

# I AM... the transforming promises of our Savior

I AM...so do not be afraid

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Text: John 6:16-21

Theme: A journey of faith transformation begins with facing our fears and trusting in Christ to be with us in the storms of life.

The story goes that there was this very young bride who was very nervous and frightened on her wedding day so she went to talk with her pastor. "I am afraid I might not make it through the ceremony properly," she confessed.

The pastor assured her that everything would be fine and then said, "When you enter the church tomorrow and the processional begins, you will be walking down the aisle you've walked down many times before. Concentrate on the aisle. When you get halfway down the aisle, you'll see the altar, where you and your family have worshiped for many years. Concentrate on the altar. Then when you are almost to the altar, you will see your groom, the one you love and want to spend the rest of your life with. Concentrate on him."

These seemed like just the calming words the young bride needed to hear and she was relieved and went home to prepare for the big day. The next day she walked down the aisle with her chin up and her smile radiant. She was a beautiful, confident bride. But those who were sitting in aisle seats were surprised to hear her as she walked by muttering, "Aisle, Altar, Him, Aisle, Altar, Him, Aisle, Altar, Him."

This morning I will be talking about words and statements that can take away our greatest fear. Will you pray with me...

This morning we will begin a new sermon series that takes us through the season of Lent and to the Sunday beyond. It is entitled "I AM... the transforming promises of our Savior." We just finished a tremendous series entitled "If God Exists..." and I thought it would be very appropriate to begin a new series with the bold statement of existence "I AM." The gospel of John contains a series of "I am statements" that are found nowhere else in the Gospels. I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the gate, I am the resurrection, I am the way, the truth, and the life, I am the vine, and I am the Alpha and the Omega. These powerful and colorful statements of Christ are metaphors as well as promises. They open our eyes to seeing Christ in new ways but they also contain promises that will deepen our faith and relationship in and with our Savior.

These statements link the Lord of the New Testament with Yahweh of the Old Testament. Do you remember the story of Moses and the burning bush? When Moses is about to leave with his commission to lead the Israelites out of slavery he asks God for his name. God announces, "I am who I am." The name is filled with life, vitality, and movement. It is a statement of companionship – as in I am with you. It is a statement of power and confidence. I am who I am – almost reminds me of Popeye after eating a can of spinach. It is a statement of self disclosure and self knowledge. So Jesus builds upon the foundation laid by his Father and reveals himself through this series of "I AM statements."

Moments ago I read you the list of the classic "I am statements" but to start this series I am adding one that is normally overlooked by scholars because it is obscured in the translation from Greek to modern English. In the story that was just read the disciples are in a boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee and they are terrified as they see a ghost walking by. The typical translation of Jesus' calming words is

“It is I; do not be afraid.” But the proper translation is “I AM; do not be afraid.” I resonate with the latter translation because of the power generated by those two words.

So we will start our Lenten series with this passage and we will look at our fears and doubts and how we need to turn them over to the confident “I AM” who comes to us in the storms of life. I would ask that you get out your handouts and follow along because I am going to bring up three points about fear, trust, and faith that might help you in your spiritual journeys.

The first point I would like to make is that when our faith spends most of its time in dry dock then it often falls apart in the storms of open water. Put yourself in the sandals of one of Jesus’ disciples and hear today’s story again. You have only been with the Lord for a short time and you are still trying to understand the strange things he keeps saying and the amazing things he keeps doing. He has turned water into wine, which you certainly didn’t see coming. He has healed all sorts of illnesses and you have witnessed blind men regain their vision and deaf women regain their hearing. Just a few hours ago you watched him transform a few fish and loaves of bread into a meal large enough to feed five thousand men and all of their families. You watched as the crowds surrounded Jesus and wanted to make him king and you knew that you had hitched your wagon to the right leader.

So far there have been no obstacles. So far the hardest thing you have had to do is put up with the other disciples who smell like fish. On the evening in which you thought you would be alone with Jesus he sends you away by boat across the northern most part of the Sea of Galilee. It is dark and a storm blows in churning up the water and making it impossible to move forward. You can feel the fear of the others and panic fills the boat along with water. Then you look out across the waves and there is a person walking. With your limited faith and your panic stricken heart you scream out in terror.

How many times does this happen in our lives? Our faith is fine and we are comfortable as long as we don’t have to leave the dock for deep waters. Our faith is just fine as we sit in the pews and sing hymns and praise songs and we don’t have to journey to the rough waters outside these walls. We know, don’t we, that the moment we leave the safety of the dock, the moment we set out for deep waters, there will be a storm. We know, don’t we, that we are worried that we will respond just like the disciples and we will panic. We will cower when we are tested or we will fail to recognize the Lord walking with us. And so we keep our faith in dry dock so that it won’t get wet.

Many a great believer has been in the same spot as those disciples of old. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, was caught in a storm at sea and the experience changed his life forever. The story goes that he was traveling back from the colony of Georgia and crossing the Atlantic Ocean by ship. His time in the colony was a complete disaster and he was questioning his faith. As luck would have it, a terrible storm struck the ship, tossing it about like it was a toy in a bathtub. Wesley panicked. He clung to his bunk and hid below deck. As he shook in terror a community of Moravians, who were traveling back to their homeland, calmly gathered to worship and praise God. He watched them sing and praise God unfazed by the howling winds and crashing waves and he could not believe their fearless and waterproof faith.

How do you grow in faith? You have to first take it out of dry dock where you can experience the storms of life.

The second point that I wanted to raise is that if we are going to have a waterproof faith, like that of the Moravians, we need to put our absolute trust in Jesus Christ. Have you ever witnessed people faith who are surrounded by adversity and yet they seem calm? Have you ever been around those who were filled with terror? The difference is like night and day.

Fear destroys trust. Fear reveals the shallowness of our faith. Fear consumes us and blinds us so that we cannot see Jesus walking with us even in the toughest challenges and the darkest times. Have you ever been paralyzed in fear? I have. I remember a time when I was shooting an assignment for one of the newspapers that I worked for and it was on iron workers. You know the men and women who put those steel beams in place several stories in the air. So I got permission to go up and join them and I was given my guide. He was a tough, leathery skinned, man with a one-inch cigar permanently attached to his lower lip. "There is only one rule in iron walking," he said gruffly. "Never look down."

At that time in my young life I was a man with more self confidence than good common sense and I was confident I could remember and obey that one simple rule. So up we went. I followed him across some beams that were 12 inches wide and then a couple more that were 10 inches wide and I was doing great. About 10 stories up he went scooting across an 8 inch beam that was about 60 feet long like he was a Russian gymnast on his way to claim a gold medal. I was right behind him until I got to the middle and I disobeyed the one rule – never look down. I froze in fear. Every joint in my body was in full rebellion and would not move. I was rigid – but somehow, somehow I was moving. At first I thought it was my knees knocking, but they were too frightened to move. Then I thought it was my mind playing tricks on me, but it was too scared to even develop a clear thought. It was then I realized that it wasn't me that was moving it was the beam.

This beam that takes cranes to lift, this beam that seemed so solid on the ground, this beam that looked so safe began to sway and dance with me in the middle. The width of eight inches shrunk to eight centimeters. The 30 remaining feet grew to 30 miles. If my toes could have broken free of my shoes they would have curled around the beam and I would have clung like a small bird unwilling to fly.

"Don't look down!!!" cried my guide with the cigar still hanging firmly on his lip.

"Too late," I shouted back, "what's rule number two?"

"Look at me," he shouted, "look at me!"

That is exactly what I did for the eternity that it took to cross that beam. I looked at one-inch cigar and kept telling myself if it doesn't fall then I won't fall. I never looked down, and my feet somehow kept moving. When I finally made it to the safety of the 12" beam a cheer went up. My guide slapped me on the back and said, "Welcome to the world of the ironworker. Wasn't that a kick?"

Even when I was paralyzed in fear I could move because I placed my trust in my guide – and in his cigar. Isn't that what happened in the story in that boat. Once the disciples overcame their fear and fixed their eyes on Jesus, once they recognized him and placed their trust in him, their journey ended safely.

Finally there is one other lesson that we can glean from this story. Jesus doesn't promise to calm every storm in our lives, but he does promise to calm US in every storm. The reason I like John's version of this story more than the others is that Jesus doesn't rescue the disciples by calming the waters. Instead he companions them and calms them so they can get through the storm together safely. If you read the story carefully you notice that all he said was "I AM, do not be afraid," and it transformed the disciples. The storm still hit them with full force. The storm was still a threat to their lives. But now they could set their eyes on Jesus and move through their fear to the safety of the shore ahead.

Too often we Christians want God or Christ to rescue us from the storms of life. Too often we pray for the storms to be diverted to someone or somewhere else. But that is not a proper prayer. The storms of life shape us and grow our faith. The storms of life help us to face our fears and build our trust. If we are going to be Christ's disciples in this sinful and imperfect world then we are going to always experience threatening storms.

I believe that Jesus did not promise his disciples smooth sailing wherever they went. We know the story better than that. He promised that if you live out the Kingdom of God ethic you will be persecuted, misunderstood, and mistreated. But he also promised that he would be with us in our journey so that we would not have to face the storms alone. The peace comes not from the waters around the boat but from the passenger named "I AM" inside the boat.

Let me ask you this morning about your spiritual journeys right now. Where are the storm clouds mounting in your life? Where are the waves of uncertainty crashing down upon you? Where are the winds of change blowing so hard that they threaten to flip your life upside down and inside out?

Wherever you may be right now in your life and whatever storm may be blowing hear the good news spoken by the one who risked everything to show us his love. I AM; DO NOT BE AFRAID.