

“Thinking Outside of the Boat”
August 27, 2023

Exodus 14:19-31
Matthew 14:22-33

Look at Peter and the other disciples, huddled together in a boat, battered by the waves, far from the land, with the wind against them.

Here, I think, the Bible gets it right in describing the human situation.

Throughout Scripture, the image of the sea suggests the chaos that always threatens us, the chaos that is held at bay only by the grace and power of God. As one person put it: “To the biblical mind, being on the sea is itself a threat. To be at sea evokes images of death. And here, of course, it is the sea that separates the disciples from Jesus, who represents the presence of God.”¹

I’m willing to bet that you’ve felt something like this—alone in the boat, buffeted by the storm and the waves. There probably have been times when you’ve felt separated from the presence of God, when you’ve been uncertain about the love of God. Maybe now is one of those times for you. If so, it is especially good that you are here today.

As the waves picked up and the wind got stronger, I wonder if those followers of Jesus thought: “Well, here we go again.”

Some time earlier, as Matthew’s Gospel tells the story, the disciples found themselves in another storm-tossed boat. That time, Jesus was with them, which you’d think would be good—but Jesus was asleep! He was so oblivious to the plight of the disciples that they had to wake him up, yelling: “Lord, we are perishing!”

Some say that these are words of doubt, indicating a suspicion that God either isn’t there or doesn’t care. Others hear these words as a pathetic attempt to awaken God to our plight.

But even more, the cry, “Lord, we are perishing!” is a prayer from our hearts. It is said that we can only love something that can be threatened, endangered, or which could cease to exist altogether. This prayer, then, is a prayer of love, spoken in the face of life’s frightening fragility.

We are frightened because *we do care*. We are restless and worried and fearful because we do love our neighbors as ourselves; because we do love our world and our nation and its people. When what we love is threatened, we cry out.

Like those ancient disciples, we know as well, from hard experience, that there are often no quick or easy ways through the storms.

And here we go again.

This time, Jesus isn’t even around.

You see, right before *this* storm, Jesus sent the disciples away so that he could be alone.

Here's what happened.

Jesus was told that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been brutally executed by Herod. Matthew simply tells us that on hearing this, Jesus sought a deserted place where he could be alone. In one of the most poignant scenes in all the gospels, we see Jesus at his most human, grieving, troubled, pulling back. He needed, it seems, to be away from both the crowds and those followers who were closest to him.

But the crowds find him and come to him, seeking healing. There are so many of them and Jesus has compassion for them. He feeds them—which is another story entirely—then, still seeking solitude Jesus sends his disciples away; then he sends the crowds away; then he goes away himself, the compassionate and grieving Jesus, finally alone, finally able to pray.

And out on the sea, separated from Jesus, his followers are threatened once more. Look at them in the boat. You'll probably recognize yourself on board as well.

After enduring the storm alone, while the dawn is still dark, the disciples see a figure walking toward them. It looks a little like, yes, like Jesus.

Of all that he might have done, why would Jesus come to his followers in this way, at this time? Is it not that he needed to be near them; that he discovered in his solitary grief how much he needed his followers? Can we see something of God's deep desire to be with us in this man walking on the sea in order to reconnect with his community?

But since Jesus is walking *on water* his disciples are terrified. One translation of this story tells of their response: "'It's a ghost!' they said, and screamed with fear."

Is this a vision, a hallucination—or is it indeed a ghost coming near?

Of all the stories, why would Matthew tell of disciples who thought they'd seen a ghost?

Think of those who first heard this story, some years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was not physically present to them. Could it be that the early Christians, trying to live faithful lives in a perilous world at times experienced Jesus as *not* very real? They had placed their faith in this Jesus. They had found new life in following this Jesus. In the face of persecution and ostracism, did they worry that he was *not* going to be there for them—that he would be no more than a wisp of smoke?

It would be a terrifying thought for those disciples out in that storm tossed boat.

It would be a terrifying thought for those early Christians.

It is also frightening for us in our time.

Doubt nags us. Even as people pray and seek to live faithful lives at home, at work, at school, I know there is the worry that God is not around. Or at least that is my fear at times. I know what Reynolds Price meant when he said that “Few believers known to me have survived midlife without the sense of occasional or frequent, desertions by God or absences of God’s interest, or—hardest of all—God’s intentional silences.”²

And you know that this is not a problem simply for those beyond middle age. Such desertions, absences, or silences are known to college students and young adults as well.

Have we been fooled into seeing what isn't there?

Is this a ghost or is it the living Christ?

Listen! Matthew always gives more weight to what can be heard than to what can be seen. If your eyes cannot be trusted, listen. In the midst of the storm Jesus says: “It's all right! It's I myself. Don't be afraid!” Literally, Jesus says: “I am”—the very name of the God of the Jewish people.

Our modern minds hear this story and start thinking in terms of the law of gravity. We think of all the jokes and cartoons about Jesus walking on water. The image becomes absurd, the story an occasion for laughter.

The biblical mind was more concerned with the One who overcomes the power of chaos, represented by the sea. “Walking on water” is a phrase that speaks of the conquest of chaos. In biblical thought, only God walks on the sea.

Here, in the middle of this story, Jesus does what only God can do. Jesus speaks as only God can speak. The disciples, the early church, and we today discover God with us in Christ, speaking those incredible words: “Take courage. Do not be afraid. I am.”

There is something real here, after all. There has been something *real* here all along—we just need to be reminded of it again and again. In his book, *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, Reynolds Price—who knew of God’s desertion, absence, and silence—reflects on his struggle with cancer and concludes: “I know I believe God loves God’s creation . . . So surely God works and watches, in some sense—no doubt many senses—from love . . . I don't claim certainty for much else I've said. But that claim feels like firm ground to me.”³

God works and watches from love.

We can trust in the God revealed to us in this Jesus who comes to us on storm tossed seas.

Still, is anybody willing to get out of the boat and start walking *toward* this figure?

We remember the story of Peter, who looks and is able to see more than a specter. We remember the story of Peter, who listens and is able to recognize more than a ghostly voice. We remember, and hope that his sight and hearing are better than our own.

At this point Peter begins to think this is no ghost, but is actually the One whom he has chosen to follow. “Lord,” Peter calls out over the wind, “If it's really you tell me to come to you on the water.”

At Peter's request, Jesus says to him: “Come on, then,” and he takes his first tentative steps out onto the sea.

Peter thinks outside of the boat.

Learning to walk is never easy. It takes time and practice. We see toddlers taking those first hesitant steps, only to fall—and then try again. And, let's be honest, we don't come to walking on water naturally. It's hard to negotiate the waves without starting to sink. But Jesus calls us to learn to walk in a new way. And we learn by practice out in the world.

The world is chaotic. Bad things happen. Innocent people are hurt. Hunger, racism, violence, homophobia, greed, and sexism are very real evils that we face—even in our city. Walk out our doors and look as the winds blow and the waves batter everyone.

God alone conquers the chaos. But we are invited to walk on those waves as well. We are called to take courageous stands for what is right, what is loving, even as the winds and waves rage.

Of course, such courage is fleeting.

Look now and watch as Peter begins to sink after taking only a couple of steps. The reality of the situation is overwhelming.

You know, I find a lot of comfort in this. To me the story would have been scarier if Peter had stayed on top of the water. At least this way we know what happens when we start to go under.

It is not a ghost, but the living Christ who comes toward us.

It is not a ghost, but the One who commands even the wind and the sea who reaches out to catch us when the waves are high, the waters deep.

Again and again, however, God's generous compassion and mercy, God's strength and courage are thought to be ghostlike. Again and again, we opt for something of our own making, something that we think is more concrete, and we end up with the sinking feeling that the water around us is rising.

Just then, God comes toward us; just then, God reaches out to us.

If we open our eyes, if we listen closely, the ghost we see—all that frightens us, all that leads us to give up hope—the ghost we see may actually be Jesus: God moving toward us, giving us faith enough to walk even on stormy seas, there to catch us when we fall.

Think outside of the boat—for that is where we are most of the time.

Hear again the words of Jesus: “Take heart. Do not be afraid.”

¹ Page: 1

NIB, Matthew, pg. 327

² Reynolds Price, *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, pg. 36.

³ Ibid, pg. 84-85.