

Matthew 14:22-33: Walking on Water

Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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²²Immediately he 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." ²⁹He 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."

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God

This is a story I heard a lot as a child, perhaps you did, too. And as a kid I seem to remember the focus being mostly on Peter and his strong start but then ultimately wavering, and frankly, disappointing faith at the end. I remember hearing the story and thinking, "Peter! Why did you doubt?? He was RIGHT THERE! And you were getting to walk on water!" Obviously younger Katelyn thought it would be really cool to walk on water. I guess older Katelyn does, too :) But that aside, how could Peter possibly have doubted when Jesus was right in front of him? Wouldn't it be easy to trust in that situation?...

...I guess it makes sense that Jesus would have called Peter's faith "little"... Ouch. Young Katelyn was a bit of a harsh critic...

But I suppose if I'm honest with myself there's still a bit of truth to some of those questions still today. I do wonder what it would look like to be called out into

choppy waves and asked to have a big enough faith to trust God with something seemingly impossible. But then again, I'm not sure we have to imagine it, though perhaps we do have to imagine the actual walking on water part.

But before we begin to imagine our own scenarios, I do want us to take a moment to imagine ourselves in this story.

STORY

Imagine with me that you are there with the disciples, you've just watched this miraculous situation unfold in which a small meal of loaves and fish are multiplied into more than enough to feed a massive crowd. You're likely still in awe of what has just happened and are trying to process it, when Jesus tells you and the other disciples to go on ahead of him in the boat to cross the lake. It doesn't seem to be a soft request, more of a compelling urge, so you go. As the day begins to end and the light of day fades into darkness, the waters become rough and the waves rock the boat as the winds push you further out into the water. While trying to manage all of this you wonder where Jesus is and why he sent you ahead as he stayed behind. Yes, the crowds needed to be cleared after such a gathering, but surely they could have done that on their own and he could have come with you? Maybe been of some help? Or at least company—you'd like to discuss what just happened, after all.

Then, just as night begins to turn to morning, with just a small glint of light in the sky, and with sleepy vision and exhaustion clouding your mind as you continue to battle the waves, you suddenly all notice something coming toward you on the water. What could that possibly be?? Everyone is, rightly, spooked.

You begin to wonder, could this be a ghost? Fear begins to creep in and panic starts to take over the group when you hear a voice call out saying "Take heart, it is I! Do not be afraid." Though, the way he says this actually comes across more

as “Take heart, it is I Am. Do not be afraid.” You recognize that name as the name God gave to Moses when he asked for God’s name on the mountain. For a split second you’re distracted by the revelation that this man is once again revealing his identity. Could he really be God? The I Am?

And then you’re snapped back to reality as you hear Peter say, “Lord, if it is you, call me out on the water to you!” And Jesus simply replies, “Come.” And so you see Peter swing his legs over the side of the boat and begin WALKING on the water, JUST like Jesus! You’re completely in awe until all of a sudden you see Peter glance around him at the waves that continue to crash and he begins to sink. And just as he begins to go down, he cries out “Lord, save me!” And Jesus immediately reaches out, grabs his hand, and smiles at him saying with such tender love, and maybe just a little humor, “Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

And at that they climbed back into the boat, and all those with you began to worship Jesus saying, “surely you are the Son of God.”

REFLECTION

I often find that I better understand Jesus and the experiences he had, as well as his disciples, when I can place myself in the story. And really, I find that helpful for many scenarios in life! But every time I do that with this story I am grabbed by the moment when Jesus says, “Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt?”

As a child I heard this in more of a chastising tone,

“Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt?”

But now, I hear it more like I read it before, with depths of love and compassion, as well as a sort of invitation into a faith that is bigger.

“Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt?”

You see, I don’t think Jesus calling Peter “you of little faith” is an insult or chastisement so much as a gentle acknowledgement that there is more for us in

our life with God than we sometimes allow ourselves to see or be open to. God wants “big faith” for us, but we often look around at the waves and allow ourselves to shrink into a faith that is far too small.

In this story, from the moment Jesus reenters the scene, he is walking toward, calling to, inviting out, and saving. He is present in the midst of the waves, not just before or after them. *This* is the God we must remember as we travel through tumultuous or unknown parts of life. A God who is present and wants us to be present, too.

And while perhaps we are not encountering actual waves and winds, or sinking in water to then be lifted up, there are plenty of life circumstances we have each been through, or are going through, that we could use those metaphors for, both individually and communally. Think of the moments when we say things like “I feel like I’m drowning,” or “I just can’t get my footing.” Or any other number of phrases we use to describe overwhelm. And sometimes we are called out into those “waves and wind” situations, being asked to step forward with courage and trust... and sometimes we just find ourselves in the midst of them.

However we get there, when those moments arise, whether we feel ready, or don’t at all, or some combo of the two, God is with us and compassionately calls us into deeper life and faith.

As I reflected on this story I couldn’t help but think of this church community as you went without a minister this last while, and as you stepped forward in your search for someone to fill the minister role. And I think of my own experience as I stepped forward in answering the invitation to interview and enter this role. There were a lot of unknowns and nerves, on all sides, I’m sure. And now, we continue to feel a variety of things as we think together about the future of this

community. Not to mention the many other circumstances we each have in our lives and communities outside of *this* community.

But no matter the situation, in the midst of it all, the celebrations and relief, too, God is present. God is walking toward us and inviting us to have a bigger faith—a faith that chooses to trust and step forward, even in the midst of doubt and uncertainty. Because the opposite of faith isn't actually doubt, it's inaction, so that means faith is action; so even small steps of courage are signs of big faith, like Peter's first few steps out onto the water. And yes, sometimes, we may look around and see the waves, become afraid, and start to sink or feel overwhelmed, but we are not alone, and taking that next faithful step is full of faith (even if it doesn't feel like it). And in the midst of those steps, God is with us, reminding us to keep stepping forward with courage.

Just like “you of little faith,” the question of “why do you doubt?” isn't condescending or chastising, but rather, a reminder that God's faithful presence and saving work should help us continually be courageous. A gesture of sorts, to look around or look back and remember God's faithful presence with us.

When Jesus calls out to the disciples saying, “do not be afraid” it is the fourth of SEVEN times in Matthew that he reminds his followers to not be afraid. Clearly this is a reminder they needed then, and it's one that we need now. Even if not at this moment, we will at some point in time. But either way, I have a feeling it's a message we need to hear again and again.

One commentary I read said, “What is so clear from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the

assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.”¹

Sometimes stepping out in faith is a bit of a risk. It can be scary, and we may doubt what we’re doing or where we are headed, but faith is an activity, not a possession.² It’s not something we “have” but something we “do.” So even small steps, small actions, are faithful signs of trust in God and what God is up to. And on the days where even a small step feels like too much, God and your community are here to pick you up.

Just like we’ve heard the last several weeks, we get to be partners with God in the good work God is up to, so while you likely won’t physically feel Jesus pulling you out of the water, someone next to you might reach out their hand to comfort you or be present with you. Or maybe you’ll find a trustworthy listening ear as you journey through something difficult. Or any number of other acts of presence.

And while there are likely to be moments when we feel defeated and like our faith is just too small, remember Jesus’ loving invitation into a bigger life of faith, not bigger as in “flashier” or more show-y, or loud, but bigger as in more aware of God’s presence, God’s call, and a willingness and boldness to step out of the boat, even when the wind and waves are rocking us as we step toward the one who calls us to to trust and step into the *more* of God.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word Commentary

² Interpretation Commentary on Matthew, p. 180