond with amazement, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” And that is the right question to ask. Matthew is steadily revealing the identity of Jesus. Sickness and disease obeyed His word. Demons obeyed His command and now creation itself obeys Him. Matthew is showing us that the kingdom of God has now been inaugurated because the Creator has come to redeem that which was lost and broken.

Now, I used to fly a lot as a kid when I would fly back and forth between my parents. And even to this day, I fly back and forth to conferences and to visit family. And when I do I often still get a little “uneasy” during turbulence. But sometimes all it takes to calm myself is to remember that the pilot is experienced, completely steady and unconcerned. The same is true for us spiritually. Our peace grows not because the turbulence disappears immediately, but because we can trust the One who is in control.

The disciples are learning this truth first hand, that peace is not found in the absence of storms but it is found in the presence of the King in the midst of the storm. As Charles Spurgeon once said, “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.” You see, storms often become the place where we learn most deeply who Christ truly is, not some distant deity, but Almighty God who is in the boat with us.

So how do we apply this passage? First, we need to examine our understanding of what discipleship, following after Jesus, truly is. Are you following Jesus only when it feels comfortable and beneficial? Or have you truly surrendered your life to the King? Jesus never promised an easy path. But He promised His presence.

Second, we need to recognize that storms are not necessarily signs of God’s absence but opportunities for us to learn to trust Him more completely. Sometimes faithful obedience leads directly into difficult seasons of life. The disciples were in the storm because they followed Jesus. Instead of blaming God for life not going the way we wanted, maybe, we should start considering what God is doing in us through the storms and how He would want to use us during and after.

Third, bring your fears honestly to Christ. When the storm raged, the disciples did not hide their terror. They cried out, “Save us, Lord, we are perishing!” These moments reveal that Jesus does not demand a flawless, unwavering faith before He will act on your behalf. Even a weak, trembling faith that runs directly to Jesus in the midst of panic is still genuine faith. By opening your heart to Him honestly, you exchange the crushing weight of anxiety for His peace. So, don’t let the smallness of your faith keep you from the greatness of your Savior, but boldly bring your anxieties to Him, knowing He is ready to calm both you and the storm.

Lastly, we need to remember who is in the boat with us. The same Christ who calmed the sea still reigns with authority today. Nothing overwhelms Him. Nothing surprises Him. Nothing is beyond His control. Yield to Him, and although life is full of storms, He will get you safely over to the other side.

The deeper question beneath this entire passage is not simply, “Can Jesus calm storms?” The deeper question is, “Will we trust Him enough to follow Him through them?” Because pursuing the kingdom of God does not mean a storm-free life. Sometimes the path of obedience leads into wind, waves, uncertainty and fear.

But the hope of the gospel is this, the disciples were never abandoned in the storm because Jesus was with them. And Brothers and Sisters, neither are you. The King who calls you to follow Him is the same King who holds authority over everything that threatens you. The waves still obey Him. The wind still obeys Him. Creation still obeys Him. And ultimately, through His death and resurrection, even sin and death themselves are defeated under His authority.

There may be moments when life feels chaotic and overwhelming. Moments when God seems strangely silent. Moments when fear rises like crashing waves. But we are reminded that silence is not absence and delay is not abandonment. The King is still in the boat with us.

So pursue the kingdom of God not simply when the sea is calm, but even when storms rage around you. For the safest place in all the world is not in the absence of storms. It is the presence of Jesus. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the authority and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Thank You that He is not only the King who calls us to follow Him, but the King who remains with us in every storm.

Lord, we confess that fear often overwhelms our faith. We become anxious when circumstances feel uncertain and afraid when life seems out of control. Forgive us for the ways we trust our fears more than we trust Your authority.

Teach us to follow Christ with wholehearted surrender, even when the path is costly or difficult. Strengthen our faith in seasons of trial and remind us that no storm is greater than the Savior who reigns over it.

And for those walking through storms today, whether grief, suffering, anxiety, uncertainty, or weariness, we pray that they would experience the peace that comes from knowing Jesus is near.

Help us pursue Your kingdom with steadfast trust, confident that the King who commands the wind and waves also holds our lives securely in His hands. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, King, and the Lord over every storm. Amen.

Benediction: May you follow Jesus Christ with wholehearted trust, even when the path is costly and the storms are fierce. May your faith rest not in calm circumstances, but in the authority of the King who commands the wind and waves. And as you pursue the kingdom of God, may His presence give you courage, peace and steadfast hope wherever He leads you. Amen.