You of little faith, why are you so afraid?

Matthew 8:18-34

Key Verse:8:26 “He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.”

As I mentioned last week, the beginning part of Matthew’s gospel reveals Jesus’ ministry in four parts: preaching the gospel, teaching on the Mount, healing the sick, and raising the disciples. Today’s passage teaches us the cost of following Jesus and the nature of his ministry. It contains three different incidents but with one common point, which is that being disciples of Jesus requires strong faith in him in all situations.

First, the cost of following Jesus (18-22) Look at verses 18,19. “***When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go***.” For the sake of his disciples Jesus wanted to cross over to the other side of the lake. He didn’t quite have enough time with them since the crowds were always following him. The disciples also needed rest apart from the crowd. Then a teacher of the law came to Jesus and said that he would follow Jesus wherever he went. At that time, the teachers of the law opposed Jesus. But this man was different. He wanted to follow Jesus. He must have been deeply touched by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He wanted to become a great teacher like Jesus. How did Jesus reply?

Look at verse 20. “Jesus replied, “***Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.***” Here the word “the Son of Man” is his messianic title. Jesus called himself ‘the Son of Man”, implying that he is God the Incarnate and the Promised Messiah. Foxes have holes for their shelter and birds have nests for their living. But Jesus didn’t have any place to lay his head. Jesus taught the teacher of the law about the nature and cost of being his disciple. Being a disciple of Jesus is not a fantastic dream, but a practical reality. In fact, Jesus spent a long time preaching to the crowd his sermon on the Mount. As soon as he came down from the mountain, large crowds followed him. (8:1) A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and asked for healing. Jesus had compassion on him and touched him and healed him. As soon as he entered Capernaum a centurion came to him for the sake of his sick servant. Jesus was amazed by his great faith and healed his servant. After this, he visited Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law. (8:15) When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Jesus and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. (16) The work of Jesus was going on and on without break or vacation. Following Jesus as his disciple required constant demands of work and responsibilities. Those who want to take life easy and comfortable cannot be disciples of Jesus. Lazy people cannot bear the amount and the speed of Jesus’ ministry. The teacher of the law thought that being Jesus’ disciple would be like sitting in an honorable seat and teaching a sermon to the crowd for at most forty minutes, and having a break and getting paid. To him being Jesus’ disciple gave easy honor, recognition, and reward. But Jesus taught him that following him requires constant self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, hunger, sleepless nights, no housing guarantee, and no health insurance. Following Jesus is not a fantastic dream, but a practical reality.

Jesus did not mean that being his disciple meant being homeless. Here Jesus meant that being his disciple means keeping on the move as he himself kept on the move. In other words, he had no time for relaxing on a comfortable couch. He had no time for leaving the demanding crowd behind for a break. The work of God goes on and on continuously. Jesus said in John 5:17, “*My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.*” Being disciples of Jesus is not remaining in a comfort zone, but marching forward like a soldier at a battle field. This is why we have one Bible conference after another every season. The work of God keeps going on and on without break.

Look at verse 21. “***Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.***” This man might have thought that he could satisfy the requirements of being Jesus’ disciple. He was a hard working man. He had no problem spending many sleepless nights taking care of others. He was more practical and active than the teacher of the law. But he did not know the cost of following Jesus. How did Jesus reply? Look at verse 22. “***But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead***.” Attending a funeral ceremony of parents is one of the most important human occasions for children. This man might have bragged about his strong family ties and his loyalty to his parents. He was a moralist. But Jesus challenged him to follow him as his first priority. Here the dead are those who are spiritually dead, and their own dead are those who physically dead. In Luke’s gospel Jesus added, *“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God*.” (Lk 9:60) Jesus did not mean that we should not attend the funeral ceremony of our parents. He meant that we must seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness. He meant that even the closest family ties must not be set above commitment to Jesus and the proclamation of the kingdom. (D A Carson: Expositor’s Bible Commentary)

We often have to make decisions between God’s work and human affairs. We have to make choices between pleasing God and pleasing people. Following Jesus, being disciples of Jesus, is costly. It sometimes demands our commitment and sacrifice, even at family gatherings or in social meetings. If we go wherever we desire and do whatever we want, we cannot follow Jesus. Jesus said to Peter, his top disciple, in John 21:18, “*Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go*.” Jesus said to those who want to follow him, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*.” (Mk 6:34, Mt 16:24, Lk 9:23) Being Jesus’ disciples is difficult, like entering through a narrow gate. Few want to follow Jesus. But Jesus said, *“But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*. (7:14) Following Jesus is costly, but worthy and truly blessed.

Second, you of little faith, why are you so afraid (23-27) This event teaches us Jesus’ authority over nature. Jesus and his disciples got into the boat to cross the other side of the lake. (23) ***Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat.*** (24a) Sudden storms frequently occur on the lake. The surface of this lake is more than six hundred feet below sea level, and the rapidly rising hot air draws from the south-eastern plateaus violent winds whose cold air churns up the water. A storm on the lake was unpredictable, like a tornado. The waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. What was Jesus doing at that time? ***Jesus was sleeping*** (24b). Mark’s gospel says that Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. (Mk 4:38) Jesus was in perfect peace in the middle of a perfect storm.

Look at verse 25. “***The disciples went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!***” Among Jesus’ disciples there were veteran fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They did their best to control the boat, but they failed because the storm was huge. They were gripped with fear, the fear of death. They hurriedly woke up Jesus for help. Here we learn that we as disciples of Jesus may meet unexpected storms like others do. Following Jesus, we are not exempted from storms. How nice it would be if our life with Jesus is always like smooth sailing on the sea with a gentle breeze! But we also meet storms, sometimes a perfect storm. Someone may lose a job or health. Others may fail in their school study. Still others may suffer from sudden broken relationships with others, and so on. Storms often are out of our control. First, we struggle to overcome out of our strength, but soon give up because the storm is too big to handle by ourselves. Jesus’ disciples reached their limitations. The fear of death overwhelmed their heart and soul. Then they remembered Jesus. They had forgotten that Jesus was with them. Sometimes we forget the presence of Jesus during our storms. We often choose to come to Jesus as the last option. After struggling with all of our strength and giving up, we then come to Jesus as the last choice. Jesus’ disciples did their best, failed, and came to Jesus.

How did Jesus reply? Jesus didn’t apologize to them, saying, “O, I am sorry that I forgot you, guys.” or “Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?” Rather, he rebuked their lack of faith. Look at verse 26. “***He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm***.” Jesus rebuked his disciples and then the storm. The words “You of little faith” is ‘*oligopistoi’* in Greek. It appears five times in the New Testament, always with reference to Jesus’ disciples. (Mt 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, Lk 12:28) Here Jesus didn’t rebuke his disciples because they were not able to overcome the storm. Rather Jesus rebuked them because they did not believe in Jesus as the Son of God, who has authority over nature. Jesus did not rebuke their lack of faith in their ability, but lack of faith in Jesus, who is God the Almighty. They had witnessed Jesus’ messianic power and authority. Jesus healed the leper and raised the ill servant of the centurion. Jesus drove out evil spirits and healed all the sick. Who can heal all the incurable diseases and drive out evil spirits but God alone? The disciples must have believed that Jesus is the Son of God, who is able to move mountains, calm storms, and perform miracles in all impossible situations. But they were powerless and helpless before this storm. They did not come to Jesus as their first choice. They did not turn their eyes on Jesus but on the storm. Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith.

Dr. Samuel Lee often said, “Unbelief is disaster.” He meant that lack of faith causes all problems. We often meet storms, whether they are big or small. We often are tempted to give up everything and to jump into the Sea of Galilee and die. But we must wake up Jesus and listen to his rebuke. “*Oligopistoi*” “*You of little faith, why are you so afraid?”* We must believe that Jesus calms our storm. We must believe that Jesus has power and authority to control the storm and rescue us from the storm. Amen! There is no failure and despair in Jesus Christ. Our prayer is not denied, but delayed. While Jesus is with us in our boat, we will be okay. Jesus will take care of us until we reach our final destination, which is the kingdom of heaven. Amen!

Jesus said in Mark 11:22, “*Have faith in God.*” He also said in John 6:29, “*The work of God is this: to believe in the one (Jesus) he has sent.*” Missionary Dr. Isaiah Lim met a big storm in the midst of his PhD study. It was so huge that he couldn’t control it by himself. At that time he humbly came to Jesus and woke him up through his persistent prayer. Jesus, his Lord and Savior, calmed the storm and Dr. Lim now safely reached the harbor. Through storm trainings God increases our faith in Jesus Christ that he is the Son of God who has authority and power to save us from our sins. Jesus is the Son of God who came to be with us as the Immanuel God. Jesus is the Promised Messiah who came to take our infirmities and bear our diseases. When we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are saved from sin and death and in all kinds of storms of life.

What was the disciples’ response to Jesus? Look at verse 27. “***The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him***!” The disciples were amazed by the power and authority of Jesus over nature. Still they did not realize that Jesus is the Son of God.

Third, Jesus restores two demon-possessed men (28-34) Jesus’ journey with his disciples continued. When they arrived at the other side of the lake, which is in the region of the Gadarenes, there were some who welcomed them. Who were they? They were two demon-possessed men who were coming from the tombs. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. They shouted when they met Jesus, “***What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time***?” (29) They were beside themselves because they were possessed by demons. The other synoptic gospels say that they were possessed by 6,000 demons. It is unbearable for us to bear even one demon, but they were tortured by 6,000 demons. It is surprising that they recognized Jesus as the Son of God while his disciples did not. The demons knew that Jesus has authority and power to throw them into hell on the last day. They began to bargain with Jesus for their punishment. They saw that a large herd of pigs was feeding nearby and they begged Jesus to let them enter into the pigs. (31) Look at verse 32. “***He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.***” There was a mass suicide of pigs. Mark and Luke’s gospel counts the number of pigs as 2,000. Jesus sacrificed 2,000 pigs for two lost souls. If we count the price of 2,000 pigs in US currency, it is more than a few million dollars. Jesus didn’t mind sacrificing 2,000 pigs for the sake of two souls. Jesus’ exorcising two men teaches us in what we have to put our real value. We must put our value in saving lives. Jesus said, “*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*” (Mk 8:38) Jesus values one soul more than the whole world. Someone may think that he or she is worthless in this world. They think that their life on this earth is meaningless. But God who gave them life does not think so. To the eyes of God our heavenly Father, we are more precious and important than the whole world. Each of us is a very good and important existence to God no matter what people may say about us or no matter what difficult situation we may be in. God says, “You are my son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus’ sacrificing 2,000 pigs for two men was also his challenge against materialism. Look at verses 33,34. “***Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.***” When the townspeople heard and met Jesus, they should have been thankful to Jesus, not only for healing the troublemakers but also for granting hope for healing to all the townspeople including themselves. They should have received Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But they pleaded with Jesus to leave their town because of fear of further financial loss. They valued 2,000 pigs more than two sick men. They didn’t really care about the healing grace of Jesus, but for their pig industry. Jesus challenges this materialistic society by sacrificing 2,000 pigs for the sake of two souls.

In this event Jesus also teaches us that he is the ruler of spiritual world. He rebukes demons and cast them out. He has authority and power over evil spirits. He is the ruler not only over only nature, but also spiritual world. When we encounter evil spirits, we must rebuke them in the name of Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus Christ has power to cleanse us from all our sins. (1Jn 1:7) The name of Jesus Christ has authority to drive out all evil spirits from us. To the eyes of Jesus one lost soul is more precious and important than the whole world. Jesus gave his disciples authority and power to drive out demons in his name. (Mt 10:1, Mk 6:7, 13, 16:17, Lk 9:1) We can drive out demons in the name of Jesus with the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that God may drive out evil spirits of materialism, hedonism, and relativism from this country in the name of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Following Jesus Christ is costly. It is sometimes uncomfortable, inconvenient, unrealistic, inhuman, demanding, sacrificial, lonesome, and so on. It is not also exempted from storms of life. But following Jesus Christ is the most valuable, precious, and meaningful life because we follow the way Jesus went ahead of us, and participate in the work of saving souls in this world. May God bless our life with Jesus and in Jesus even in the midst of storms of life! Amen.