

## Take Heart, It Is I; Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 14:22-33

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC, in Camden, August 9, 2020*

Matthew 14:22-33: <sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." <sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup> He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Have you ever set out to do something, feeling confident at first, only to find yourself stepping back in fear or losing your footing – literally or metaphorically speaking? One of my childhood memories is wanting to jump off the 10 meter (30 ft) platform at our local outdoor community swimming pool. Since I spent most days of the summer there, I always watched and admired kids who took that dive. I had made it off the 3 meter and then the five meter boards ok. I tried to tell myself that I could take the leap off the 10 meter platform and *should* do it. I felt the internal pressure mounting. Days went by, weeks went by. Finally, I climbed all the way to the top of the tower up its scary narrow metal steps. At the top, I wanted to take heart but could only feel my heart beating in my throat as I inched my way to the edge of the platform to look down into the water. I stepped back in fear and forward again and backed away again. I tried to talk myself into just running and jumping without looking but did not want to risk hitting another person in the water below. I am not even sure what I was afraid of – the wind carrying me to the edge? Hitting the water wrong and getting hurt or hitting the bottom of the pool too hard? After I don't know how long, I finally gave up and faced the embarrassment of climbing down again, listening to impatient and condescending words of kids on their way up who had to wait and let me pass. I never tried again. I felt like an absolute failure and utterly alone. At 53, a part of me occasionally still thinks I have to go and jump off that platform to feel ok. My body tells me otherwise! The real challenge is to let my heart be OK with it.

Of course, such experiences of stepping out with faith only to panic or retreat can take all kinds and often more significant forms. Maybe you had to give a presentation or you wanted to speak up about something important to you, a matter of justice perhaps, or protecting yourself from verbal abusive. You felt courage in your heart but then you started noticing quizzical or frowning expressions in other people's faces. Fearing rejection, you quickly lost your focus and your voice. Perhaps you have been dreaming of changing careers but every time you take steps to take the risk, you start to worry about how you will sustain yourself and whether you are good enough to prevail. Pretty soon you find yourself back tracking. Perhaps you have been trying to work up the courage to make amends in a relationship but are terrified of setting off another fire storm of emotion or just being misunderstood. Maybe you have been dealing with a scary medical diagnosis and feel paralyzed about how to move forward. Or you have been considering seeking treatment for an addiction but are afraid that you will lose whatever little sense of security you still have if you let go of control. Perhaps, in any of this, you have found yourself gravitating between trusting that God is present with you and fearing that you are utterly alone and bound to fail.

A few months ago, I quoted Emmanuel Teney who said, "There are no guarantees. From the viewpoint of fear none are strong enough. From the viewpoint of love none are necessary." These words feel particularly apt again today. I wonder how the apostle Peter might have responded to Teney's words before and after his adventure of trying to walk on water. Actually, only Matthew features Peter in his version of the story of Christ walking on water. Why might that be? Peter often serves as the foil for all of us who seek to follow Christ. Peter was so eager to do the right thing in faith, to lead by example and show his love for Christ. Peter was often the first to speak, act and lead. He also had to eat humble pie over and over again because of his own lack of understanding. Peter's fears of persecution would eventually even lead him to betray Jesus in the courtyard on the night of arrest. Jesus as the Christ loved Peter dearly, even though fully knowing Peter's fears and failures. This, too, is an important model and assurance for us. We see all this exemplified in our Gospel story. Let us turn to the story now.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> You also find a rendition of it from the Asian Christian tradition on the bulletin cover. It is a picture of a hand painted plate Mark was given by his hosts during a teaching visit to a Christian institution in Hong Kong.

You may recall from last week that Jesus had just inspired a feeding of the multitudes. At the start of that day, Jesus had actually sought time away to pray after hearing about the murder of John the Baptist by corrupt king Herod but the needs of the people who came had taken precedence. The story for today comes at the end of that day. Jesus picks up where he had left off seeking that space for prayer. He sends his followers ahead in the boat at night to go to the other shore of the large lake. Jesus is immersed in prayer but his followers, many of whom are experienced fishermen and sailors, get stuck in some nasty weather in the middle of the night. Imagine yourself in their place. You are sailing out into Penobscot Bay in a smallish sail boat on a stormy night after a long and intense day. You are trying to navigate toward the safety of a distant shore but the wind won't let you get there. Your boat is getting tossed about by the waves. There is precious little visibility. You might be wet, tired, cold and scared by now. Finally, you see the first inklings of the morning arising but you are still in danger. Can you sense this?

In our story, the weary followers of Jesus suddenly see what looks like him walking on the water toward them. They immediately shout together in fear: "It is a ghost!" Granted, you don't usually see somebody walking on water! Something either ominous or awesome is happening. It is strange for sure! In the context of their time, the deep waters were a representation of chaos and danger. This might include external forces of violence and injustice or internal fears, greed, aversions that keep us from living a free life. Having Jesus walk calmly on the water symbolizes that he literally rises above chaos/disorder and potentially destructive energies. He is not beholden to any of that.<sup>2</sup> Nor need we be.

Notice how Jesus compassionately does not chide his friends for their fear and disbelief. Instead, he encourages them by saying: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter so wants to take heart, to not be afraid! He cries out to Jesus: "Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water." I wonder why Matthew is telling the story in this way. How much did that *if* weigh on Peter's heart and why might it have mattered to walk on water with Jesus? It sounds like Peter trusted that he would recognize Jesus' voice. He would not let himself just be lured by

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<sup>2</sup> In Pure Land Buddhism you also find stories of the Buddha of great Compassion walking across waters to lead people to a safe shore. Buddha passes through waves and tongues of fire representing the various challenges and forces that hold us captive. See Taitetsu Unno's beautiful book *River of Fire, River of Water*.

a force out to get him. If it was Jesus, then something in Peter knew in his heart that he would be enabled to come to Jesus no matter how crazy that seemed. He, too, would be able to walk safely despite the threatening chaos below, around and within him.

Jesus responds with the simple invitation: "Come." Peter actually steps out of that boat despite the waves and the wind and begins to walk toward Jesus. The moment he loses his focus on Jesus and takes in the presence of the strong wind, his brain takes over and lets all the danger signals flash. Something in Peter is now crying out to him: "Are you crazy? You can't walk on water. You are going to die, you fool!" Sure enough, Peter starts to sink. He regains his focus on Jesus and calls out: "Lord, save me!" In one of the most tender passages of the Gospels, Jesus immediately reaches out to Peter and catches him before he drowns. Jesus also says: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I don't know about you but I don't hear those words spoken in the spirit of a rebuke but in the spirit of deep love. Jesus knows how much more could be possible if Peter didn't lose the connection to the ground of his own being, embodied in Christ. He loves Peter no less for it. I wonder whether this story is a needed prelude for Peter so that he may trust that Jesus will meet him with the same compassion, after Peter's denial at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, as he did when Peter nearly drowned in his own fear.

We might all be tempted to wish that Peter had gotten out of that boat and waltzed right over those waters in great confidence. However, his stumbles are also reassuring amidst our own stumbling and folly. For one thing, this story can remind all of us that while we are not tied to God by an umbilical cord, we are connected by virtue of the spirit of the divine dwelling in us. Something in us has the courage to get out of the boat. We just tend to forget God's presence and let the threatening circumstances and our desires for security and certainty cause us to stumble. Now, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep trying to step out of the boat. As we follow Christ in our day, we are invited to come and face the chaos, fears, and negative energies in our own lives, in our local, national and global communities. Whether it is low self-esteem, domestic abuse, addiction, warfare, famine, a pandemic, an illness, racial injustice, rising poverty and cataclysmic wealth gaps, rising fascism and nationalism, growing social isolation or climate change, we need to get out of the boat and face these realities.

In a way, Peter's story is also a good reminder that sensing and living from this connection with the divine is not something we do by the power of our separate will and effort. At the heart of it all lies our interconnection with God who models a spirit of compassion for us all amidst our stumbling. So much of living a life of faith is actually about letting go of that need to control our destiny. As the quote on the bulletin cover by Lama Willa B. Miller reminds us: *"This world with all its beauty and all its vibrancy is just so because it is not fixed, because everything is contingent.* The more we let go into the contingent flow of life and trust in God's love, the more securely we can rest in God and life. Such is the great paradox of faith and, as the Christian mystic and theologian Thomas Merton liked to say, "Our intentions go a long way with God."

I would like to end with one of my husband Mark's poems which affirms the foundational reality and strength of God's love which is always reaching out toward us as Christ did to Peter.

### ***All and Ever Only Love***<sup>3</sup>

*I often wonder if I am lovable,  
and love cautiously because*

*I know how easily I can be  
hurt and my heart broken,*

*but you do not hesitate  
toward me, since You*

*are all love and only love,  
and when You love You*

*love without measure, and  
when You love me in*

*this way I find who I am  
and who You are, which*

*is all and ever only love.*

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark S. Burrows and Jon M. Sweeney. *Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart.*