

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

**Matthew 14:22-33**

**August 10, 2025**

In the Biblical text for today, the disciples are **made** by Jesus---the word in the Greek is “forced” or “compelled” ---to get in a boat and leave him alone. He has been trying to be alone for some time, but crowds have followed him. He has fed the five thousand, and presumably, he is tired and needs time with his Father.

So, Jesus puts the disciples on a boat to go to the other side of the sea where more ministry awaits. Jesus will catch up with them later. The disciples are obedient.

Later, when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water toward them, however, they are afraid. They think he is a ghost. This may be, as I said earlier, because in their day, the Sea was associated with the realm of evil, and storms were associated with evil spirits which stirred up a storm. Jesus tells them “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.” This may also be translated, in language the disciples would recognize as Jesus revealing his divine identity, not as “It is I” but “I AM,” God’s name from Exodus. They would be familiar with the “I AM” name of God from the Old Testament.

Peter, however, seeks to **test** Jesus to make sure it is really him. He says to Jesus, “Lord, **if** it is you, command me to come to you on the

water.” Interestingly enough, Jesus doesn’t scold Peter for testing him by saying, as he did to Satan in the wilderness, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Peter has asked for a command to obey, and Jesus, as his leader, commands him, saying, “Come.”

Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on water. But when Peter focuses on the wind and the waves, he starts to sink. He cries out --as the Greek says, he squawks--not “**If** it is you save me” but he says to Jesus, “**Lord**, save me!” Jesus reaches out his hand to Peter, catches him, and then scolds Peter, saying “You of little faith! Why did you doubt?” They get into the boat, and the wind stops. The disciples then truly recognize who Jesus is, and they worship him. After that, they get to the other side of the sea and ministry begins again. Those who even touch the fringe of Jesus’ cloak are healed.

I don’t think the point of this story is that we as Jesus’ disciples are supposed to walk on water. That is something only God can do to show his power over the realm of nature. As preacher Mark Hoffman<sup>1</sup> puts it, “Leave the walking on water to Jesus.”

I also don’t think the point of this story is that we are to test Jesus, as Peter did. I wonder if its point is rather that we might be called to go through difficulty as we do ministry “on the other side.” In that, we are certainly not to be afraid. Jesus will be there for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Hoffman, “Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33.”

As for walking on water, we all well know the jokes about walking on water. When I am playing golf and my ball sometimes skips over the water on Quail Run 4 at Rio, and people marvel, I simply say, “Oh, you have to know where the stones are.”

Another joke is told about the difference between walking on water when it is liquid and walking on it when it is ice. As that joke goes, *there once was a young man named Jimmy who had heard a family rumor that his father, his grandfather and even his great-grandfather, all "walked on water" on their 21st birthday. When the day of his 21st birthday came, he believed that if they could do it, so could he. So, off he went in a boat with his friend Eric. When he got out in the middle of the lake, he got up and stepped out of the boat, fell in the water and almost drowned.*

*The next day, Jimmy asked his grandmother why he wasn't given the same gift as the others in his family. She told him that his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all been born in **February**, not in **August**, as was he.*

Another observation I have about this story is that it might have something to say about faith and salvation. Recall the moment in the story in which Peter begins to sink and cries---or squawks---“Lord, save me.”

I have used this story<sup>2</sup> once before about faith at an Easter sunrise service here but it bears repeating.

*A famous German circus once visited the town in which [theologian Henri Nouwmen] was living, and one of the circus acts was the internationally acclaimed troupe of trapeze artists, “The Flying Rodleighs.” Nouwen wrote that he was able to sit with the leader of the troupe, talking about the dangers of his work. Rodleigh said to him, ‘As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joseph, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.’ Nouwen asked, ‘How does it work?’ ‘The secret,’ Rodleigh said, ‘is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joseph, I have simply to stretch out my arms and wait for him to catch me with his hands and pull me safely onto the platform.’ ‘You do nothing!’ Nouwen said, surprised. ‘Nothing,’ Rodleigh repeated. ‘The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joseph. It’s Joseph’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joseph’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, or we could fall, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must have faith and trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher*

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<sup>2</sup> As told by Rebecca Mincelli, in “Walking on Water,” from Henri Nouwmen.

*will be there for him.' Nouwen writes, "When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, (I realized, life is like that) - one must trust the catcher. Trust that God will be there when you are forced to make a long jump - or even when you're going through the storm. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just reach out your arms toward him with faith and trust.*

Others have made observations about this story as well. One<sup>3</sup> Biblical commentator writes:

*Many have commented on the symbolism of the passage. The boat has been a traditional symbol for the Church. The night storm represented persecution, when the presence of Christ seemed so distant and the presence of evil so close. In the midst of persecution, evangelists (symbolized by Peter) attempt missionary efforts, only to falter with the many pressing concerns. Then the Lord comes to comfort, to strengthen, and to be present to the congregation and its leadership. The response to the Lord was worship of the Church.*

Others reflect on how Peter feels. Preacher Joanna Seibert<sup>4</sup> says:

*"Come," Jesus says. So Peter swings his legs over the side of the rocking boat while all the other disciples watch with their hearts pounding in*

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Broding, "Trust in Times of Stress,"

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Seibert, "Walking on Water."

*their throats as he places his feet on the surface of the turbulent water. With the waves crashing against the side of the boat, the wind whipping his hair into his eyes-- Peter puts his feet flat on top of the water, takes a huge trembling gasp, and stands. He takes a few hesitant steps towards Jesus across the heaving surface, like those first steps he took as a toddler. He is doing fine until a gust of wind almost topples him. Peter gets scared and feels his feet sinking into the black waves below. He goes down like a rock.*

*Even if you have never tried to walk on water, you know how Peter feels. You are learning to ride a bicycle and have gained enough speed that suddenly you stop wobbling and start flying. The wind is in your hair, the scenery is whizzing by, when just as suddenly you lose your confidence. You drop one foot to the ground and the whole adventure comes crashing down on top of you.*

*Or maybe you are standing up in front of a meeting to say something you passionately believe. At first the words just flow from your mouth, exactly the words you need at right moment, and then you look at all those blank faces staring back at you, and you lose your nerve. Your brain turns to mush. You quickly sit down, your cheeks burning, your hands sweating, and your heart throbbing in your ears.*

*"LORD, SAVE ME," Peter cries out, and Jesus does, reaching out his hand, catching him, hauling him out of the cold water like a big, frightened flounder, dragging him over to where the other disciples pull him back into the boat. And then the awful words: "O man of little faith, why Did You Doubt?" So why don't we name Peter, doubting Peter, the name Jesus gives him, instead giving Thomas the name?*

*These are the same words many of us ask ourselves every day. Why don't I have more faith? Why can't I trust God? Why am I afraid to let go and let God care for me? Why do I doubt? I believe I am in God's hands and they are good hands, but then the person I most love dies. The loneliness goes on and on, I lose faith, and I begin to sink.*

*I believe that God is present and active in the world, but how do we reconcile all the innocent suffering occurring with heart wrenching regularity around us?*

On this same issue, others have observed that the various storms of life we experience, or the deep waters, can be a blessing. As Biblical commentator Richard Donovan<sup>5</sup> writes, "When things are going badly, our hearts are more receptive to Jesus. A broken heart is often a door through which Christ can find entry." Preacher Peter Lockhart<sup>6</sup> adds:

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Donovan, "Biblical Commentary Matthew 14:22-33."

<sup>6</sup> Peter Lockhart, "Jesus Holds Back the Deep."

*...the promise of the good news is that all is not lost, for see coming across the waves and through the storm comes Jesus to bring hope. Here is another significant image of the story; that it is Jesus who comes to those in despair at the time of their greatest need. When hope seems to be running out the door and fear and trembling are all that is left Jesus comes with those words, "Take heart it is I do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid."*

*Jesus words are words of healing and of hope for those of us who find ourselves threatened by the stormy seas of life. In the boat the disciple Peter wants confirmation of Jesus identity and sets out to test his faith. Jesus' beckons Peter out on to the waters and we see that Peter at first focused on Jesus is able to walk on the waters towards Jesus. But then seeing the threat around him begins to sink, he loses focus, and as Jesus indicates his faithlessness betrays him. But even in this moment of failure Peter is able to look and cry out "Lord save me" and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and catches him.*

*There is an immediacy in Jesus response to Peter's need that gives us hope and here we might catch the overtones of what Paul wrote to the Romans, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This is a promise of healing and hope to us all. It is a promise that is born out in Matthew's retelling of the story when we move from Jesus disembarking from the boat and people flocking to him to be healed. Reaching out and simply touching the hem of his garment*



*brings healing to people's lives. When the Lord comes near lives are changed.*

Preacher Matthew Skinner<sup>i7</sup> observes:

*The most important detail to consider is the place Peter asks to go.*

*...He's not trying to **be** Jesus; he is trying to be **with** him.*

Skinner also says, "Sometimes, incredibly turbulent places are also 'thin places' where God breaks through." Preacher Carla Works<sup>8</sup> notes that "If Jesus had not forced the disciples to embark on this uncertain journey, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst."

Take heart, my friends. It is Jesus. Do not be afraid.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Skinner, "Faith Within the Chaos."

<sup>8</sup> Carla Works, "Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33."