



## Scripture and Sermon

August 2, 2020

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### Matthew 14:22-33

**22** Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, **24** but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,<sup>[a]</sup> for the wind was against them. **25** And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. **26** But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. **27** But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

**28** Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." **29** He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. **30** But when he noticed the strong wind,<sup>[b]</sup> he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" **31** Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" **32** When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. **33** And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Around this time, give or take a few weeks, six years ago, I preached my first sermon. It was a major moment in my journey to accepting and pursuing my call as, at the time, the scariest part of the idea of being a pastor was the public speaking. But, God worked through me and my preparation, and the sermon went well and I actually felt good while doing it. I remember sitting in the clergy chairs, shaking in my boots, but once I got in the pulpit and I started to preach, all of my worry and doubt floated away. It just felt right. I could feel the Holy Spirit with me and I became much more confident that being a pastor was what God was calling me to do. Now, six years later, just over a month in my first appointment as a full-time, real deal Pastor, the lectionary brings me the same text that I preached on back then. At the time, I had chosen that story to preach on because it was one of my favorites at the time, because just a handful of months before it was preached on to me at a student worship service at Albion. It wasn't specifically the sermon that did it, but it was that night that God gave me the kick in the butt to seriously consider the call to ministry I had gotten while at camp that summer.

I remember being really proud of that sermon, so I thought I would revisit it and see if it held up after my years in seminary. Well, I couldn't find a copy of it in my files, so I can't say if it holds up, but I do remember some of the major pieces of it. One of the things I know I did in that sermon was to look at the story from a different angle, focusing on a different element than others usually do when we hear this story. Y'all have probably heard enough of my sermons now to know that I still love to do that. It is something that I love about the Bible the most, that almost all of the stories and writings are so rich and complex that there could be a sermon on just one sentence, or we can shift the focus to a part that we wouldn't expect and find a new (or maybe just different) message from God. This way that we can find new things, read the same passage so many times but find new messages that resonate in important ways to us in that moment is the movement of the Spirit in the text and within us. So, while I remember some of the things that I found important to the message that God wanted me to share back then, I was led to yet a different aspect of the passage for this morning.

The main thing that I learned this week is that perhaps we have been focusing too much on Peter and not enough on Jesus in the way that this story reads. This story is well known as the Jesus and Peter walk on water story. Perhaps, the spectacular event of two men walking on top of the water has become a spectacle, distracting us from some of the other important elements of the passage. That said, this focus on the latter half of the passage has brought out a lot of powerful sermons and songs. Messages about God calling us out to do scary things with our faith and to keep our eyes on Jesus so we don't sink. That is an important message and one that I have liked to hear a lot as I have accepted my call to ministry. There is a song based on this story by the band Hillsong called Oceans (Where Feet May Fail) that was basically my theme song for a couple years in college. When I was leading the worship band for chapel at Albion my sophomore year, we sang this song probably once a month because I loved it so much. You'll find some of the main lyrics on a sticker on the back of my laptop: "You call me out upon the water" and "Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander." These were important messages to me that comforted me in ways that were so needed before, but in looking at the bible text itself for the first time in a while while preparing worship, I was drawn to some details that make me rethink what Jesus was referring to when he said, "You of little faith, why do you doubt?"

As I read the passage again and thought about that Oceans song, it occurred to me that Jesus didn't really call Peter out onto the water. Peter asks him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" and Jesus grants the request. Peter invites himself out onto the water! This realization got me thinking about the ways that we typically talk about this story and what else might be more of our own summary than what the story itself is telling us about Jesus and faith. When we focus on the spectacle of Peter walking on the water, we focus on his fear and distraction from Jesus that

causes him to sink and needing Jesus to save him, instead of what Jesus is doing in this story. This often leads to sermons about how we all must do better to keep our eyes on Jesus and our faith strong, never wavering and if we do that, then we, too, will be able to do wondrous things like how Peter was able to walk on the water.

A summary of this type of sermon was written by Nadia Bolz-Weber in a sermon she did on this text. Nadia is an ELCA Lutheran pastor, theologian and writer who founded a bold church called “House for All Sinners and Saints” and has written a handful of books. She is one of my favorite pastor people alive, so I imagine you will hear of her again, or feel free to ask me more about her sometime. Her summary of this type of sermon is sassy and points out some of the ways that this message is one that doesn’t work for everyone, so I figured I wouldn’t try to do better, and would read you hers:

“The disciples are in a little boat battered by waves, they see Jesus walking toward them and for a moment, Peter is a hero. He steps out of the boat and has sufficient faith to walk on water. He actually does it. Peter musters up what it takes to be God-like and what it takes is faith. Lots and lots of faith. Because with enough faith you can walk on water all the way to Jesus. If you had enough faith you could do it too. And maybe even better than Peter. Because Peter’s only mistake was that he took his eyes off Jesus and that’s why he sunk. So the moral of the story, and of course every Bible story is about how to be moral...so the how to be moral of this story is that if you in your life are not God-like in your ability to financially prosper or overcome all your failings as a human or defy the forces of nature and walk on water then the problem is that you don’t have enough faith and you should really muster up some more because the thing is, it’s all up to you to make your way to Jesus. So, don’t be afraid. Get out of the boat but be better at it than St Peter and don’t take your eyes off of Jesus. You can do it if you really try. End of sermon. And good luck with that.”

This is perhaps a bit more cynical and sassy than fully necessary, but her touch of hyperbole helps to point out how harmful this interpretation can be when we follow it’s logic to completion. If we only focus on the walking on water part, we are saying that the solution to problems, seen in the story as the storm on the sea, is to have more and more faith. On the flipside of that message, of just have more and more faith during hardship to make the impossible happen, is that those who don’t get those spectacular miracles or remain weighed down by the hardship, are lacking faith. This message plays out in harmful ways for those who then believe that they just need to have more faith to get rid of their mental health issue or have their disease healed, or get out of poverty, or or or... One of my seminary classmates struggled with this message. He had horrible panic attacks for a lot of his life, but they especially kicked up with the stress in seminary. He was raised to believe that if a hardship is pulling us down, then we just

have to have better faith and then Jesus will keep us above it. He was told by some church people to pray harder for them to go away. Well, they didn't. And while he didn't get professional help, he started to feel even more anxious and depressed because he then felt like his hardest try to have faith wasn't good enough. He felt shame and guilt that he must not have enough faith, even as someone following a call to ministry in seminary! After many conversations with many of us, his classmates, he sought professional help and things started to get better for him. He realized that his mental health issue, the raging sea in his life, wasn't his fault because of lack of faith. He had to realize that Jesus is with us in the hardships, and will pull us up from the depths of the hardships to be near him when we drift farther away, but having the most faith is not going to make us more worthy to be in the presence of Jesus or solve our problems. Faith can help a bunch in hard times! But it is not the cure to all ailments.

So, with all this in mind, I was thankful to find that the commentary I tend to use most often didn't just focus on the walking on water part of the story and gave me some new ideas to chew on for this passage. Mainly, it brought up the idea of Jesus's rebuke "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" as a rebuke of Peter leaving the boat in the first place and not specifically of him faltering in his walk on the water. Let's review that part of the passage, because let's be honest, we really know the miracle part the best. This passage starts where we left off last week, after the feeding of the five thousand. The people are filled and the leftovers are collected and here we are. Jesus sends the disciples off ahead of him to start the boat ride across the water, knowing it will take them all night. Jesus then sends the crowds home and takes some time to pray by himself to God. During the night, a storm came over the sea and the disciples had a rough night, being battered by the waves in the middle of the sea. Jesus eventually comes back to the water and then he walks toward them on the sea. Not expecting anyone on top of the water, not in a boat, and wary from a night on the sea during a storm, they think it is a ghost and are afraid! Jesus knows this and calls to them saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." It is to that that Peter responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come."

This story is one that is so relatable to us as we can see ourselves within the story so easily. As Jesus sends the disciples off to cross the sea without him physically present with them, we can relate with the disciples feelings of fear and uncertainty as we live without a physical presence of Jesus in our lives. Though many of us have probably not been on a small fishing boat while being tossed in a storm, we know what it feels like to be surrounded by chaos out of our control (and that was before the pandemic!), we know what it is like to feel worried about the bad threatening to overtake the good, we know what it is like to fear death and consider mortality. We can imagine being the disciples, tired and scared, probably a bit mad at Jesus for insisting they leave when they did so they got stuck in the storm, and we can imagine how terrified we

would be to see a figure standing unnaturally ON TOP of the water. It is in the latest and darkest moment of the night that Jesus comes to them. Jesus, walks on, or shows who's boss, to the chaos surrounding the disciples in the boat. It turns out that there are numerous Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, references to how God is the only one who walks on the sea, in Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Sirach. So, it shouldn't be a complete mystery who it could be walking toward them on the water. Alas, they don't catch on right away and think Jesus is a ghost. (I can only hope that Jesus thought to himself something like "No, I'm the other one, the Holy Ghost isn't here yet.") He speaks to them though, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Speaking words that remind us of when God showed up for Moses in the burning bush and said "I am the I am." So, Jesus shows up on the water doing what only God can do and identifying himself with the voice of God, the "I am." And Peter's response is "Uhhhh... Lord, if it is you, have me come out and do that incredible, only for God thing with you!" Then the walking on water thing happens, but also fails, and Jesus says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Not no faith. Not how dare you falter out here. But "you with enough courage to go for it, but still anxious about doing it, you with a typical combination of trust and doubt when involved in the work of God, why did you doubt?" The word translated doubt here, is greek distazo, which specifies doubt in the form of vacillation, not skepticism. It is used only one other time in the NT, later in Matthew 28, when Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection and it says "when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." That implies that the doubt that Jesus is referring to is not doubt in if Jesus could keep Peter walking on water in the storm, but is the doubt that Peter (and the rest) had when looking out at the figure on the sea, unsure if it was Jesus who was with them. It is Jesus saying, it should have been obvious that it was me, why did you doubt I was coming to you in the first place, and why did you feel the need to test if I was Jesus?

So, the message of this passage is not "If he had enough faith, he could have walked on the water" and does not apply to mean "If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways." It is that we can and should have faith that Jesus comes to us, as the presence of God, cutting through the chaos of our lives and the world. We need this reminder because it is all too easy when the waves of life are high, when we get anxious and nervous, when we have focused so much on what we can do alone to get through, it is easy to lose sight of God's presence. It is normal to be unsure of if God is with us when stuff hits the fan and you don't know how you will get through it. It is normal to look around in the midst of pure chaos, like the days, weeks, months, we have been in the midst of with this pandemic, and election cycle, and denomination drama, and not recognize where God is present among us. Even the disciples themselves didn't recognize the physical Jesus coming toward them! The not physical Jesus we have now is even harder to spot! Yes, Jesus rebukes Peter for not

believing it was him, but when Peter challenges Jesus to prove it, Jesus responds with grace. He agrees to the challenge, allowing Peter to walk on the water too, not letting him suffer the consequences of wanting to do what the divine can do when he falters and sinks, but immediately grabs his hand as Peter cries out for help. Peter's lack of faith does not affect Jesus saving him. Jesus doesn't call out to them from afar, alerting them of his presence and then staying there, he continues closer and closer, until he is holding Peter's hand, until he is inside the boat with them! Peter's lack of faith from inside the boat or outside the boat does not deter Jesus from drawing closer and closer to them in the midst of the chaos and fear. This story may tell of the spectacle of Peter defying the laws of physics and walking on water, but the truly powerful and most important message of the story is what it tells us of our God. Jesus comes to us, as the presence of God, in the midst of chaos and fear, not deterred by how little or how much faith we muster, to be with us in the thick of it and help us get to the other side.

This is the message that we need today as we experience the most chaos and fear as a whole nation and world than we have in a lifetime. This time is full of the unknown, the uncertain, and the unusual. This story acts as a reminder of who Jesus is and teaches us how we can better respond as God's people. We have a God who does not leave us high and dry when we are surrounded by a storm. We have a God who draws near to us, comes beside us in the hardship, and brings us peace to get to the other side of it. Jesus calls to us like he did the disciples, "Hey, it's me. I'm here. Be encouraged and don't be afraid, we will get to the other side of this." This does not mean that we can never be afraid of anything, or that we are being bad followers if we are anxious or we should ignore the existence of the hard, bad or chaotic. It means, don't let fear get the best of you, don't be afraid that you won't ever see the other side of the chaos. Similarly, we shouldn't put God to the test by being reckless or thinking we can be like God, we cannot expect unnatural miracles at our beck and call like Peter walking on water. But, we can trust that if we do find ourselves out of our depth and we lose sight of Jesus completely, we can call out to the Lord and Jesus will find us, grab our hand, and pull us close to him and will bring us back to our community. As we continue in this seemingly endless storm, stuck being thrown around in the boat, let us all learn from Peter. May we keep an eye out for Jesus among us, believe it when we feel his presence, and call out to him if we are particularly struggling. We can trust that no amount of chaos, hardship, fear, or lack of faith can keep Jesus from drawing close to us.