

Little Faith  
Jessica Tate  
13 August 2023  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

### **Matthew 14:22-33**

The scripture today comes right after the story Meghan preached on last week: The miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The disciples have just gotten the leftover fish and bread put away when we launch into this next story. Listen for God's word to you today.

22Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."  
28Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."  
29[Jesus] said, "Come."

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.  
30But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him,  
saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is the story of God for the people of God.

**Thanks be to God.**

Stay in the boat or try to walk on the water?  
What would you do?

Stay in the boat or try to walk on the water?

92% of the disciples stay in the boat.<sup>1</sup>

All night long they've been battered by wind that's pushed them far from shore. I need to tell you our English translation doesn't do the storm justice. The Greek word we translate as "battered" literally means torture, torment, or harassment. The wind being "against" them is a Greek adjective that suggests opposition or hostility.<sup>2</sup>

I've never been on a boat in a storm. But I've about worn off my arms paddling a canoe trying to beat a storm across a lake. I felt scared. I felt vulnerable. I felt small. And that was nothing close to being battered by a hostile storm.

I imagine for the disciples there was little sleep that night, with wind howling and the tumult of the relentless waves.

After a night like that they were primed to be afraid. So when a figure comes close to the boat, walking on water, it's no wonder they didn't recognize their friend. It's no wonder they cry out in fear.

And they definitely did NOT try to get out of the boat. "You do not step out of a boat in the middle of a storm. You batten down the hatches, put on your life jacket, hunker down in the belly of the boat, and pray that the waves do not get any bigger and the winds do not get any stronger."<sup>3</sup> They had enough fishermen among them to know that when there is a storm at sea, you seek what safety and shelter you can and try to keep your fear at bay long enough to hold steady until the storm passes and the winds calm.

My friend Andrew notes that most followers of Jesus don't get out of the boat in rough times. There's no shame in that. When secularization and polarization and dwindling numbers of worshippers batter the aging hull of the church, it's reasonable to seek safety, to hunker down and try not to rock the boat, praying the storm will pass.

But Andrew also notes that the world — countries, communities, people — are battered by raging storms:

- economic inequality that's become so entrenched we don't even question any more.
  - violence that never seems to end
  - extreme weather that's taking its toll on human life.
- just to name a few.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Andrew Connors for turning that into a statistic :)

<sup>2</sup> Salmon, Marilyn. Workingpreacher.net commentary on this text. 2023

<sup>3</sup> Connors, Andrew. Feasting on the Word. Pastoral reflection. WJK. p. 16.

“The safest way to avoid getting hurt,” Andrew says, “seems to be to stay in the boat. There is no shame in staying in the boat. The majority has figured this out. The safest course is to stay in the boat and pray.”<sup>4</sup>

And then here comes Jesus, walking on the water in the middle of the storm. Walking out to his friends and seeing their fear, saying what has got to be God’s most repeated phrase: Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.

“Don’t be afraid. It is I,” he says.

Again, our English translation doesn’t do the words justice here. Not only because no one goes around saying, “It is I.” But it would be incorrect to translate this as, “It’s just me,” as though Jesus had just come around a corner and spooked someone.

What Jesus says is, “*ego eimi*.” I AM.  
We’ve heard those words, that name, before, yes?

Jesus isn’t just saying, “I’m not a ghost.” He says, “I AM”.  
*Ego eimi*, I AM.

With this name — the same one the Holy One offers Moses at the burning bush — he reminds them that he is the creator and redeemer, the sovereign Lord who has made promises to the people, who is himself the way, and now walks on water in a storm.

Peter, God love him, has the hutzpah, in the presence of this Holy One, in the middle of roaring winds and this miraculous sight to say, “Lord, if it’s you, command me to come to you on the water.”

I would love to know what was in Peter’s head.  
Is this a challenge? Does Peter want proof this is Jesus?  
Is this a test? Does Peter want to know if Jesus is powerful enough to make him a superhero too?  
Maybe Peter still high on the miracle of feeding thousands and wants to see what other powers they have?

I would love to know what was in his head.

And I wonder as I pondered and puzzled over this story this week, What if what’s in Peter’s head is **hope**?

What if Peter has hope that - with God’s help - he can step out of the boat — out of the safety he knows into something much more uncertain, even impossible.

---

<sup>4</sup> Connors, p. 16.

What if he has the audacity to hope for another miracle that he gets to participate in. To experience again - just like they had with the bread and fish - that he could be and do what Jesus calls him to be and to do.

God bless Peter who steps out of the boat full of hope and faith and trust.

After just a couple steps, of course, things fall apart. His confidence falters as he remembers the wind. He remembers the wind and becomes frightened. And he begins to sink.

There is much to love about this next part of the story.

Peter cries out, "Lord, save me" and *immediately* Jesus reaches out a hand to catch him.

There is a lovely sermon to be preached about Jesus being close enough to us to reach out a hand to catch us in whatever fear we find ourselves.

There is a lovely sermon to be preached about asking for help and finding God's presence.

There is a lovely sermon to be preached about the church standing in for Jesus and catching people as they fall.

But I'm not going to preach those this morning because of what Jesus says next.

Jesus reaches out his hand, catches Peter, and says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

I've always thought Jesus was chastising Peter.

A friend of mine, Roger Gench, who recently retired as pastor from New York Avenue Presbyterian down the road, got me rethinking that.

Roger points out, "Peter DOES walk on water — albeit only a few tentative steps — and he does it in a storm." Roger reminded me that "Little faith may be a hindrance at times but a little faith can also enable one to do amazing things, like move mountains and walk on water."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe Jesus's question isn't an accusation: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt it was me?"

Maybe Jesus's question isn't a critique of Peter's hubris, "O you of little faith, why did you think YOU could walk on water?"

Maybe Jesus's question is more compassionate, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt [that you could walk on water]?"

What if Peter isn't doubting this is Jesus, but doubting the miracle he's seeing with his own eyes?

What if he's doubting the miracle that HE is walking on the water, even as he's doing it?

What if he's doubting the miracle of 5 loaves and 2 fish feed thousands,

and before that the healings that belie everything he knew to be true of the world?

What if he's doubting the miracle once he's in the middle of it because it's too far from his entrenched way of seeing and understanding and acting in the world.

---

<sup>5</sup> Roger Gench, Feasting on the Word, Theological Reflection.WJK. p. 16.

“Peter’s fear gets in the way of his faith.”<sup>6</sup> And it makes me wonder how often fear gets in the way of mine. How often fear gets in the way of yours. How often fear gets in the way of the church’s faith.

Maybe what this story is trying to teach us is that whatever the headwinds, whatever the great distance from shore, whatever the storms, whatever the legitimate fears we carry, the people of God can risk stepping out of the boat and taking a step toward Jesus. He will be right there with us. And by his power within us, we can do that which he calls us to do, even when it’s audacious and risky and frankly even foolish.

And maybe more than that, the people of God, the church, SHOULD be willing to risk our own well-being to try something foolish in the midst of a storm. And to trust that in doing so we are one step closer to our Lord and our savior and to the people he calls us to be and what he calls us to do. One step closer to the kingdom of heaven Jesus talks so much about.

Friends, there are some storms raging in the world right now. Our privilege insulates us from a lot of them. Maybe we are the 92% of the disciples hunkering down in the boat. That’s the safest course. But maybe it’s worth taking Peter’s lead and taking some risky steps out onto the water, to places we have no business going and shouldn’t even be able to do, but by the grace of God.

So I’ve got some homework for you. Between now and the time we see each other again — between now and the time we see each other again, follow Peter’s lead. Leave the safety of the boat and take a few risky steps into a storm to come to Jesus.

Maybe that means you speak up in a meeting at work for something you know is right but challenges the status quo. Or speak up for someone, who needs someone to stand with them.

Maybe that means the donation you were thinking about giving to support Remember Niger during this political coup or to disaster relief efforts in Hawaii, that donation? Double it. Quadruple it. Make it enough that it’s an amount that makes you nervous.

Maybe you reach out to someone to say you were wrong and you are sorry. Maybe you reach out to forgive someone who has wronged you.

I don’t know what a few faithful steps might be for you, but my invitation to you is to do something that gets you out of the safety of the boat, trusting that you can be the person Jesus calls you to be and do the things he calls you to do.

And if you take a first tentative step and inevitably fear rises in your gut, remember this. Jesus is right there, within reach. Say the word and he will immediately reach out a hand to steady you. For a little faith can move mountains, can feed thousands, can even walk on water.

Thanks be to God.

---

<sup>6</sup> Connors, 16.