

P11A 2023 Matthew 14:22-33

Although I know I attended chapel in college dozens of times, literally the only message I still remember was one of the coaches saying that when he was growing up, his pastor only preached two sermons, and one of them was on this text: Jesus and Peter walking on water. But apparently it wasn't a very good sermon, because he told us he remembered thinking, "Dear Peter, this week, can you please just stay in the boat?" I think he may be on to something.

To situate ourselves on the timeline of Matthew's story, Jesus found out that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded; he tries to take some time away to mourn, but the crowds follow him. Jesus has compassion on them, so he heals and then feeds 5,000 of them, not counting the women and children. But he still hasn't had time by himself to pray, so Jesus sends the disciples away by boat and goes up on the mountain by himself. I have been to the Sea of Galilee when the wind kicked up enough to change plans for a boat trip, so I cringe at the thought of the disciples on the sea at night, in the dark, in the kind of boat that they would have had 2,000 years ago, tossed about by the wind and the waves. Jesus walks to them on the water and, because live people don't usually do that, the disciples assume they're seeing a ghost.

Jesus announces himself and tells them not to be afraid. Now, after *earlier that same day* watching Jesus miraculously feed the multitude, we might expect that the disciples could have reasoned that if this person who is defying the laws of nature by walking on water says that he is Jesus, he is, in fact, Jesus. We might expect them to be overwhelmed with relief that he has shown up, with his supernatural abilities, and that if he has told them not to be afraid, that they can confidently trust him to help. Of course, that's not what happens.

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Well, what is Jesus supposed to say? It is him, so he invites Peter to come toward him. Peter gets out the boat and seems to be doing OK for a minute, but then he realizes what he's doing, panics, and starts to sink. "Lord, save me!" And Jesus does, with a question, "Why did you doubt?" They get in the boat, the wind dies down, and everyone worships Jesus as the Son of God.

You have probably heard, as I have heard, and as my college gym teacher heard every other week, that Jesus called Peter out of the boat to do this big, impossible thing—but that it wasn't impossible so long as Peter had faith! And Peter was doing just fine while he had his eyes on Jesus...but he lost focus, was distracted by the challenges around him, started doubting himself, and sank, to be rescued only when he remembered to call out to Jesus. So, stay

focused on God and you can do anything. That's a good motivational self-help story; but it's not what Matthew really says.

Jesus doesn't chastise Peter by saying he has too little faith. Remember that Jesus said you only need a mustard seed worth of faith to move mountains. Whatever faith Peter has, it's enough. So Jesus wants to know why Peter doubts. Often this is read as criticism of Peter for doubting *himself* while he is trying to walk on water...but discipleship isn't about trusting our own abilities; discipleship is about trusting Jesus. The point where Peter doubts is not on the water but before he ever gets out of the boat: "Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you." He is not satisfied with the assurance of Jesus' presence or Jesus' encouragement not to be afraid. Peter makes him prove it—and ends up scaring himself even more. Jesus isn't disappointed that he sank but that he thought he needed to do something that foolish in the first place. It wouldn't be as good a story, but maybe Peter should have believed Jesus all along and just stayed in the boat.

It is possible that in some very specific circumstances, God may call us to do seemingly impossible things. Not walking on water, defying the laws of physics things, but out-of-the-ordinary things. It's thrilling to think we've been called on a special mission, like superheroes for Jesus. But most of the time, we have enough to do just living out God's command to love the other people in our boat. It's not as exciting as walking-on-water-level acts of faith; though, in some ways it's much harder. But to believe Jesus when he says, *I'm here with you; you don't have to be afraid*—that's enough of a discipleship challenge without us thinking we need to perform miracles. If *we* say to God, "Will you be with me if I do this big, incredible thing?" Well, the answer will always be *yes*, because God is always with us. But that's not the same thing as *God calling* us to prove our faith through extraordinary acts.

We're not quite halfway through the season after Pentecost, the long season marked by green that symbolizes our growth in discipleship. The other name we sometime use is "ordinary season." During these long months, we don't celebrate virgin birth, empty tombs, or fire that enables speaking in tongues. Instead we mostly listen to Jesus teach us to be more loving, merciful, generous, and just—things that the world badly needs, and that we can mostly do right where we are. Again, that's not to say the life of ordinary discipleship is always easy; this world sometimes seems like one storm right after another. But trusting God's promise to be with us through it all is a big enough leap of faith, even without leaping out of the boat. May we trust God's presence and promise, right where we are.