



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Between Faith and Fear”

Matthew 14:22-33
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The Gospels tell stories within decades of when Jesus lived. You can be sure there remain strong memories of what Jesus said and did. In the case of at least the Gospel of Mark, there are a few who might be able to say,

“I was in the crowd when Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,’” or could say,

“I remember that night Jesus was arrested. My hope died before he did.”

Also, this was a culture where the primary source of entertainment and recordkeeping was storytelling. Many people were quite practiced at passing along stories from one generation to the next. Important stories were even recorded on parchment.

Finally, let’s remember that there was great excitement and energy among the followers of Jesus who grew rapidly after the news was spread that the grave was empty. That excitement and energy fueled the desire to remember and pass on what Jesus said and did.

Still, the writers of the four gospels-
since our passage is from Matthew,
let’s say the writer of Matthew’s Gospel-

The writer of Matthew’s Gospel did not have recording history as his goal. After all, the word, “Gospel,” doesn’t mean “Old News.” It means, “Good News.” Matthew’s Gospel had an audience in mind: Matthew’s church. Matthew told the story of Jesus in a way that spoke directly to what it means to follow Jesus in his day.

Here is a literary trick he uses. Peter was a real person with his own personality. But being the disciples’ leader after Jesus died; Matthew’s Gospel uses him as a “stand in” for the church and a “stand in” for people in the church.

So, when you hear a story about Peter, we the church, and you and me as individuals in the church, are being addressed. Where Peter succeeds, the church is affirmed; where Peter fails, the church is critiqued.

Keep that in mind as you hear this story about Peter from Matthew’s Gospel.

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, 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, 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."

So, which is it: Should we be offended or affirmed?

To explore the answer to that question, I'm going to jump in and out of the story.

First, you need to know that this boat story is sandwiched between two crowd stories. Right before the disciples get into the boat, they are overwhelmed by the challenge of 5000 people needing to be fed. "Send them away," they tell Jesus. Instead, he feeds them.

Right after the disciples get out of the boat, they are met with a scene of overwhelming need. A crowd of sick people come or are carried to Jesus to be healed. That passage doesn't have the disciples saying, "Send them away," but I bet they think it. Jesus heals them all.

And that is the way it is with the church sometimes, isn't it?

Thousands to be fed, thousands to be healed...

failing neighborhoods and failing schools...

an opioid addiction to add to the other addiction epidemics...

"Jesus, send them away."

I think "Send them away" is reflected in the temptation to be "spiritual and not religious." To be spiritual is to be in good with God. To not be religious is to be able to opt out of the church's collective responsibility to follow Jesus and face the thousands needing to be fed and the seemingly unending number of people needing to be healed.

Only opting out doesn't work, does it? Not for those who have a conscience anyway. The hungers and hurts find us. They can find us within our families. We want to be what the family needs us to be. And, let's be clear, sometimes we can walk on water. Sometimes it seems even we can multiply loaves and heal the hurts and we gain great satisfaction and joy in fulfilling the duties of love within the clan. But sometimes a parent with failing health, or a struggling child, or a troubled marriage, can seem bigger than we can manage. "Jesus, send the troubles away."

Or the hungers and hurts can find us at work... or among friends... or in an unexpected expense... or a diagnosis... or a death.

Or maybe they find us through the overwhelming news of the nation or world. Again, it is not always a storm. We woke up to the news last week that tensions have thawed between the Koreas. Not that long ago, some of us worried about a terrible storm of war... one involving

nuclear weapons. But the winds have calmed, at least for now, and we, like the disciples after the storm, want to thank and worship God.

But sometimes the world's needs seem overwhelming and all of us, no matter our political persuasion, can have moments of despair.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees:

who is going to house and feed them?

Continued terrorist attacks and gun violence:

what can be done?

Leaders that lie, media that lies:

who can we believe?

“Jesus, we can't deal with it. Send the troubles away.”

Between the thousands needing to be fed (Jesus fed them. “Thank you Jesus!”) and the many needing to be healed (Jesus healed them. “Thank you Jesus!”), the disciples are in a boat. But this *episode between* is no respite. This is not a tranquil scene of calm water and smooth sailing giving the disciples a chance to rest and catch some Zs... or some rays. A storm hits, and it is one of those storms that are so familiar to the region; the kind that build up behind the Golan Heights and then swoop suddenly over the hills bringing driving winds and breaking waves to the Sea of Galilee.

Remember, the writer of Matthew's Gospel has his church in mind. He counts on his readers and hearers to remember all the other stories in the Bible where the sea is chaotic:

beginning with the flood in Genesis,

going through stories like Egyptian pursuers being drowned,

and Jonah on a boat trying to sail away from Nineveh

and the boat almost sinking until Jonah is thrown in the waves.

Those Bible memories might not come immediately to all of our minds today, but I am pretty sure Matthew's Church gets it. Matthew's church is afloat in a Roman Sea. Sometimes the Roman waters are calm and Christians are left alone. But sometimes the storms of Roman persecution can come rushing as quickly as a storm over the Golan Heights, and the church finds itself in sudden danger. Sometimes Matthew's Christians are up to the task and are brave. But sometimes they notice how strong the winds and how high the waves and they falter. *Are they failures?*

The church at other times in history has found itself in such dramatic storms. Imagine this scene in Germany in the 1930s: a pastor studying Philippians 2 in preparation for a sermon:

At the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The pastor is concerned. The invasion of Poland troubles him. But what really troubles him is the arrest of Jewish neighbors simply for being Jews. And what troubles him even more is the cover that is being provided for the government's anti-Semitism by leading church theologians and pastors.

A sermon starts to brew in the pastor's mind and heart. "Every knee shall bow to Jesus," he will preach, and then remind them of the great German theologian Martin Luther and his doctrine of Christian Liberty. While we should be servants of our family, our community, our nation because Jesus was a servant to us, when it comes to a conflict of ultimate loyalties, the knee should bow only to Jesus.

Seized by the truth of the passage and emboldened to place love of God and loyalty to Christ first, he begins to write a sermon where he will remind his congregation that they are Jesus followers first and last. He is not going to personally attack Hitler or the Nazi party, but he is going to speak out for the persecuted as Jesus did when he walked on water and spoke out for the woman caught in adultery about to be stoned, for the lepers who were treated as the walking dead, for the Samaritans and Gentiles who need compassion as much as anyone.

The German pastor steps out of the boat and begins writing the sermon with confidence. But the journey to the pulpit is over rough seas. The pastor begins to feel the strong wind, remembering the mania that has swept not only the country but the church, where attacks on Jews- verbal, and sometimes physical- are celebrated. He begins to notice how high the waves are. It has been reported that Nazi sympathizers are attending churches and reporting what they hear. The pastor begins to sink, and changes his sermon.

Roman persecution in Matthew's day, Nazi persecution in that pastor's day; those are pretty dramatic storms in history. I tell you them to offer clarity. Dramatic though they are, I hope you can empathize because the tug of war between faith and fear happens in all of us from time to time.

Do you have your own tale to tell? Do you remember times when you found yourself in a position where you clearly saw a path that Jesus would want you to take, a path Jesus has taken before- yet the threat of strong winds and choppy waves overwhelm you?

Middle Schooler who see someone bullied and are scared to speak up know that the storm doesn't have to be global, or national, or historic. So does the employee who sees an unethical practice and wants to address it, but also knows it involves a friend... or a supervisor.

I can empathize with

- the one who would like to help with Family Promise by taking a meal or spending the night,
- or the one who would like to tutor in an at risk school,
- or the one who would like to visit the dying or give comfort to the grieving.

They want to walk on that water, but they feel anxious.

Afraid.

Afraid of infection. Afraid of depression.

Afraid of harm being around people they don't understand
and whose actions they cannot predict.

That may not be you. Goodness, there are plenty in this church who find great joy in doing precisely what I described. They walk those waters and the wind seems a breeze and the waves mere ripples. But all of us can come up with those moments in the storm when we faltered.

Are we failures?

Peter stepped out. He had seen how Jesus, after hearing the disciples ask him to send the hungry thousands away instead walk on water by feeding them. Peter thinks, “This time, I’m not going to be the one who lets Jesus do it on his own. I’m getting out there. I’m walking too.” And he does. We know what that is like, to step out in faith in ways that are real and transformative—that make a difference for others; that make a difference in our own lives.

But then Peter notices the wind and the waves and he falters. And we know what that is like too. We are right where Peter is, halfway there, *located between faith and fear*. We falter, we follow. We follow, we falter.

Are we faithful? Are we failures?

Back to the question as I asked it at the sermon’s beginning: Should we feel offended or affirmed by this passage?

I’m going to end up saying more one than the other but, honestly, the passage gives space for both. This passage certainly could have served as a “Call to Confession” for the German Churches that sold their souls to Hitler. It can be a word of judgment for those who risk nothing for the sake of compassion or justice.

Yet, I believe that Matthew tells this story not to tear the church down but to build it up. Look at the clues in the story.

- Yes, there is fear in Peter,
but there also is courage both in his stepping out and in his prayer. Remember his prayer? “Jesus, save me!”
The prayer admits a need, and that is an act of courage.
- Yes, there is doubt in Peter when he pays more attention to the winds and waves than to Jesus,
but there is faith too. Remember how the passage ended?
Not with condemnation, but with worship.
- Yes, Peter is exposed at first,
but then he is held. Affirmed. Helped back up and back in the boat.

Yes, the seas can become choppy sometimes-
in marriage,
at work,
among friends,
in the neighborhood,
in the nation,
in the world.

Peter isn’t spared the storm, and he does falter, but he gets a hand in the midst of it.

I think Matthew is telling us not to give up on ourselves because of sinking spells, precisely because we are not alone. If we can move our eyes from the waves that threaten to overwhelm us to him, and see his hand reaching out to hold us, then we might remember that no storm, not even death, can take us from him.

I'm going to finish this sermon by going back to teaching again. This teaching moment will be brief.

This story has *Easter all over it*- Matthew presents a human Jesus who walks as God on water. Matthew is telling the post-Easter church that though storms remain, Jesus lives. We will find ourselves in storms, but look for the risen Jesus in the midst of them. We will falter, but look up. Jesus is there with us even between faith and fear and is reaching his hand out to steady us and help us find our footing again.

This story is not about our rejection. No, it is about God's embrace of us even when we falter. At such times, take courage. Find your footing. Take your eyes off the waves and see the hand of Jesus. You are not alone.