

# Do Not Be Afraid

Matthew 14:22-33

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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October 3, 2021/19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/World Communion Sunday

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Many Sundays, I get up behind this pulpit to preach with bad news ringing in my ears. Sometimes it's an email, a text, a conversation minutes before worship.

Almost always, someone is in trouble and someone who loves them is asking for prayer.

As I stand before you today, I am thinking of Terry Williams, Phil and Mary Dyck's son-in-law who is recovering in Calgary from a bad accident. Mary sent out an update yesterday afternoon and the road ahead looks to be a long one.

And I am thinking of Kathy Wiebe and Ruth Franz who lost a brother to COVID yesterday.

That's just the bad news from the last twenty-four hours or so. There are other stories too, obviously. Some are spoken out loud, many are not. Some are global in scope; some are painfully private.

Last week I quoted Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren's book, *Prayer in the Night*. In it, she says that to be human is to be "small and mortal and very, very vulnerable."

Our gospel story this morning is one where the disciples likely feel precisely this: small, mortal, and very, very vulnerable.

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The reading begins with an interesting image. Jesus, alone, on the top of a mountain, praying.

The disciples, down below, in the middle of a storm.

As I pondered this image this week, I couldn't help but be reminded of how often this is exactly how things feel for each one of us.

We're in the middle of a raging storm, whether it's the storm of a health crisis or a relationship breakdown, or the loss of employment, or depression or anxiety about the future in the midst of a pandemic, or any other thing that seems overwhelming and threatening and scary...

We're thrashing around in stormy waters while the waves batter against our frail little boats. We're wondering how on earth we ended up here, asking why we didn't make some better choices, taken some different turns. We're straining to see the shore through the wind and pelting rain and we're not sure we have the strength to paddle there even if we could see it.

We're feeling small, mortal and very, very vulnerable...

All of this is going on... and Jesus is somewhere else.

He's off doing holy things, praying on a mountain somewhere. Which is fine, but it's not particularly useful to us down in the storm. We'd rather he come and do something more obvious and impressive. A miracle would be nice. You know, fix a few things for us.

I suspect Peter felt the same. Where are you, Lord? We're drowning here!

And then, after long hours of struggling in the storm (evening until dawn is a long time, especially in a storm!), Jesus is there.

But Peter and the disciples aren't sure if it's really him. They're afraid. Maybe they're hallucinating. Maybe it's a ghost. Maybe it's something worse.

We who read their story from a distance might be forgiven for wondering: What's wrong with them? Haven't they just witnessed Jesus miraculously feeding five thousand people on the hillside? Don't they remember that Jesus calmed a raging storm back in Matthew 8? Surely, they know by now that Jesus is capable of the miraculous!

But fear is a more natural response than faith, then and now.

Jesus calls out to them: "Take courage, it is I. Don't be afraid."

It's interesting that this is what he says. The Greek words we translate as "It is I" are *Ego eimi*, which literally means, "I am."

It's how the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) translates the voice of God out of the burning bush when a quaking Moses asks who he should tell the Israelite slaves has sent him.

I am who I am (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus is identifying himself, as he does throughout the book of Matthew, with God himself. Matthew does not want us to miss that this is a profoundly theological claim about the very nature and identity of Jesus.

And this theological claim which echoes back to the Old Testament is immediately followed by one of the most consistent refrains in all of Scripture, whenever heaven interrupts business as usual here on earth. *Do not be afraid.*

It is I. Don't be afraid.

God is here. Therefore, fear must go.

Well, clearly Peter misses all of this weighty theological symbolism. His response is one of trembling apprehension, even doubt.

*If it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.*

And Jesus, not for the last time, graciously accommodates Peter's unbelief. "Come," he says. Just that one word. *Come.*

For a while, Peter does ok. His eyes are on Jesus and—incredibly! —he's walking on water.

But then the wind picks up, and Peter's fear returns. He cries out to Jesus for rescue. And Jesus reaches out to save him (also, not for the last time).

"You of little faith," Jesus says. "Why did you doubt?" They climb in the boat and the storm subsides.

The story ends with the disciples worshiping Jesus: "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is the main point of the story. The story is first and foremost about Jesus and Jesus' identity.

I've listened to a lot of sermons on this story that say some version of, "Now, we must learn from Peter and have faith to get out of the comfort of our boats and take a step of faith," or "We must keep our eyes on Jesus instead of the storms of life," or "We must not doubt like Peter but believe."

There is some truth in these applications—there are undoubtedly practical lessons of faith to learn from Peter’s role in this story.

But before any of that, it must *first* be said this story is not primarily an object lesson in human faithfulness (or lack thereof). It is one of many revelations in the gospels of the identity of Jesus and of the way in which Jesus reveals God to us.

Jesus is again revealed to be the one who is Lord over the chaotic and turbulent storm. The one who walked on water is the same one who hovered over the waters of the deep and breathed the world into being.

Jesus is revealed to be the one who comes to us in our weakness, frailty, and faithlessness. Don’t be afraid, I am here. I am with you in the storm. I will pick you up when you fall. I will lead you out the other side.

Even though you can’t see it now, even though things look dark and bleak, even though you’ve been struggling for quite a while, the storm will pass. I am with you both now and then.

I want to note two other things.

First, Jesus comes to us. Jesus makes the first move. Matthew 14:25: Shortly before dawn, Jesus went out to them...

Just before dawn is when things often seem the darkest, don’t they?

I don’t know how it is for you, but when I’m having trouble sleeping, this is the time of the night when I am often at my least rational, when I find it easiest to give into my deepest fears and insecurities and doubts and suspicions.

In the story, it is at *just this moment*—this time of the night when things seem darkest—that Jesus makes the first move. He goes out to them.

And he comes to meet us in our storms as well. Jesus is always coming out *to* us, offering comfort, hope, rescue. Always saying the same thing: Do not be afraid.”

Second, Jesus asks us to take a step in faith. In the story, this invitation is in response to a test from Peter. *If it’s you, tell me to come.* And so, Jesus accommodates Peter’s request

But Jesus is always offering this same invitation to each one of us, in every situation in our lives, whether it’s in the middle of a storm or when waters are a bit calmer.

Come. Take a step of faith. And then another. And then another.

He says to us what he said to Peter. “Come.” Even if your faith seems inadequate, even if it seems impossible, even if you’re afraid of failing or falling. I will be here to pick you up and set you back on the path.

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As you know, today is World Communion Sunday. It is a Sunday where we come to Jesus together, with Christians around the world of every tribe and tongue, to a common table, a common confession, a common hope, a common love.

The worldwide church is really nothing more or less than this broad swath of humanity, across time and space, who have found Jesus to be present amidst the storm, and who have come and keep coming to him in faith.

Whatever our denominational distinctives, whatever our cultural realities, whatever our liturgies and styles of worship, whatever our demographics, whatever our socioeconomic status, we are all *at the very least* united by these most basic postures.

We cling to Jesus in the storm. We keep taking steps of faith toward him together, confident that he is the one who has the words of eternal life. To whom else would we go?

I want to close with the words of Ben Myers who is an Australian theologian that I admire. I’ve quoted him before. He recently wrote a little book containing reflections on each line of the Apostle’s Creed, this declaration of faith that Christians around the world accept.

Here’s what he says on the line “I believe in the communion of saints”:

Becoming a Christian is not really about institutional membership or about adopting a system of ideas. To become a Christian is to be included in the circle of Jesus’ followers. I am washed with the same bath that Jesus and his followers have had. I get to share the same meal that Jesus shared with his followers. Four of Jesus’ followers have left written records of what he said and what he was like, and I get to spend my life continually pondering these four accounts. I read them not because I am studying ideas about Jesus but because I am studying him. **I want everything in my life, right down to the smallest and most disappointing details, to enter somehow into communion with the life of Jesus.**

I share the holy bath and the holy meal, and I read the holy stories [like Jesus walking on water] because I am seeking Jesus. But when I do these things, I am also seeking myself. I want to find myself among the circle of Jesus' followers. I want to be wherever Jesus is—and he is in the company of his friends. I want my whole life to be “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). I want my life's small story to be tucked into the folds of Jesus' story.

**When this happens, my life acquires a meaning beyond itself. I begin to see myself as part of a great company, an ever-widening circle of people who have handed their lives over to the pattern of Jesus' life. This great company of disciples seems to speak with one voice, to breathe with one Spirit, to cry “Abba, Father!” with one unceasing prayer (Rom 8:15-16).**

The Fourth Gospel ends by telling us that it has offered only a glimpse of Jesus. If everything Jesus did was written down, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

Perhaps at the end of the age, the Total Gospel will be read out and will be found to contain everything—every life, every story, every human grief and joy, all included as episodes in the one great, infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends. The world itself is too small for such a book. Life and death are too small for the communion of saints.<sup>1</sup>

May we, with our sisters and brothers around the world, speak with one voice today,

Abba, Father. We want to come to you.

To find healing, to find hope, to find shelter in the storm.

We want to know that you are here, that you are never far from us. And that fear must go.

We want to be where you are, in the company of your friends.

We want our stories to find their place in yours.

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 110-11.

