

Sermon Note: Believe

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This is the final Sunday of *Our Baptismal Vows*, our summer series on the promises of the United Methodist baptismal covenant. We've renounced the powers that diminish us, accepted the freedom God gives us to resist evil and injustice, confessed Jesus Christ as Savior, and promised to nurture one another in faith. The fifth and final promise is the profession of faith itself, the central words of the Apostles' Creed: to believe in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This week's texts come from Paul's letter to the church in Rome and Matthew's account of Jesus walking on the water. Paul explores what authentic faith requires, and Matthew tells a story about a disciple who tests it.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqGWI0WTj24>

In this clip from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), Indy faces three trials guarding the Holy Grail.

Why This Video?

Indiana Jones has to pass three trials to reach his goal. The first asks for humility: kneel, or go no further. The second asks for exact attention: spell the sacred name, one letter at a time. By the third trial, there's nothing left to perform or get right. There is simply an impossible gap with no way across, and the only instruction anyone gives him is to believe. He steps out in an act of faith, trusting that he won't fall.

Video Discussion Questions

1. The first trial's solution is to kneel: "the penitent man is humble, kneels before God." What do you notice about this trial, whose only demand is humility? Has humility ever been difficult for you? If so, what made it difficult?
2. The trial begins with a warning: only "a penitent man" will survive what's ahead. What's it like to face a warning like that before you know what's coming?
3. The second trial is all about details: the old spelling of the sacred name. Why do you think this trial tests careful attention rather than physical skill?
4. Indy spells out the sacred name in its old form, one letter at a time, starting with I instead of J. What do you think it takes to remember something precise when the stakes are life or death?
5. The third trial doesn't even look like a trial. Indy stares across a gap with no visible way over and says, "It's impossible. Nobody can jump this." What do you think goes through someone's mind in the moment right before deciding whether or not to try something that seems impossible?
6. Indy steps into the gap with no proof and no plan. Several rooms away, his father lies dying and whispers, "It's a leap of faith... you must believe," but Indy can't hear him. What do you think about someone stepping into the unknown with no reassurance at all, not even a voice telling them it will be okay? Have you done something similar before? What happened?
7. These three trials have three different requirements: humility, attention, and belief without evidence. Which of those three would be hardest for you personally? Why?

Romans 10:5-15 (NRSVue)

⁵Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say?

“The word is near you,
in your mouth and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim), ⁹because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation. ¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Matthew 14:22-33 (CEB)

²²Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. ²³When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. ²⁴Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. ²⁵Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. ²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, “It’s a ghost!” They were so frightened they screamed.

²⁷Just then Jesus spoke to them, “Be encouraged! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸Peter replied, “Lord, if it’s you, order me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹And Jesus said, “Come.”

Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, “Lord, rescue me!”

³¹Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, “You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind settled down.

³³Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, “You must be God’s Son!”

Scripture Study Questions

1. Paul writes that the righteousness of faith doesn't ask us to climb to heaven or descend to the depths to find Christ, because the word is already near, in our mouths and in our hearts. Where have you looked for God in some far off or complicated place, only to realize God was already nearby?
2. Paul pairs confessing with the mouth and believing in the heart, both leading toward salvation. What changes when a belief moves from your heart into your words? Which comes easier for you: believing something, or confessing it out loud?
3. "No one who believes in him will be put to shame," Paul writes, "for there is no distinction... the same Lord is Lord of all." Who is it easy to exclude, deliberately or out of habit, from that promise?
4. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved," Paul insists, right after asking how anyone can believe without hearing, or hear without someone proclaiming. Who first proclaimed this good news to you? Who might be waiting to hear it from you?
5. Peter is the one disciple who asks to get out of the boat, and Jesus simply says, "Come." What do you think it takes to leave safety before you know if you'll sink?
6. Peter is fine walking toward Jesus until he notices the wind, and then he starts to sink. When has your attention shifted like that, from what you trust toward what frightens you?
7. Even as Peter sinks, he calls for Jesus, not the boat: "Lord, rescue me!" Jesus reaches out immediately, before saying a word about his doubt. Where in your life do you need that kind of rescue?
8. Back in the boat, the wind settles and the others worship, saying, "You must be God's Son." What do you think it takes for a boat full of frightened, doubting people to end up worshiping? Where have you seen fear turn to faith like that?

Weekly Action

This week, take a few minutes to remember your own baptism, or if you've never been baptized, to consider what it means that God claims you before you do anything to earn it. Look back over the five promises we've traced this series: renouncing, accepting, confessing, nurturing, believing. Where have you kept one of these vows this summer? Where, like Peter, have you stepped out in faith and still felt yourself sinking? Bring what you notice into worship this Sunday, when we'll reaffirm our baptismal covenant together as a congregation. Consider asking a family member or trusted spiritual partner to join you and reaffirm the covenant alongside you.

Prayer

Faithful God, you call us out of the boat and onto water we cannot trust on our own. When we step out in faith and still start to sink, reach for us the way you reached for Peter, before we even finish our prayer. Steady the hands we hold out to you. Give us the courage to believe when the evidence runs out, and the honesty to admit when it does. As we come to this table of promises again, renew what was spoken over us in our baptism, and hold us close to you and to each other. Amen.

This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. In this case, AI assisted with initial drafting and iterative refinement. All final text was reviewed and approved by Rev. Rhodes.