

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

Matthew 14:22-33

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"Take Heart"

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In a Peanuts cartoon strip Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for a nickels worth of psychiatric help. She proceeds to pinpoint his particular fear.

"Perhaps," she says, "you have hypenygophobia, which is the fear of responsibility."

Charlie Brown says, "no, that's not it".

"Well, perhaps you have atychiphobia, which is the fear of failure."

"I don't think so," says Charlie.

"Well, maybe you have climacophobia, which is the fear of staircases."

"No," protests Charlie.

At which point, an exasperated Lucy say, "Well, maybe you have pantophobia, which is the fear of everything."

"Yes," says Charles, "that's the one!" [from "Fear" by Brett Blair and Staff, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I do not have pantophobia, but I do have some empathy for poor old Charlie Brown. There have been phases in my life where I wondered if maybe pantophobia wasn't a great diagnosis for what ailed me in those seasons.

Fear can be incapacitating. It can become self-fulfilling, as in the case of one woman so afraid of having a heart attack that her anxiety eventually caused one! It happens.

On the other hand, fear can help us make smart choices, and even remember our priorities, as with the young mom texting on her phone while driving one afternoon. After narrowly missing a collision with another vehicle, she tucks the phone away, and never pulls it out while driving again. The fear of what almost happened is enough to make her wise up.

Our lesson from scripture this morning is about fear, but it's not always immediately obvious, so let's take a closer look. Remember with me how, last week, in the verses of Matthew 14 just before today's lesson, Jesus has learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. He's grieving, he's facing rising opposition, and he can't seem to catch a break. He and the disciples set off across the Sea of Galilee for a little R&R, but the crowds follow him. And Jesus, whose compassion does not seem to know the same limits that mine does, feeds them all – 5000 men and their families – with five loaves of bread and two fish.

Our lesson today picks up right where that leaves off. It reads, “Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while Jesus dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.” He makes the disciples get in the boat and leave, either because he’s had enough of life or because he’s had enough of them. That’s not real clear. But what is clear is that Jesus needs some time to himself. Now, according to Hebrew Lore, the night is divided into four equal sections, often called the four watches of the night. In the summer, the first watch from 6-9pm is usually still light out. The second watch is from 9pm to midnight, the third from midnight to 3am, and the 4<sup>th</sup> from 3-6am just before the dawn. So my guess is that sometime near the end of the first watch or the beginning of the second watch, our events begin to unfold. It seems to be evening. Everyone’s had dinner. The disciples head out onto open water. The crowds head home. And Jesus heads up the mountain alone as evening falls. And he prays up there for a long time – into the fourth watch of the night, according to the original translation. So he’s been praying for hours.

But while Jesus is up there praying, the disciples are out on the lake rowing. And a storm comes up. Those who study such things tell me that the weather on the Sea of Galilee is well-documented – it’s infamous for having storms rise up out of nowhere. And the lesson tells us that the boat was being battered by the waves. According to Bishop Will Willimon, the Greek word there, which is translated “battered”, is *basanizomenon*. (Try saying that ten times fast!). Doesn’t it just sound like battering? [from “Take Heart” by William H. Willimon, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] It’s actually better translated “tortured” but we’ll get back to that.

So the rain is coming down, and the waves are swelling like a hurricane, and water’s pouring over the side, and have the guys are rowing, and half the guys are baling water, and everyone’s freaking out, and in the 4<sup>th</sup> watch of the night, here comes Jesus, walking across the water. Now how does that work? Is he like a Jedi Knight, dodging in and out of the waves, leaping breakers, doing flips in the air? Or is this just a casual stroll? Does he go up one side of swell and down the other, or does he just walk through them? Does he get wet? I don’t know. The scripture says he’s walking. You’ll have to use your imaginations on that.

What I do know is that the more important question isn’t “how?” but “why?” At least, that’s according to Bill Ritter, who writes, “The point is this. Only God can walk on the waves. That’s what the Bible says. In Job. In Isaiah. In Habakkuk. In the Psalms. In Bible-speak, it is God who walks the sea....calms the sea....tames the sea....parts the sea. Why? To show a miracle? To say: “Hey, lookie here, I’m walking on water”?

“Don’t be shallow. In ancient times, the sea was the place of evil. The evil monster was there. The Leviathan (Job 41) was there. The enemy of everything right and good was there in the water. In the Bible, the water is the dwelling place of all the forces that are against us. And here (in this story), God, in the person of Jesus Christ, walks on the sea....walks over the sea....strides through....steps on.... making his way across the sea....putting everything that is oppositional to God and oppositional to us literally under his feet. [from “Two if by Sea” by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)]

Which is all very interesting, but may leave you wondering how you’re supposed to hit the ground running with this on Monday morning. Well, there are two schools of thought on where we go from here and they both date back to the earliest centuries of Christian tradition. And I don’t think I can be faithful to the scripture without highlighting the merits of both, because although they seem contradictory, I’m not convinced that they’re mutually exclusive.

The first school of thought asks us to remember that Matthew is writing to a besieged and beleaguered church—one living under the constant threat of persecution and torment. This is not news. We know that the early church faced indescribable horrors in its infancy. And we also know that one of most powerful and timeless images for the church is a boat. Still today, the part of the sanctuary where you all sit is called ‘the Nave.’ It shares its linguistic root with Navy. It means ‘ship’. The ancient understanding of the church was that it was a ship in the storms, the waves, the winds of life. We come to

the ship, week after week, to connect—to remember that we're not alone in the storms that rage beyond these walls and sometimes within them.

So there's Peter, sitting in the boat being battered by the waves, or better, 'tortured'. I told you I'd come back to that. The boat is being tortured by the waves, which doesn't make sense from a literal standpoint, but makes all the sense in the world if one is writing figuratively about a persecuted young church. But back to Peter. He's sitting there with his fellow disciples when Jesus comes to them on the water. "It's a ghost!" cry the disciples. "No," says Jesus, "it's me. Take heart."

And then good ol' Peter opens his mouth: "Lord, IF it's you..." If??? Seriously, Peter? Like he hasn't just healed people, and fed crowds, and shed light on scripture. IF it's you? Do you all know who else says that to Jesus? The devil – back in Matthew 4 – when tempting Jesus. "IF...you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread. IF...you're the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. IF...you worship me, I'll give you everything." That's what Satan says. So Peter says, "Lord, if it's you, prove it." It's really an arrogant, presumptuous, devilish, foot-in-the-mouth, Peter kind of thing to say. What a bumbling idiot! His doubt, so goes the argument, is not only that he took his eyes off Christ, but also that he could not accept Christ's presence in the storm, in the wind, with the little battered boat, so he separates himself to go looking for proof. And he didn't need to. Because Jesus was already coming to him.

The fact is, nobody weathers a storm alone. We need each other. Lori Wagner offers interesting insight here when she writes, "...in the Christian tradition, the trinity – God the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, is often described as a state of perichoresis, a unity of three together in interactive motion, three yet one. The word "perichoresis" is derived from the Greek *peri*, meaning "around", and *chorea*, meaning "to come and go". But *chorea* is also the root word in choreography. It's a coming and going that's complimentary. An ebb and flow, breathe in, breathe out. It's dance, motion, perfect dynamism and fluidity. Human relationships are an imperfect imitation of that perichoresis that exists in God. Like birds on the wind, we thrive when we ride the wind rather than fighting it. We thrive together, one body, each part moving to compliment, augment, and uplift the other.

The second school of thought is probably more familiar, but again, not mutually exclusive. Harkening back to our story, Peter has seen Jesus walking across the water. So he calls out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." To which Jesus says, "Come on!" So Peter gets out of the boat and goes striding across the water. This school of thought suggests that we need to follow Peter's lead – to get out of the boat, to take risks, to step out in faith. And we do.

If we look back across two thousand years of church history, it's hard not to notice how the church went through times of major upheaval every 500 years or so. In the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, the church transitioned from a band of persecuted house churches to the state-sanctioned religion. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the church in the East schismed from the church in the West, and centuries of bloody crusades, bubonic plague, and theological bankruptcy left carnage across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of the printing press led to a period of enlightenment. Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, and the theological shift brought about by the protestant reformation unleashed Biblical study, hymnology, and mission in radically new ways.

We're now a quarter of the way into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the time is ripe. The internet has again revolutionized how we communicate. The rise of multiculturalism, the celebration of diversity, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the impending climate crisis is challenging the church to think differently. And it's scary. We're caught in the crosswinds of conflicting needs and the swells of fear and the maelstroms of uncertainty.

Not a day goes by that I don't see someone post something on their Facebook feed with a Norman Rockwell picture nostalgically looking back to the past, missing the days when kids played outside all day, and drank from the garden hose, and got spanked when they misbehaved, and were taught their manners, and went to church and took a family drive on Sunday, and I don't know what all else, and every time I see

one of those things, I just cringe. Because it was only true for a segment of the population. If you went south of the Mason-Dixon line, the drinking fountains were still segregated by skin color. And if a woman's husband beat to a pulp at night, she couldn't have a bank account or a credit card in her name or even rent an apartment without a male cosigner so she was stuck. And if you happened to have schizophrenia, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or any host of serious mental illnesses, there was a good chance you'd spend your life either institutionalized or marginalized because no one had ever heard of Sertraline or Diazepam or Bupropion or Quetiapine or any of the other medications that now make it possible for many with mental illness to live a normal and productive life. I don't feel any nostalgia for those days. I'm grateful for a safe and happy upbringing, but I wouldn't go back for anything. No thank you. I am convinced that humanity's best days are still in front of us. I may not see it with my eyes, but I see it with my heart.

We need people to get out of the boat, to meet Jesus in the wind and the waves and the maelstrom of this age and forge a new path for the church of tomorrow. We need risk-takers. We need water-walkers. We need visionaries. For all Peter's faults, and there were plenty, I feel an affinity for his heart. He never stopped hungering to encounter God. And the fact remains that when the storms of life are raging, I need to know Jesus isn't stranded back on shore, back in the annals of history, back in the simplicity of my childhood, but that he crosses stormy seas and tortured waves and howling winds in order to meet me in the maelstrom.

Which brings us back around full circle. How do we hit the ground running with this on Monday morning? I owe you something. The ever-present danger in this text is that we will listen to Christ's words to Peter—"O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?"—and conclude that if Peter had just had enough faith, he wouldn't have sunk. The lesson is then transferred to our lives, suggesting that if we just had enough faith, if we would just try harder, we wouldn't sink either. This line of thought is faulty for two reasons. First, it suggests that faith and problems are mutually exclusive. We all know that's not true. In fact, sometimes being true to Christ can cause more troubles, not less. Second, it suggests that we can somehow achieve the power of God. Yes, we need to give life our all. Yes, we need to step out of the boat in faith sometimes. But I got news for you, folks. Even if we were some kind of bionic people with super strength, and amazing courage and incredible mind-power, we still wouldn't be able to walk on water by ourselves. We cannot achieve the power of God—we have to receive it. When the storms around us are raging, it's not enough to try harder. We've got to reach out our arms and cry out 'Lord, save me!' So let me say this as clearly as I can: The main point of this lesson is about Jesus' willingness to overcome any obstacle to reach out to those who need him. Take Heart! That's the crux of the lesson right there.

Maybe Peter needed to get out of the boat and teach us to take risks, or maybe he needed to stay in the boat and teach us the power of togetherness. Or maybe both. If you ask me, we need both risk-takers and caretakers. We need both water-walkers and oar-pullers. And sometimes we're called to one, and sometimes we're call to the other. But be we in the boat or out of it, the storms of life are raging around us. And be we in the boat or out of it, we all need to hear the crucial words in this passage. They belong to Jesus, who says: 'take heart, it's me,' which some of dared to suggest could be translated "Take heart – I am." (Talk about a loaded statement!) I am right here with you—in the storm, in the fear, in the brokenness, in the loneliness, in the water, in the boat. We can't leave Jesus back on the beach or back in the dim recesses of history. Since there is nothing that can keep Him from coming to us, we know, as we look to him striding across the churning chaos of the sea, that his water-walking does not defy nature, it reveals the very nature of God. Take heart. It's me. I am right here with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.