

Faith and Fear

^{NRS} **Matthew 14:22** Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Faith and Fear

The story of Jesus walking on the water may well be familiar. The phrase has found its way into everyday usage. When we talk about someone who is a legend in their own mind, we say, "He thinks he can walk on water!"

Perhaps we should note that the disciples have left in the boat to cross the lake because Jesus compelled them to do so. He made them do this. This wasn't some foolish impulse on their part. Nevertheless, they were struck by a storm and were being battered and tossed about by the waves. Being obedient disciples didn't shield them from trouble or danger. Obviously, the storms of life afflict the righteous as well as the wicked.

As the disciples cry out in fear, they hear a voice. "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid!" Twice Jesus speaks to their fear. "Have courage," he says. "Fear not!" That's pretty much the story as told by Mark and John (Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21) and Matthew - except Matthew also tells about Peter stepping out onto the water. And we aren't entirely sure about what to think of Peter. Peter said, "Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come meet you." What is Peter doing? Is he testing Jesus?¹ Is he in effect questioning Jesus? Let's see just how much power you really have? Or, is this one of those examples of Peter's impulsiveness, of leaping before looking? Peter tends to get a bad rap in Biblical interpretation. We think of him as the man who denied even knowing Jesus on the night that Jesus was betrayed and brought before a kangaroo court. But we overlook the fact that he was the only disciple that even dared to risk showing up on that terrible night! In today's reading, Peter is ready to go to Jesus, even if it involves walking on water. He barely looks before leaping. Certainly that's better than those who look for so long that they never get around to leaping.²

Here came Jesus walking toward them on the water. We tend to jump on this and focus on the miracle. "See? He's walking on the water! That proves that he's God! We get all turned around wanting to prove who Jesus is and we neglect to hear what Jesus is teaching. In this story, walking on the water isn't so much a sign of divinity - as it is an indication of being empowered by God through trusting in God. Think about it. Peter walked on the water, too. Peter wasn't divine, he wasn't God, but because of his trust in God, he was empowered to walk on the water.

Peter said, "Lord, since it's you, command me to come meet you." And Jesus replied, "Come." Peter stepped over the side of the boat and started walking to Jesus. The text says that then he noticed the wind, he became frightened, and he began to sink. Jesus had just said, "Have courage. I'm here. Don't be afraid!" And what did Peter do? He let fear get a hold of him!

The admonition to "Fear not" or "Be not afraid" is everywhere! There are at least thirty-eight instances where God's people are told not to be afraid! It's everywhere from Genesis to First John.

When the Hebrews were leaving Egypt, Pharaoh sent his army out to chase them down and bring them back. When the Hebrews saw the world's mightiest army bearing down on them, they were scared. The horses were charging, the glint of the desert sun reflected off of hundreds of spears and swords. The only future was death or slavery. And Moses told the Hebrews, "Fear not!"

Elijah the prophet came upon a poor widow who was gathering sticks to cook the last meal before she and her son would starve to death. And Elijah said, "Do not be afraid!"

A poor carpenter, about to be married, finds out that his fiancé is pregnant, and he knows that he isn't the father. A voice tells Joseph, "Be not afraid." (Matthew 1:20)

On Easter morning, two women were in a cemetery as the sky began to lighten with the dawn, felt the ground shake and saw a figure as dazzling as lightning with brilliant white robes. It scared the Roman soldiers so bad that they fainted. And the angel said to Mary and Mary Magdalene, "Do not be afraid." (Matthew 28: 5, 10)

Over and over again, in the face of war and violence, in the face of starvation, in the face of conquest and slavery, in the face of family disaster, in the face of supernatural forces, and in the face of wind and waves out on the lake, the message is always, "Fear not!"

Fear stagnates and ties us up. We're afraid to raise questions - and so we fail to find answers. We attend worship - but we're afraid to invite someone else. We know that we are to care for the needy - but we're afraid that someone will take advantage of us. We're told to give generously - but we're afraid that we might need the money. We dream of new members and filled pews - but we're afraid of change that pushes us beyond our comfort zone. It's fear that keeps us from acting on our faith. It's fear of the future - that keeps us from living in the kingdom of God today. We see the glass as half empty instead of half full.

Just a few years ago, there were lots of Sundays when there were no children here. One time, I felt that the "children's sermon" was so important that I told the story anyway! We didn't have anyone to keep the nursery during worship. Someone would volunteer to take children to the nursery, if there was a need. There was one young couple who came regularly - Mitch and Julie. Other young adults started coming. When there were three families, an opportunity for fellowship and study called POYQ was begun. Over the past three years or so, POYQ has almost tripled in size! The demographic of this congregation has changed. Of all of the families in this congregation, whether those families are couples or single people, young adults now make up twenty percent of those who come to worship on a regular basis. And that segment of the congregation is growing!

It's a common human tendency to see life through our individual circumstances. There are some of us who have lost family members and we've attended funerals for friends in this congregation. Our vision for the future has become short-term. And so perhaps we see the loss of friends more than we notice the wonderful wave of new families in our midst. But there's a saying that far-sightedness is when an eighty-year-old man

plants an oak tree. An act like that, looks beyond our self to the future of those around us. I invite all of us to have more faith in the future.

As a congregation, we began this year with many of us rather concerned about the church budget. And that has hung over many of us like a dark cloud and affected our attitude and our vision for the future. But if that's the case, it's time to snap out of it! Two weeks ago, the church received gifts from two families totaling \$ 25,000. The gifts have no restrictions on them. They are a pure expression of support and confidence in the work of First Pres.

There are two ways to react to these wonderful gifts. We can think, "How wonderful it is that somebody gave that money. I'm not as worried about the budget, now." It's a selfish response. How good of someone else to relieve my worries. That's all about me and that's not how we should react. It's far better to be inspired by these gifts, to realize that we, too, need to plant some oak trees for the future. The faith and confidence of others in the work and future of First Presbyterian Church should inspire the rest of us. We need to look beyond the loss of friends and see the younger faces that will be the bright future. They will carry the torch, shining the light of God's love in Thomasville as others grow weary from years of faithful service. That's calls for us to be generous, not cautious, with our gifts to the church. It calls for each of us to be planting oak trees for the future. It calls for us to see the glass as half full and envision ways to fill the glass brimming full and overflowing. It calls for us to envision a bright future and to work make the vision reality. It isn't up to others to facilitate the future strength of First Pres – it's up to all of us! And an important way to do that is to realize that our congregation is changing and we need to consciously support and encourage all segments of the congregation. In Christ we are all brothers and sisters, all family, and are to embrace and support slave and free, male and female, black, brown, and white, and old and young alike. (Galatians 3:26-29 NRS)

We criticize Peter for being impulsive, for leaping before looking. But certainly that's better than those who look for so long that they never get around to leaping.³ And it's important to note that Jesus doesn't criticize Peter for being impulsive. Instead, Jesus invites Peter to walk on water and empowers him to make it possible. When Peter experiences some resistance, some wind in his face, then he becomes afraid and he starts to sink. Jesus only criticizes Peter for being afraid – for lack of trust. We need to let go of our fear and move forward by trusting in God. It's time for us to step out in faith, to get out of the boat, be empowered by God, and do some walking on water! Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Fear not – there is a God.
Fear not – God is present.
Fear not – God does save.
Get out of the boat and walk on some water!

¹ Roger E. Van Harn, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) p 88-89

² George A Buttrick, *Matthew - The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 7* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 434

³ George A Buttrick, *Matthew - The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 7* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1951) p 434