

“Scared Faith”  
Matthew 14:22-33  
August 9, 2020

Every summer there is usually a series of blockbuster action movies that people flock to see so they can cheer for their hero as he/she defeats the enemy and dream what it would be like if they were in their shoes. Obviously there aren't any blockbuster movies coming out in theaters this summer, but maybe that will change at Christmas time or maybe we will have twice as many of these big action movies next summer. In the summer before my senior year of college, my roommate and I were already looking ahead to graduation as he was going into the Navy and I was going into the Army. And two blockbuster military movies came out that summer that I think got all of the guys in my class excited about going into the military.

The first was the Sylvester Stallone movie, “Rambo,” in which Sylvester Stallone plays a Special Forces Vietnam veteran named John Rambo, who returns to Vietnam in an attempt to find missing Prisoners Of War. This was actually the second movie in the Rambo series and throughout the movie Rambo single-handedly defeats a large group of enemy soldiers with a machine gun in one hand and a knife in the other hand. Rambo was tough, he was cool, and every time he escaped capture, all of us in the movie theater would cheer him on.

That same summer the movie, “Top Gun,” came out in which Tom Cruise portrayed a Navy jet fighter pilot, named “Maverick,” who goes to the top school in the Navy for fighter pilots. While he is there he competes with another top pilot, named “Iceman,” to see who is the best pilot. Maverick was also cool and fearless as he boldly maneuvered his jet to defeat the enemy. My roommate in college went into the Navy after graduation hoping to be a jet fighter pilot, but because of that movie, the number of applications to be Navy jet fighter pilots soared as only the top 1% of applicants were selected to fly jets.

Many guys in my college class, including myself, who went into the Army dreamed of joining the Special Forces in order to be tough and cool like Rambo; and many of the guys in my class, like my roommate, who went into the Navy, dreamed of becoming fearless jet fighter pilots like Maverick. However, my roommate and I both learned that believing we could be like those movie characters was one thing, but actually following through on those beliefs was something quite different. I quickly learned that carrying a machine gun in one hand is hard and it's heavy, especially when you are walking through the woods at night, and it's 90 degrees, with bugs crawling on you and you've only had a few hours of sleep. It was not as “fun” as I thought it would be and many of us decided that maybe we would enjoy doing something else in the Army.

My roommate was not selected to be a jet fighter pilot, but he was selected to be a Navy helicopter pilot. He also quickly learned just how tough it was to be a pilot. The training was a lot more intense than portrayed in the movie, as it required hours of studying each night, and while he made it through the training, many of the guys selected to be pilots did not make it.

The same can be said of many professions. The movies make it look easy or glamorous to be a doctor, lawyer, or teacher; but working in a hospital on Christmas day, or taking the bar exam, or facing a classroom full of skeptical teenagers is quite different.

Last week we heard how the disciples had their faith tested as they watched Jesus do the impossible. He fed 5000 families with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Today, our Gospel lesson continues with this story as Jesus told His 12 disciples to get into a boat and to go on ahead of him to the other side of the sea while He dismissed the crowd He just fed. And so the disciples did that – believing in Jesus they obediently, but maybe reluctantly, got into a boat and set sail to the other side of the sea before Jesus left. Now I say “reluctantly,” because in verse 22 it says Jesus “made” the disciples get into a boat, meaning they probably didn't volunteer or they were probably questioning in their minds why Jesus wanted them to leave now. Can't you imagine them thinking as they rowed that boat into a storm, “Why did Jesus send us out here?”

I'm sure the disciples had yearned for Jesus' presence during that storm. After all, they knew what He could do and they saw Him calm a storm before, but when Jesus came walking toward them on the water to rescue them notice what the disciples did not say. They did not say, “Oh good, here comes Jesus, now we can relax, we're safe.” Instead, they were terrified. Their faith was being tested again, and here was an opportunity for them to demonstrate their big faith, but their faith gave way to superstitious fear. “It's a ghost!” they cried out; and for a moment the storm is no longer their primary concern.

But since they didn't recognize Him, Jesus used His well known loving voice and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" to calm their fears. You might compare it to when you come home at the end of the day and you walk in the house and say, "Hello, it's me." Your spouse and children know who "me" is and the same was true for the disciples. When Jesus saw that the disciples were in need, He went to be with them and said, "It's me, don't be afraid." And in the midst of our storms, Jesus is always with us.

Then we see Peter take it a step further as he follows through on his belief in Jesus and asks, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus responds by simply saying, "Come," and with that command, Peter stepped out of the boat, in the midst of the storm, (Jesus didn't calm the storm so Peter could get out of the boat) and he walked on water. Wow! What a faith! Peter did the impossible, he walked on water. Just imagine what else could be done with such a faith? But is Peter a good example of faith? After all, as soon as Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the wind and the waves, thus doubting Jesus' willingness to protect him, he begins to sink. And yet, Peter still believes in Jesus' power. So with a scared, desperate faith, he cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him, saying, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" In those words Jesus then defines the difference between belief and faith. Peter's belief got him rescued, but his lack of faith got him all wet as he began to sink in the water.

Jesus calls all of us to be His disciples, to follow Him, to step out in faith on new and unexpected paths with Him. The question is, "Will we follow Him?" Will we turn our belief in Jesus into faith in Jesus and follow Him wherever He leads us? You see, believers will stay in the boat where it is safe or comfortable, but followers will step out of the boat on the most adventurous, miraculous, and unpredictable journey of their lives. In fact, I'm sure many of us, if we examine our lives, we would realize that if we did not step out in faith, we would not be where we are today.

But as Peter demonstrated, following through on our beliefs is not easy and there are all kinds of winds that will try to draw our attention away from Jesus. There are winds of greed, addiction, helplessness, busyness, and certainly a pandemic that will try to blow us off course and distract us from following Jesus. Does this mean that the storms in our lives will stop if we keep our eyes on Jesus? No. We would all prefer to have the tests come back negative for cancer, or to have people who hurt us apologize for their wrongdoings, or for this pandemic to go away today and for things to return to normal. But Jesus didn't come to take away all of our hardships, struggles, or our doubts. As long as we live on this earth we will encounter storms, but when we keep our eyes on Jesus, we will definitely make it through the storms of life.

If this pandemic gets even worse tomorrow, God will still be there. If the stock market drops by 50% tomorrow, God will not change or break His promises. If you get a bad medical report, it doesn't mean that God has left you. In life, there are storms, but God is always with us; and when we clothe ourselves in the lifejacket of faith and begin to walk on the troubled waters of our lives, through the winds and the waves, Jesus will be there, calling to you with love and peace, saying, "Take heart, it's me, do not be afraid."