

## Sermon 20.08.09

Matt 14: 22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

***Scripture is woven into sermon video. In the written version, it's in bold italics, referring to beginning and end of passage.***

Our gospel reading starts with the word immediately, and so before we jump in, I want to give some background...

The chapter starts with the death of John the Baptist, where we're told: 'his disciples came and took the body and buried it and then they went and told Jesus.' It goes on: 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.'

But Jesus wasn't alone for long. He's barely back on land when he's met by the crowds who came looking for him to cure their sick. After a long day, still reeling from the news of John's death, the disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the crowds, everyone is hungry and tired, but instead Jesus gathers a few loaves and fishes from his confused and reluctant

disciples and feeds the thousands of seekers. His disciples have just finished cleaning up the leftovers of that pop-up feast when our story begins.

***Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat....while he dismissed the crowds...***

Here we are, at the end of this full day, and even before he dismisses the crowd, Jesus makes his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side. Then J dismisses the crowd by himself. I wonder, what's going on here? Tuck this detail away as we continue the story.

J, all alone, finally has time to go up the mountain to pray.

***And after he dismissed the crowds..the wind was against them***

It's been a long night for the disciples too, after a day that's been filled with a mix of horror and awe. They've spent all night being battered about on the stormy sea. Imagine, they must be exhausted by now.

***And early in the morning...and they cried out in fear...***

It's night time. That time of fear. That time of not knowing what's out there.

The 1st time I ever camped alone - in state park, felt safe - mowed lawns, picnic tables and fire pits at every site. There was only 1 other camper in this part of the campground - a man who looked like he was also camping alone.

I had set up camp, pitched my tent, went for a hike, made supper - everything was cleaned up and put away, a fire going in the fire pit. A great day. I sat down near the fire with a cup of tea and a book. All was right with the world.

Then it came. Suddenly I noticed it - it snuck up on me quietly, quickly. It was dark. Really dark. Outside of the light provided by the fire and the flashlight I used for reading, I couldn't see anything. All of a sudden there were noises, my senses jumped on high alert. What's that sound in the bushes? Something's there, rustling around. This wasn't just my imagination. Something, or was it someone, was on the edge of my

campsite. What did I have to protect myself? My heart thumped. Fear seized me, gripped me with its iron fist.

Figuring it was better to know what the intruder looked like, I turned my flashlight and swept it back and forth across the bushes. The light shone on my intruders eyes, bright yellow, staring right at me. Not just one set of eyes, there were more...

Relief flooded over me and I began to laugh. A whole troupe of racoons had come to visit me in the darkness of the night. Racoons! My fear melted away.

In our story, on this dark and stormy night - The disciples are here in the boat, crossing the sea on their own, per J's instructions, struggling against the turbulent storm. And What do they see? Something that looks like a ghost... and they're terrified.

***But immediately J spoke...do not be afraid...***

Immediately, immediately this gospel tells us, J identifies himself in an effort to reassure his disciples. "Take heart, take courage, it is I, don't be afraid." They hear J's voice, they see something, not quite sure what they see, but they hear his voice telling them to take courage; that it is him that has arrived; don't be afraid.

It's out of that place of fear, that Peter sets a challenge:

***Peter answered him...Lord if it is you...command me to come to you on the water.***

Peter proposes a test to prove the would-be-ghosts identity. Who is it that lurks out there? Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.

***He said Come....Lord, save me!***

Jesus says, Come. And Peter steps boldly, maybe recklessly, out of the boat.

How long was P there, on top of the water? There, walking toward J before he realizes the scope of what's happening, before he takes in the waves crashing around him, the

dark water beneath his feet? He begins to sink. Lord, save me, he cries as the water creeps up his chest, nearing his chin, about to totally engulf him.

***Jesus immediately...they all worshipped him saying...***

So what does this story have for us today?

Often I've heard of it as a 'fear not' story, a story where P exercises bold, fearless faith, briefly doing the impossible. Debie Thomas, African American pastor and writer, offers a different perspective.<sup>1</sup> She says, really, Peter is not acting faithfully, no his fear leads him to recklessness. She goes on:

"Nowhere in the Gospels are we called to prove our faith by taking pointless risks that threaten our lives. Recklessness is not faith."

The disciples have every reason to be afraid - they are caught in a powerful storm that threatens their very lives.

Peter doesn't act out of faith. Instead, His Fear leads him to suspicion. He doesn't trust the voice he knows and hears.

not believing this familiar voice who calls to him, It is I, do not be afraid. Instead, he makes a demand. *"Lord, if it's you...command me to"*

Listen carefully. Can you hear the echoes of another famous identity test in Peter's words? The identity test Jesus faces in the wilderness, forty days after his baptism? *"If you are the Son of God...command these stones"*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1201>

*Peter says, "if it's you...command me",*

Debie Thomas suggests that what's at play here is not about human fear and whether we're called to simply step out of the boat in trust. What's at play is how we respond to God's presence when we're afraid.

How do we respond to God's presence when we're afraid?

When you find ourselves sinking beneath the waves, overwhelmed by fear and doubt, what's your response?

If you can relate to Peter, with suspicion quickly rising up within you when you're afraid - then notice what that feels like. When suspicion driven by fear overtakes me, I notice I get small, guarded, tight.

Does suspicion cause you to not listen to trusted voices in our community?

Or turn away from those who might teach us about awareness, ways we don't care for those who aren't part of our inner circle of friends and family?

When our faith is shaken, do we test God -

If it's you, really you, God, then make this happen...?

When Peter is no longer sinking, but holding onto J - J's question to P: Why did you doubt? might really be: why did you doubt *me*? Why did you let suspicion drive you instead of hearing my voice and allowing my presence to steady your boat?

This story isn't so much about Peter, it's about J's response to those who don't understand him, don't trust him.

This story shows us again and again how J moves towards those who are filled with fear, flailing in the water, sinking.

J moves towards the disciples -

The good news is that regardless of where we are, frozen in the boat, with the other 11 disciples, or questioning J's presence - J moves towards us.

From the very beginning of the story, Jesus moves towards his disciples. He moves towards them when they're overwhelmed from a day of healing and feeding. when they're struggling at sea. when they're terrified by his approach. when they're reckless enough to set him a dare. He moves towards them when they begin to drown. when they ask for help. when they're shivering and ashamed.

In other words, *Jesus never stops moving towards the ones he loves*. He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are.

It doesn't matter how full of doubt, questions, fear we are. J moves towards us, through the storms, saying "take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid"

Our flailing bodies are the ones he pulls out of the water as we sink and feel up to our necks in the storms of COVID, poor health, shaky finances. Ours is the boat he climbs into. It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves: "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid."