

“Drowning in Fear”

Matthew 14:22-33

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It was a dark and stormy night. It did not start out that way, but the weather changed abruptly and threatened the lives of everyone on the Sea of Galilee. This included Jesus’ twelve disciples.

Why were they on the sea that late at night? Jesus sent them to a distant shore so he could have some time alone before joining them the next day. Listen as I give you the details of this dramatic rescue.

Jesus and the disciples had been traveling to the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee so Jesus could teach and respond to the needs of those who were struggling to survive. As you would expect, he was welcomed by many in these communities, which alarmed some of the religious leaders.

They were threatened by his message and popularity. Jesus exposed the religious leaders’ insincerity and hypocrisy and called on them to repent, which they refused to do. Even in these early days of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew tells us these leaders were plotting to kill him and silence his voice.

This helps you to understand why the news Jesus received about John the Baptist hit him hard. John, the last Old Testament prophet and the one who baptized Jesus, had been killed by the Roman leader, Herod.

Jesus felt a deep sense of gratitude to John for endorsing him and encouraging people to follow him. Jesus knew that John’s support and influence were the primary reasons his public ministry got off to a good start.

For this reason, Jesus needed to take a break from traveling to grieve John’s sudden death and to think about his own future. This is why Jesus decided to go with the disciples to a remote area around the sea where he would have time to reflect and pray.

Evidently, someone heard where Jesus was going and began telling others. Word spread quickly among the people in the nearby villages and towns that Jesus was coming to their area, so by the time Jesus and the disciples arrived, thousands of people were waiting for them.

Jesus did not have the heart to send them away disappointed. He made the decision to suspend his retreat in order to teach the masses and to heal those who were sick.

As the day drew to a close, Jesus refused to send the people home hungry as his disciples suggested. He chose, instead, to make it possible for everyone to eat using the five loaves and two fish a little boy in the crowd graciously offered.

After everyone had eaten and the crowd dispersed, Jesus turned his attention to the retreat he had planned. He insisted his disciples get into the boat as the sun was going down and head to the other side of the sea. He intended to spend the night alone and to join them the next day.

All was calm when the disciples embarked on their journey, but that changed sometime in the night. The disciples were a great distance from any shore when a storm arose. It must have been severe because it caught Jesus' attention.

From his vantage point on the bank, Jesus could see the disciples struggling to keep the boat from capsizing. He knew his quiet night of reflection and prayer was going to be interrupted again.

The same compassion that compelled Jesus to help the people waiting for him when he landed on the shore of the Sea of Galilee the day before now led him to go to the aid his own disciples. He made his way out to their boat while the storm was raging, terrifying them even more. Due to low visibility and the absence of a boat carrying this person, the disciples thought Jesus was a ghost.

Jesus was aware of the commotion he had caused and called to the disciples. "It is I," Jesus told them, words that sounded eerily similar to what God said to a frightened Moses at the burning bush. "Do not be afraid."

Still struggling to see Jesus clearly, Peter replied, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," Jesus said.

It appears Peter was able to walk on the water for a short time, but at some point fear overwhelmed Peter and he began to sink.

"Lord, save me!" he cried out, and Jesus did.

"You of little faith," Jesus said to Peter as he lifted him out of the water. "Why did you doubt?"

After Peter and Jesus climbed into the boat, the winds died down.

"Truly, you are the Son of God," the weary and grateful disciples proclaimed.

How does this story speak to us today? As I pondered this question last week, I was drawn to what Jesus said to Peter as he lifted him out of the angry waves.

“You of little faith. Why do you doubt?”

Quite frankly, this sounds a bit harsh. Who would not have struggled under those circumstances?

Surely, Jesus could have given Peter a pat on the back for even attempting such a feat. No other disciple jumped overboard, which I completely understand.

I love to swim, and I grew up near a state park and lake where I began water skiing as a child. Some of my fondest family memories are in a boat on that lake.

I jumped out of that boat and many others like it to swim or ski. It was second nature.

I still would not have crawled out of the boat that night on the Sea of Galilee. I would have gladly waited for Jesus to get to the boat and helped him to come aboard.

So, why didn't Jesus cut Simon Peter a little slack and compliment him for trying? I believe the answer lies in one particular word that Jesus used when pulling Peter out of that wave. It is the word, doubt.

This word is not a reference to skepticism or unbelief. It means to vacillate, to be indecisive or to waver between different opinions or actions. In Peter's case, it meant to quit believing what he knew in his heart to be true when he got out of that boat.

Why did Peter do this? Why did he trust Jesus enough to get into the stormy water but not enough to sustain him until he was by Jesus' side?

He took his eyes off of Jesus and focused his attention on those billowing waves, didn't he? In other words, he chose in that moment to believe that storm and those waves were stronger than Jesus and the God who sent him.

What was the message Matthew wanted to send to the early Christians? Throughout their lives, they would encounter many stiff challenges that would seek to undermine their faith and confidence in God. They would be tempted, like Peter, to believe those challenges were stronger than Jesus and the God who sent him. Through this story, Matthew wanted to encourage them to remain loyal and faithful to the God who would always be faithful to them.

What is Matthew's message to us? Like the early Christians, we, too, need to place our unwavering faith in God and believe that God will see us through any challenge we face.

How many times have we started down a path on our faith journey only to stop and turn around? At times, there may be valid reasons for doing this, but losing confidence in God is not one of them.

We do not need to be afraid to make ourselves available to God, nor fearful of offering ourselves to God's service as John the Baptist and Jesus did. God will never abandon us, and we will never encounter anything beyond God's ability to change for the better.

At all times and in all places, God will work on our behalf to bring good out of bad and hope out of despair. God's love for us is unconditional and everlasting.

Because of this, we must always be strong of heart and faithful, fully confident of God's abiding presence, goodness and mercy. Too much is at stake and too many are depending upon us to be good role models for us to put our hands to the plow and look back.

If we truly believe God blesses those who choose love over hate, kindness over cruelty, truth over deception, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, sacrifice over self-indulgence, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over violence, then we must live this way every day.

If we believe God will give us, just as he gave John the Baptist and Jesus, the ability to speak the truth to power by demanding justice for all God's beloved children, then we must become their advocates.

If we believe God will equip and enable us to challenge the powers of darkness and evil that we saw in Charlottesville two weeks ago, then we must speak out and condemn all forms of hatred, bigotry, racism and violence.

If we as a church believe God wants us to make hope visible by lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, clothing the naked, repairing broken down houses, providing toys for children whose parents cannot afford them, teaching underprivileged children to play instruments and welcoming all who walk through these doors looking for comfort and companionship, then we must continue to give ourselves away and not grow weary in well doing.

If we believe God will always come to us when we are struggling to keep our head above water, then we must keep our eyes on Jesus and listen to our faith instead of our fears. If we do, we'll reveal a faith that moves mountains and transforms communities.

Just ask Simon Peter. This man who almost drown that night on the Sea of Galilee when fear overwhelmed him became the most vocal and prominent leader of the church in the years immediately after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

How? His faith in Jesus was greater than his fear of the storms he faced.

Is your faith this strong, resilient and courageous? Do you have more confidence in God than fear of the storms that may be swirling around you?

What do you need to do this week to strengthen your faith? What would help you to keep from getting distracted so you can keep your eyes on Jesus? What role does the Holy Spirit want to play in this process?

Think about this as we sing our final hymn.