

Courage to Take a Step

Matthew 14:22-33

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."

This Biblical story follows the account of the feeding of the multitude, which began with Jesus trying to get away to pray alone and the crowd persisting. Now that the crowd has been fed and dismissed, Jesus tries again. In the earlier story, Jesus gets away to pray, and then feeds the multitudes. In this story, Jesus gets away to pray, then walks on water. Matthew does not want us to miss the clear parallel between the prayer life of Jesus and the mighty things he does. **Dock Hollingsworth**

The picture of the disciples sent on their own across troubled seas and of Jesus walking on water to save them and to calm the waters is a picture that has given comfort, encouragement, and challenge to Christians over the generations. This text and its parallel texts in [Mark 6:45-52](#) and [John 6:16-21](#) have been used over the centuries to remind us that Jesus often calls us to go into uncharted waters, but when we go in faithfulness, he never abandons us.

There is a variety of rich images in this scripture that bring to life important dimensions of God's call and God's assurance to us:

- The image of Jesus taking time to pray, even in a very uncertain situation, is a reminder that things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer.
- The image of Jesus sending out the disciples on a mission just as he sends us in mission today.
- The image of choppy seas and the reality that when we set out on Christ's mission, though we will often be in troubled waters, Jesus does not abandon us but rather comes to us, as he came to the disciples, when we need him most.
- The image that Jesus and the reign of God that he inaugurates have power even over the forces of nature and can conquer our fears and the evil that causes them.
- The image of the disciples who, because of their fear, could not recognize Jesus when he came to them in ways they never expected (walking on the water).
- The image of Jesus calming the troubled waters for the disciples and the reality that he can calm our troubled waters as well.
- The image of the disciples responding to Jesus' saving grace through worship and through the confession "Truly you are the Son of God" (v. 33).

All of these images have rich power to remind us of the love of God, the saving grace of Jesus Christ, our calling to be in mission, and the assurance of Christ's love and companionship when we need it most. However, what is unique to the Gospel of Matthew's version of these events, and not found in Mark and John's accounts, are the dialogue with Peter and Peter's attempt to step out of the boat and walk on water to Jesus, in response to the command of his Lord. It is this encounter

that we have the rich imagery to enable the word of God to speak to us. **Clifton Kirkpatrick**

In Hebraic thought, water represents much more than a mere physical reality. Whether it is the sea with its unfathomable depths, the relentless river in full flood, or the all-consuming deluge, there is something metaphysical about the threat water poses to human life. According to Karl Barth, water, in the first biblical creation story, is "the principle which, in its abundance and power is absolutely opposed to God's creation;" "it is a representative of all the evil powers which oppress and resist the salvation intended for the people of Israel."

Throughout the Old Testament it is precisely this reality over which God's lordship is continuously demonstrated and God's victory affirmed. In the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2), in the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), in the mighty act of deliverance from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21), and in the miraculous entry into the land of promise through the swollen River Jordan (Josh. 3:14-17), the Lord triumphs over the waters.

The God of Israel tramples on the waves (Job 9:8, Hab. 3:15) and walks "in the recesses of the deep" (Job 38:16). These are very specific signs of God's sovereign and transcendent power over all that would threaten and thwart God's purposes (cf. Ps. 93:4).

So, when Jesus approaches the disciples in their boat as they battle with the elements, the prospect is, naturally, terrifying. Who can walk here with such authority and freedom? The act and its associations are unmistakable. Jesus is exercising a prerogative that belongs to God alone. When he speaks to them, his words serve only to reinforce the sense that this is a divine revelation. **Iwan Russell-Jones**

Like the other disciples, Peter is panicked both by the turbulent waters and by this figure walking toward them on the water in the very early morning hours.

Even after Jesus speaks to the disciples, they are still not sure if it is Jesus. Peter, knowing that the call to discipleship is unique to his relationship with Jesus, responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). When Jesus issues the command, "Come," Peter steps out of the boat in faith and in faithfulness. Having embarked on his journey across the sea in faith, he then becomes frightened, but the strong arm of Jesus lifts him up and returns him to the boat.

What is so clear from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.

Commentator Clifton Kirkpatrick relates this story:

Years ago, I attended an ecumenical gathering at which Ernest Campbell, then the pastor of Riverside Church in New York, was addressing a group of pastors on the crisis in our churches. I will always remember his assertion that "the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." He was right. The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter's example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be, and God assures us that if we "get out of the boat," we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

William H. Willimon may have put it best in a sermon entitled "How Will You Know If It's Jesus?":

If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest. Matthew 14:22-33 invites us to do just that; have the courage to take a step! **Clifton Kirkpatrick**

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