

Psalm 105:1-4
Exodus 3:1-15
Matthew 14:22-33

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“I Am.”

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TAKE COURAGE!...IT IS I.

The event described in our New Testament scripture this morning takes place immediately following the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. The crowd has been fed and cared for, and evening has come. Matthew 14:22-33 begins with Jesus doing what we have seen him do on many occasions, taking time alone to be with God.

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come.” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

A week ago yesterday, my musician son Alex left his home in Boston to move to Germany. I’ve had a few months to get used to the idea, but when Alex first told me of his plans, my initial reaction was fear. Where will he live? How will he live? Will anything bad happen to him when he’s so far away? Alex convinced me that though on some level, he had the same fears, he also knew that Germany was where he needed to be to take the next step on his life’s journey. He obtained a job teaching music at an international school, learned the German style of playing his double bass, and last week, he boarded

a plane to begin his new life. Today's Scripture passage helps me to know that he did the right thing, and that he'll be okay.

The disciples in our story have set off by themselves as well. On Jesus' command, they have gone ahead of him by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. While Jesus remains alone on the mountain, praying, the disciples have found themselves in the midst of a violent night storm on the sea. They are far from the safety of the shore, the wind is against them, and they're being battered by strong waves. They're in trouble, and they need a Savior.

I have a recurring dream of traveling by car either through a heavy rainstorm or in the middle of a snowstorm in white-out conditions. I can't see the road, and the terrifying thing is that I'm still moving. I usually have this dream when I feel my life is moving out of control, and anxieties surround me.

What is your recurring dream, and what does it represent for you? Perhaps you don't need a dream to tell you when you're experiencing chaos in your life or are burdened by worries and fears. This is the situation that Matthew is describing in this story.

Now, look carefully at how Jesus responds. Renewed by the Spirit of God, he turns to the sea and notices the predicament of his disciples. He goes to them in their distress, not carried by a wooden boat, but by the power of God in him that is able to overcome the wind and the waves. He has already conquered what threatens them.

When the disciples look out and see a man walking on the stormy water, they don't recognize him as Jesus but scream out in fear of what they think is a ghost. Quickly Jesus reassures them with the words, *"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*

The Greek words most often translated as "It is I." or "I am here." are more accurately expressed as "I Am." We've heard these words before at the burning bush. Matthew is emphasizing here that God's power is present in the person of Jesus. The I Am is there with the disciples in the middle of the night, in the middle of the storm.

There is one disciple who needs proof. Peter says to Jesus, *"Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."*

How many times in the midst of our storms, or our uncertainty about which way to turn do we ask, "Are you there?" "Is it you?"

I have a friend who, at significant times in her life, has had a white feather appear to her as if from nowhere. At first she didn't take much notice, but when it happened again and again, she began to listen. "Yes, it's me. I am here."

Several years ago in a church meeting, an elder shared about a certain song that would mysteriously play on his radio when he was in particular need of guidance and assurance. He told us tearfully about a time when he was struggling with a decision that would deeply affect his family, and just as he pulled his car into his garage, that song came on the radio. The comfort it gave him was real. "I am here."

And finally, you can ask my husband Mark about the arm that he felt encircling his shoulder as he stood alone in our kitchen one anguished night. "You're not alone. I am here."

Just as the disciples needed to know that Jesus would come to them in the storm, I think Jesus understood that Peter couldn't quite believe until he experienced himself, what could be done through the power of God. Jesus used Peter's doubt to demonstrate to him that the Son of God was indeed there, overcoming human limitations and making possible, the impossible. Jesus didn't stop the storm then, but with God's power working in and through him, he showed Peter how he himself could also walk above it.

Have you ever come to the end of something and then afterward thought to yourself, "That must have been God, because that could never have happened without him."

I have too.

Another true test of Jesus' identity could have been this: "Lord, if it's you, catch me when I fall, because I'm human and fallible. I can be bold if I know I'm walking toward you, but I still need your net for when I fall short, when I doubt, when I try and fail, when I'm far from you, when everything seems against me, when I need saving. When that happens, give me your hand, and walk me to safety."

Matthew tells us: *Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.*

I like the way Eugene Peterson's The Message translates Jesus' next words to Peter following this episode: "*Faint-heart, what got into you?*" Faint-heart appears in the text with a dash between the words. It reads to me, not as a rebuke, but as if Jesus is looking at Peter and truly seeing him. "Faint-heart, you had it! Remember that!"

Last February, I traveled to Houston to visit my parents. My dad is 87 years old. Rather rapidly now, he's losing his eyesight, his hearing, and his ability to walk. He had some doctor's appointments while I was there, and as he slowly walked into the medical building and through the hallways, my mom gave him her arm. She told me later that he sees her as solid and strong, and feels secure with her. The truth is, he should be using his walker, but he wants a real hand with life in it guiding him. I can understand that. They walk through their storm together. My mom holds her husband over the water, and Jesus holds her. They're an extraordinary couple.

As Jesus leads Peter back into the boat, the sea is calmed. The witnesses have seen enough. The disciples proclaim and worship Jesus as truly the Son of God, and they are changed forever.

With renewed purpose, the disciples will next join Jesus in his work on the other side of the Sea of Galilee as the crowds gather again with their sick, and he heals them all. Soon, it will be the disciples' turn.

We know where God is in this story, but where are you?

Are you sitting in calm waters enjoying the gentle rhythm of the waves against the side of your boat? Pray prayers of gratitude for the peace of this season and for the beauty of your current view.

Is the water beneath you beginning to churn as you hold onto the sides of the boat for security? Look for Jesus walking toward you, and listen for his reassuring voice.

Have you found yourself in the water, faced with challenges that you worry you can't handle alone, a human trying to walk on water? Take heart. You're not alone. Jesus is out there with you. As your arms reach out to catch your balance, his hand is there to steady you. What a relief to know that you don't have to have **all** the strength.

But let us consider one more possibility. Perhaps you're in a boat that's comfortable and familiar, but like Peter, you're looking outward feeling drawn toward a hazy vision. Is it Jesus or a ghost? Peter said, *"Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."*

Peter knew that the true Jesus would challenge him. The path toward which Jesus would call his disciple would be difficult. It would require risk, a conquering of fear, a re-ordering of limiting beliefs, a letting go... and a trustful walking toward. It would require growth. To Peter, Jesus said, *"Come,"* and with conviction and courage, Peter accepted the challenge and stepped out.

Maybe **you're** ready to step out and follow Jesus' call to something new. This passion you have, this special way about you, this affinity that you feel toward something might just be leading you into the fullness of who God made you to be. Maybe you have to get out of the boat to learn what it is that you, a child of God, are capable of. You may be about to find out that you can walk.

It's likely that depending on the day, or the situation, you're a character in all of these scenarios. That's the nature of the sea and the nature of life. And we can know that, in times of stillness, turbulence, or calling, it's Jesus' nature to draw near, to give us strength and to show us the way.

As I've watched Alex prepare for his move, I see that he is getting his sea legs, and I see the new person he is becoming. He'll probably fall and get up and fall again and get up stronger. Thank you, Jesus, for catching him. Thank you, Jesus, for catching us. Amen.