

Right before today's story in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus receives word that his cousin, John the Baptist, has just been beheaded. Upon hearing this horrible news, Jesus went away by himself, but the crowds followed him. Instead of getting away alone, Jesus had compassion on them and attended to their needs. Later that same day, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand men (not including the number of women and children) took place. Jesus blessed and broke all that they had- five loaves of bread and two fish- and all ate and were filled. There were even leftovers- 12 baskets full! On the heels of this miracle, we find another miracle story, which is also found in the Gospel of Mark (6:45-52) and John (6:16-21). Before we listen for God's Word to us this day, let us first pray. **[PRAY.]** Listen to a word from God found in Matthew 14:22-33. I'll be reading in the New Revised Standard translation (NRSV). **[Read Matthew 14:22-33.]**

Fear is real. It is a real human emotion that all of us experience from time to time...some of us experience it more often than others. Our 5 year-old daughter, Bailey, has developed the habit of voicing her fear by naming the opposite. On the way to the dentist, she'll say, "There's nothing to be afraid of, Mama," which translates: Put on your seatbelt because she is going to let it rip once we arrive. A few weeks ago, we were in the water together, and she said, "There's nothing to be afraid of." I knew she was feeling otherwise. Fear is real. Many of us experience fear even more right now in the midst of the unknown of a pandemic. Will I be able to find or keep a job? Will my family be safe? Will I lose my housing? Will I find affordable housing? How can I grieve when I'm unable to say goodbye to my loved one? How long is this virus going to last, O Lord? For some of us, fear motivates us- while for others, fear paralyzes us. In some understandings of

Christianity, fear and faith cannot co-exist, as fear can often be seen as a sign that you lack faith altogether. After all, some Christians believe that other Christians should be about putting on brave fronts and happily ever afters, leaving little room for the open acknowledgement of fear” (journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). You know- this flavor of Christianity can sometimes say things such as, “If you’re afraid, then you’re not rooted in God’s love” (Thomas). I think that’s simply not true. As humans, we all have times when we’re afraid. I don’t believe in a God who would support this kind of belief nor conditional love. God’s saving love through Jesus is big enough for our fears. Again, if we’re to be real as followers of Jesus, then we must name, claim, and acknowledge our fear and thus our need for God’s saving grace.

Fear is a recurring theme in today’s biblical story. We’re told that immediately after the feeding of the masses, Jesus sent the disciples by boat ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he dismissed the crowds and then went up on the mountain by himself to pray. While he was away praying during the night, the disciples get caught in a storm. Early the next morning, more than likely while it was still dark, Jesus came to them walking on the water. By this point, we’re told that the disciples have been battling the storm for hours by themselves, and we can assume at this point that they’re exhausted. Many scholars confirm that the Sea of Galilee- though smaller in size- is prone to some big, sudden and violent storms. With several of the disciples being fishermen, we can assume that they were used to sudden storms on this body of water. Therefore, it probably wasn’t the storm that terrified them. Rather, it was the appearance of a figure walking on the water that scared them. Have you ever seen anyone walk on

water successfully? They didn't recognize Jesus coming toward them. Maybe they didn't recognize him because it was dark or maybe they were so blown away by the walking on water part that they automatically assumed this figure was a ghost or something not of this world?! **Regardless, they didn't know who Jesus was.** "Immediately," Matthew's Gospel tells us, Jesus speaks to them, identifying himself, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus is using the divine name, I AM, to announce his presence. I AM is the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14). In saying this, Jesus is identifying himself with the God of Israel. But is Jesus' voice enough for the disciples to recognize him? As far as we know, eleven of the disciples, frozen in fear, say nothing. We aren't told if the silent eleven take Jesus at his word. However, we know for sure that Peter does not. What is unique to Matthew's account of this story compared to Mark and John's versions are the dialogue with Peter and Peter's attempt to walk on water. Here, in the Gospel of Matthew's account, Peter, who has the reputation of being the outspoken disciple or the disciples' spokesman, decides to test this would be ghost's identity. "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water" (v.28). Jesus says, "Come," and Peter steps out of the boat.

What happens next? Yes, Peter started walking on the water toward Jesus...but not for long as fear overcame him and he began to sink. As he sunk into the chaotic waters, Peter cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me" (v. 30)! It seems like Peter still didn't trust that Jesus was who he claimed to be. Or did he? Maybe deep within himself Peter knows enough- trusts enough- has little faith enough to cry out in the words of a psalm of deliverance (69) and experience rescue through Jesus? Scripture tells us that

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter. Jesus, while saving Peter, also said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt” (v. 31)? I must pause here and say upon the first few readings of this story, I didn’t react well to what Jesus said to Peter. Is this a rhetorical question? As with emails, we don’t know the tone with which Jesus said these words to Peter. Maybe he is ribbing Peter, not scolding him? Jesus saves Peter in spite of his lack of faith. Why did Peter doubt? Why do we doubt in the presence of the One who constantly conquers storms? Like fear, doubt is very real and as humans, we experience it often. No matter how righteous we think we are, all of us have our doubts at various times. As he asks this question to Peter, I wonder if Jesus is thinking: Peter, as soon as you saw me, I told you, along with the others, exactly who I was. You heard my voice, as I spoke words of assurance and comfort to you. So why didn’t you believe me? (Debie Thomas).

When Jesus says, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid” (v. 27), he’s telling his disciples not to be afraid in that moment- that it is him, not a ghost, walking on the water towards them. It is Jesus, Emmanuel, God with them and us- Lord and Savior. Jesus isn’t saying to the disciples and to us not to ever be afraid again. That would be humanly impossible. Like Peter, I often fail to recognize Jesus when times are tough. When faced with fear, my first thought isn’t always to recognize that Jesus is with me. No, my first reaction isn’t always trust; it’s sometimes suspicion (Debie Thomas). Yet sometimes, in that suspicion, maybe deep, deep down, there may be just enough trust- just enough faith to get us out of the metaphorical boat. “You of little faith” was a frequent rebuke of the disciples in Matthew’s Gospel, but it was not a criticism. We aren’t told that Peter had NO faith. He had

little faith. Yes, he doubted and was afraid; yet, he had faith at least the size of a mustard seed. Maybe Peter hoped that by stepping out on the sea, that would be the act of courage he needed for faith? In 1921 poet Karle Wilson Baker wrote a poem entitled, *Courage*, and in it he wrote that “courage is just fear that has said it’s prayers.” And at the root word of courage is also the word, “heart,” which is why Jesus could’ve said, “Take courage” OR “Take heart.” What if faith means living out of your heart, even in the midst of your fear? Deep down in his heart Peter knew Jesus. He had to trust himself. He had to trust his heart (workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis, 2014). What does it take for you to trust God, especially when you cannot recognize him, in a moment or a season when you’re most afraid?

In the end, only Jesus can perform such miracles as feeding the masses or walking on water. The disciples witnessed these amazing acts. We don’t know what happened to the disciples in the boat or what they said when Peter got out; however, we do know that at the end of today’s story, they not only recognized Jesus, they worshiped him and confessed their faith with Peter saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (v. 33). It sounds like their faith was deepened watching what happened to Peter. “In the end, after grief and service, fear and confusion, storms and disorientation, comes worship. In the end comes utter clarity- if even for a moment- about who Jesus is, what he has the power to do and how we are to respond. In the end is a declaration of faith. In the end is worship.” (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield). So...in the middle of the storm of this pandemic, when we don’t recognize Jesus or aren’t sure he’s coming toward us or is with us or how much longer the storm will last-because sometimes it seems like it will last forever and we are weary and afraid and doubting, remember the end of

today's story. Envision the worship that is to come- the singing without wearing masks- the passing of the peace that ends in handshakes or hugs. Breaking bread together at Christ's table. In our daily lives, where fear and faith co-exist, we're called to trust in the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

As people of faith, we can't be driven by fear alone. We must ask God for wisdom and discernment concerning what is best and faithful for each of us. However, no matter our decisions, getting out of the boat or staying in the boat- **with Jesus Christ, fear does not have the final word.** Notice that the disciples end up in the boat together. We're people of faith... maybe of little faith but faith, nonetheless, in a God who loves us and saves us. I saw a quote on FB the other day. The author is unknown. It reads, "Faith isn't a feeling. It's a choice to trust God even when the road ahead seems uncertain." We may struggle to perceive Christ through our anxiety and weariness, but as he comes towards us, he tells us, his battered disciples, over and over again, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Friends, we will, with God's saving love, weather this storm together. Precious Lord, take our hands and lead us on...Thanks be to God! Amen.