

Scripture: Matthew 14:22–27

Title: “It Is I; Do Not Be Afraid” / translated by Ji-yun Kang

1. The Sign of the Five Loaves and Two Fish

Last Thursday and Friday, I attended the Global Leadership Summit held at Autumn Ridge Church. One of the first speakers said that if you want to become a person who is likable, you first need to genuinely like a lot of people yourself. So, before we begin today’s sermon, why don’t we look each other in the eyes, give each other a high five, and greet one another by saying, “I like you”? It really is a wonderful thing to know that there are people who like you. Jesus, too, was once so popular that He had what we might call His own “fan club.” In fact, today’s story takes place immediately after the miracle of the five loaves and two fish. I think the feeding of the five thousand may have been one of the signs that made Jesus most popular. Throughout history and across cultures, people have been eager to make anyone who could solve the problem of putting bread on the table into a king. A representative example of such an experiment is communism. Communism was an experiment based on the idea that people would even tolerate dictatorship and restrictions on freedom as long as their basic material needs—especially food—were taken care of. Even within the church, the person who takes care of food can have considerable authority. In Korean churches, there is even an expression called “kitchen power.” Eating together on Sunday is a major part of church life. As a result, the women who oversee the church kitchen often have tremendous influence, which is why the expression “kitchen power” came about. There was also a church I once served that had a small room deep inside the kitchen. Whenever I went there, I was treated to all kinds of delicious food, and the room was warm and cozy. I remember thinking, “There couldn’t be a better hideout than this!” Since Jesus had fed five thousand men, the people simply could not help but follow Him. John 6:15 describes what happened after the feeding of the five thousand this way: “Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, so he withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” The fact that they wanted to make Jesus king meant that they wanted to make Him the leader of a revolution against the Roman Empire and the rule of Herod. After all, Jesus appeared to be solving the very problem of bread that the Roman Empire and Herod’s regime had failed to solve. In order to calm down this growing excitement, Jesus withdrew to the mountain. At this moment, the people who were most excited were Jesus’ disciples. Because of their Teacher, they were walking around with their head held high. The wave of enthusiasm rising from the crowd was also causing their hearts to dance with excitement. But Jesus sensed the danger hidden beneath this wave of popular enthusiasm. He recognized the political plot taking shape and withdrew from it.

2. What Does It Mean to Eat and Drink Bread and Fish?

What was the deeper meaning of the sign of the five loaves and two fish? Why did Jesus perform this miracle? He did it to teach the truth that we must eat and drink Jesus in order to receive eternal life. The feeding of the five thousand also showed that faith and obedience are the driving forces behind following Jesus. What I have may be nothing more than a few small fish and pieces of bread, but when I offer what I have in obedience, something extraordinary can happen. The feeding of the five thousand was a sign showing that obedience is the energy that empowers those who follow Jesus. Why did the early Christians repeatedly practice the liturgy of eating and

drinking Jesus through the Lord's Supper whenever they gathered? To eat and drink Jesus means, "I will live the life of Jesus myself." Just as Jesus gave His body and blood for others, eating and drinking Jesus means that I, too, will imitate Him by living a life in which I offer my own life as a gift to others. The feeding of the five thousand was not simply a sign that Jesus could solve the problem of hunger. It was a sign revealing that Jesus Himself is the Bread of Life, the One who can give eternal life. Christianity that "eats and drinks Jesus" is Christianity filled with the spirit of Jesus. It means aiming for Christianity filled with Jesus' obedience and action—a faith that actually puts His teachings into practice. But the people were not interested in the meaning of the sign. They were excited about the sign itself. A Christianity that merely eats the crumbs of the sign is not much different from a false religion that makes Jesus its king simply in order to satisfy its own desires. Those who try to make Jesus their king without obedience and action are, in effect, worshiping Jesus as an idol. The more we obey, the more energy we receive. But there was no room in the disciples' hearts for this profound truth to take root. They were completely preoccupied with figuring out how to make Jesus king so that they could bask in His glory and enjoy the benefits of being associated with Him. Jesus needed to cool down this overheated excitement. And so He prepared the next "station" in their biblical school: the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

3. A Boat Stalled by the Storm

According to the Gospel of John, the feeding of the five thousand took place in Tiberias. Afterward, the disciples were in "going-home mode." They were getting ready to return to Capernaum, their home base. The Bible tells us that Jesus was on the mountain as evening approached. The disciples, meanwhile, intended to take a kind of water taxi across the sea and return to Capernaum. If Tiberias were at the 9 o'clock position on a clock face, Capernaum would be at about the 12 o'clock position. It was a distance of roughly ten miles, and if there were no wind, it was a relatively short crossing that could be completed in about an hour. The Gospel of John describes the disciples as waiting for Jesus to get into the boat with them. They wanted Jesus to join them in a victory parade. But when Jesus did not come, the disciples' boat departed at around 6 p.m. Since Jesus came to them at around 4 a.m., the disciples had been struggling on the sea for about ten hours. Their original plan called for a journey of only one hour, but after ten hours, they had traveled only about three or four miles. The Sea of Galilee can develop large waves when strong winds come down from Mount Hermon to the north or through the Jordan Valley to the west. The disciples were trying to reach Capernaum, which was to the northeast of their current location, but the northeastern winds coming down from the direction of Mount Hermon and the Jordan Valley were working against them. When I was a child, there was a small fishing boat on a reservoir, and I would sometimes go out in it with a few friends, rowing the boat ourselves. One day, a sudden downpour caused the water level to rise, and the boat began to rock violently. It was nothing compared with what the disciples were experiencing, but even then, I felt that my life was in danger. When I was in high school, I once took a ferry from Mokpo to Jeju Island for a school trip. Suddenly, a typhoon struck, and we had no choice but to stay on Jeju Island for an extra night. That experience made me realize that even a huge ship is powerless in the face of strong winds. This is how frightening the sea can be. But the disciples were about to see something even more frightening.

4. The Nature of Fear

After ten hours of struggling in the middle of the sea, the disciples were completely exhausted. The fear of death was closing in on them. In other words, the place where the disciples found themselves was a place of death. They were stranded in the very midst of death, overwhelmed by fear. What is death? Death is becoming as though I no longer exist. To be treated as though I have no existence at all—that is death. The fear of illness, the fear of suddenly losing your job, the fear that a relationship will not work out and that you may never get married—these are all symptoms of a deeper fear of death. As dawn approached, someone came walking across the water toward the boat carrying the disciples, who were trembling with the fear of death. The disciples had no choice but to think that he was a ghost. It was like a scene straight out of a Korean supernatural folklore show. Since human beings cannot walk on water, the disciples could only interpret what they were seeing as a ghost. The fear of death was now overwhelming them with an even stronger rhythm and a faster tempo. And Jesus came walking right into the middle of their place of death. To those who were trembling with fear, He spoke gently: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Jesus came to them right in the middle of their place of death, right in the middle of their place of fear. We need to carefully discern and analyze the fears we experience. There are different kinds of fear.

The first kind of fear is the fear experienced by human beings as creatures.

As human beings, we become afraid when we encounter our limitations. Superman does not become afraid even when standing on the edge of a high cliff. But every human being is finite, and therefore we cannot help but be afraid when powerful winds and waves come crashing down on us in the middle of the sea. This is simply the limitation of being a creature.

The second kind of fear is fear that comes from sin.

After Adam sinned, he became afraid. Cain killed his brother and then fled, afraid that other people might hurt him. For criminals, even the bright sunlight can become an object of fear because they are afraid that they might be exposed or discovered. Sin produces fear.

The third kind of fear is fear that God intentionally designs.

This is fear that God allows or intends in order to draw us into a deeper and stronger bond with Him. When we become overly excited and carried away, God sometimes sends fear to cool us down. That is what happened with the disciples. The storm served to calm down the excitement they had experienced after the miracle of the five loaves and two fish. God also used the fear to take their eyes off the storm and the wind they had been focusing on and to turn their attention toward the Lord alone. The moment the disciples mistook Jesus, who was approaching them, for a ghost, the storm was no longer the thing occupying their attention. A smaller fear had been overwhelmed by a greater fear. When we begin chasing after signs and trying to worship Jesus as an idol in order to obtain the signs we desire, Jesus may sometimes send fear into our lives. But there is an end to the fear that Jesus intentionally designs and allows. Why? Because once that fear has fulfilled its purpose, Jesus can bring it to an end. The fear the disciples were facing was a fear Jesus had allowed in order to restore their spiritual sensitivity. Once its educational purpose had been fulfilled, that fear would come to an end.

5. Spiritual Sensitivity

Some of you may be in a situation where you have been rowing with all your strength for ten hours, yet you are making no progress. Perhaps there is someone who has been rowing all night but still has not reached the harbor of your hopes. In other words, things simply are not working out. Everything seems to keep getting tangled and more complicated. When this happens, we need to stop and quietly ask ourselves: **Could it be that God has allowed this situation?** Of course, if this situation has come about because of my own mistakes or wrong choices, then I should not simply assume that God caused it or allowed it. We need to discern carefully. On the other hand, when everything is going well, our spiritual sensitivity can easily become dull. When life feels as though we are walking in place, when we feel stuck and unable to move forward, that can actually be the moment when our spiritual sensitivity comes alive. Have you recently experienced a miracle or a sign in your life? If so, that may be precisely the time when you need spiritual sensitivity the most. If we become so captivated by the taste of the miracle that we begin trying to use Jesus for our own purposes, we may be in for a rude awakening. We need to follow Jesus, rather than chasing after the signs that Jesus gives us. Last week, I experienced a great miracle. For several years, my family and I had been praying to the Lord for a second car. Since we were not in a financial position to purchase one, praying to the Lord was really the only option we had. While preaching through the Book of James, I was challenged even more deeply by these words: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” —James 1:17 If this verse is true, then God is a Father who delights in giving us good and perfect gifts. I wanted to test and see whether this promise would actually unfold in our lives. Last week, an acquaintance who supports missions told us that they wanted to give us a car as a gift. It was truly like a gift falling straight out of heaven. It felt as though God was saying to me: “Didn’t I tell you that I give good and perfect gifts? Isn’t today the exact day you have completed four full years since coming to Minnesota? This is My gift to you because you have trusted Me and followed Me faithfully all this time.” I deeply realized that God is truly a good Father, and that He never disappoints those who trust and follow Him. I was also deeply grateful to the person who obeyed God’s prompting. As we shared last week, the world we live in is a fiercely competitive, performance-driven, and consumer society, yet some people create miracles by resisting this narrative of desire. The stories of the Lord’s miracles continue to build up through those who follow obedience rather than signs. At the same time, when things go well, I reflect on whether my focus on God is becoming blurred. For I must not become so distracted by the gift that I miss the obedience of the giver and the Lord who stands behind it all.

6. What If the Lord Gets into the Boat of Your Life?

Is Jesus in the boat of your life? Jesus was not in the disciples’ boat. But as soon as Jesus got into their boat, the storm became calm. The Lord needs to get into the boat of our lives. He needs to get into the boat of our workplace and the boat of our family. Nothing else in this world can produce the same effect as having Jesus in our boat. Perhaps the reason there has been no progress along the course of our lives is that Jesus is not in our boat. But if even this lack of progress is something Jesus has intentionally designed and allowed, then this fear will certainly have an end. Even without the story of Peter walking on water, this story could have come to a beautiful conclusion. That is how the Gospel of John concludes the story—it leaves Peter’s experience out. But Matthew wants to tell us the additional story of Peter walking on water. It

seems that Matthew wants to show us that Peter was able to walk on the water when his focus was fixed on Jesus, but when his focus shifted to the storm, he began to sink. Matthew wants his readers to see the clear difference between having the Lord's help and trying to move forward without it. At the leadership summit I attended, one of the speakers said something that stayed with me: **"We want certainty first. God wants trust."** We tend to want everything to be certain before we are willing to take the first step. But God wants us to take steps of faith even in the midst of uncertainty. For those of you who are frustrated because your life seems to be making no progress, and whose hearts have been battered and bruised by all kinds of trials and storms, today's message gives a powerful challenge. **Is Jesus in the boat of your life? What are you afraid of? Do you believe that Jesus will take responsibility for your life and lead you?** When the Lord tells you to take a step even in the midst of uncertainty, are you willing to obey? In the midst of the storm, our spiritual sensitivity needs to become even sharper. We need to fix our eyes completely on the Lord. Psalm 46 sings to us when we are trembling in fear before the great storms of life: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging." Even in the midst of a storm, if the Lord has come aboard the boat of our lives, we have nothing to fear. Verse 5 says: "God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day." Hold on to these words and seek the Lord at dawn. Give God the very first moments of your day, the time when your day is just beginning. If you do not know how to pray, take the daily Scripture reading from the lectionary—or the daily Bible reading that accompanies it—and simply read and pray through the passage. God will surely help those who earnestly seek Him. From time to time, powerful winds and great storms come crashing into our lives. I once heard an American mountaineer who had reached the summit of Mount Everest say: **"Storms are always temporary. We cannot control the environment. We can control our reaction."** Storms may come at any time and from any direction, but we can decide how we will respond in the midst of the storm. Some of the winds and waves we encounter may even be things Jesus has intentionally allowed. But Jesus will break through those storms and waves and come aboard our boat. That heart that desperately and earnestly seeks Jesus—that heart that longs for Him—is exactly the heart the Lord desires from us. That is spiritual sensitivity. Holding more firmly to the Lord with spiritual sensitivity is precisely the response that believers are called to have in the midst of the waves of fear that Jesus has designed and allowed for us. My earnest prayer is that each of you will continue to accumulate stories of testimony—stories of overcoming the waves of fear and the winds of fear—and that one day you will look back and see how faithfully the Lord has carried you through every storm.