

Jesus on the Water

Matthew 14:22–33

Center Church, Hartford

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A storm was brewing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had sent the disciples away in the boat to go to the other side while he stayed behind for a prayer retreat. God knows he must have needed it. He had heard that week that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been arrested and then beheaded by Herod. He had worked with doubting disciples to feed 5000 people who had come to hear him teach. He must have needed a break from people for a little while.

That night, out on the sea, the wind came up and the waves began to lash that fishing boat. Some aboard fished for a living, so they knew how to handle the boat, but it was rough going. During the struggle, someone shouted that Jesus appeared to be coming toward them across the water, no, **on** the water and not in a boat! Had the authorities captured Jesus and beheaded him, too, so that now they saw his ghost? But no, the familiar words came from Jesus, “don’t be afraid.” Not of him. Not of the waves. Don’t be afraid.

Peter claimed that boldness and sought to join Jesus on the water; if Jesus had enabled the disciples to heal and to feed thousands, surely walking on water could be another gift given. Why not?

Peter walked on water. He did. So often we focus on the fact that he saw the large waves, shivered as they lapped at his ankles, and felt the wind and so lost focus on Jesus. We emphasize the sinking and forget that Peter did, indeed, walk on the water! And when he sank, Jesus reached out a hand, pulled him up, and reminded him not to be afraid of the waves next time. When they both got in the boat, the wind ceased.

Jesus came to the disciples when the boat was being threatened by waves and wind. Jesus came to Peter when he stepped out in faith but lost his footing. Jesus came to them all and the winds calmed.

Jesus came. The Lutheran theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that this story is not about “morals, but...movement.” It’s not about Peter’s lack of faith or fear. It’s about Jesus coming to the disciples, Jesus reaching out a hand to Peter, and it’s about Peter climbing out of the boat and walking on the water toward Jesus.

Here’s what I love about Peter’s movement in this story. The other disciples see Jesus coming across those wind-blown waves, and after they overcome their fear that he is dead, they must be relieved

that he will now keep them safe, so they stay put. Peter, on the other hand, senses the opportunity to make a move into unknown waters, as it were, and to try to do something he had never done before. While the other disciples sat still, and who can blame them, Peter decided the situation called for some movement. Yes, he sank, but Jesus reached out a hand and Peter, trusting, took hold of that hand and climbed back into the boat with his Savior. But I bet he wouldn't have traded one second on that water, scared, for being safe in the boat. I have to believe that in the months and years to come, when Peter led the disciples into unknown waters in so many ways, when he took the chance on eating and speaking with Gentiles in the home of Cornelius when others said only Jews could be part of the Christian Community, and when he went to Rome to preach in a move that would cost him his life, he had to remember that night on the sea. He had to remember that he walked on that water, and that when he faltered, Jesus reached out. So much movement came later because of the confidence Peter gained that night. Jesus was there on the water before Peter got out of the boat and Jesus was there on the water when Peter needed help getting back in the boat.

In order for all that to happen, Peter had to get out of the boat.

It's not about morals, it's about movement.

Wherever you are right this minute is the boat you are in. And whatever boat you are in, you are in it in the midst of the wind and waves blowing all around us these days. Maybe you have some local wind and waves in your life that are your first concern in the midst of the bigger storm of disease, economic struggles, and systemic racism rearing its ugly head again and again in this nation. There is wind, beloved, and there are waves. The boat may seem safe, or not, but the sea surely isn't.

There is also Jesus, present in the midst of it, not just standing there, but coming toward us, always. Moving, always. There is safety in staying put and waiting for Jesus to calm the storm. No judgement on the disciples who decided then or now to do just that. But today, I want us all to think for a moment about our particular boat and the particular sea around us and where Jesus is right now with us. Does the situation call for some movement? What's holding you back and what's calling you forward? What's keeping you still and what's pushing you to move? If you feel alone, can you see not only Jesus, but the church and others with you?

There is something more waiting for you if you decide to get out of the boat and enter into the storm, moving toward Jesus who moves toward you, beckoning.

Imagine for a moment that Jesus might be calling you to come out of the boat. Why? What is out there that you might need to do in our current stormy situation? What might take some courage, perhaps foolish in the eyes of some (imagine there must have been at least one disciple who shouted, “Peter have you lost your mind?”).

Goodness knows, we need some folk to get out of boats these days. We need some folks who are ready to feel uncomfortable, face fear, find a sense of purpose. We need some folks who see that the situation calls for movement.

Is it you? Amen.