

# *God Believes in Us*

Questions of the Congregation Series  
I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Faith

by

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Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he 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 he 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 to him, “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.”

The Word of the Lord  
**Thanks be to God**

Let us pray:

God you require much of us. Speak to us now, that your word may be carried to the deep protected corners of our hearts. We ask this in the name of the word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God believes in you. God thinks you can do those things which Jesus did. God trusts that you have what it takes to be like Christ. To do so, though, God needs you to get out of the boat to which you are clinging. God calls you to step out of the boat, even amidst fear, uncertainty, doubt, or anxiety. And God believes you can do it, just as God believed Peter could do it. The question is: will you depart from the safety of the boat and step onto the water in faith?

Today's story finds the twelve disciples in a boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee. It has been a long day. As Pastor Leigh described last week, the day included learning that their friend, John the Baptist, was beheaded, and then witnessing the feeding of more than 5,000 people. Now, Jesus has departed to go pray, while the disciples set off in a boat to cross the sea. According to Matthew, this was the first time Jesus sent the disciples off alone. But as will soon be apparent, they were not as alone as they thought.

Soon night descends, the wind picks up, the swells increase, water begins to crash over the sides of the boat. These conditions persist for hours, and the disciples are pushed further away from the shore. Thus far in the story we are not told that the disciples were afraid, at least not yet. These disciples were fishermen before they began following Jesus, and had spent their lives at sea. As long their boat held together, they apparently believed they would be safe. So they continued crossing through the night trying to outlast the storm.

At some point, every life passes through a great storm. Perhaps one day the doctors will discover a dreadful disease in your body, or worse, in the body of someone you love. Or perhaps your job, and feel like you're past the point of beginning over again. Or maybe your child winds up in a situation you never would have guessed. Or a relationship that means the world to you falls apart. Since March, it has felt like the storm of isolation, separation, and loneliness from the present pandemic has swept over every aspect of our lives. When these storms hit, the sky

darkens, the winds pickup speed, and the waves of adversity batter against the little boat called your life.

Perhaps, like these disciples, you pride yourself on being experienced, tough, and want to put the best foot forward. You've traversed previous storms and you've constructed a pretty robust boat. So you think you'll be okay, just as long as you stay in and cling to the boat. But as this story reveals, God does not call us to stay in the boat.

As the morning began to dawn, the disciples saw Jesus walking toward them -- walking on the water. Now they became afraid. As one preacher noted, it isn't the predictable storm, but the unpredictable Savior, who scares them. At first the disciples believed they were seeing a ghost. Fear does this to us. It tricks us into thinking we are seeing ghosts who are coming to get us, when it is actually our Savior coming to meet us.

Jesus is quick to assuage the fear, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," he says. But notice Jesus' location. Jesus is not clinging to the boat, but is in the midst of the storm. We find our savior not tucked away for safety, but in the middle of the thing we want to avoid. We are hunkered down in the boat, trying to outlast the storm, trying to stay safe and secure while our savior stands in the center of it all.

Since Peter is Jesus' disciple he wants to be like him. He's dedicated the past few years of his life to becoming like Jesus. A disciple was expected to be like their teacher. A disciple would be the one who would carry on the message after the teacher was no longer present. When Peter sees Jesus walking on water, he wants to do likewise. He wants to be like Jesus.

It is Peter's idea to get out of the boat and walk on the water, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." To many, it is a foolish idea. In the midst of the storm it seems a better idea to batten down the hatches, put on your life jacket, and cling to the boat.

But that is not where the savior is. Jesus is there in the middle of the storm, on the water, where he says to Peter and to us, “Come.”

And then a remarkable thing happened, Peter got out of the boat, and started walking on water. He did it! He became like his savior...at least for a few moments. We're not told how far he walked, but we can picture Peter taking a few solid steps on the water as he approaches Jesus. But then, he remembered that he was in a storm, the strong wind made him fearful and he began to sink. His eyes departed from his savior and focused on the swirls of danger surrounding him. After clinging to the boat for so long, Peter's attempt to change and walk on water is met with fear, uncertainty, and potential danger. In the midst of the storm, change seems treacherous.

He begins to sink, he cries out to Jesus for help, and Jesus is there to save him. His effort earns him the rebuke, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

But who did Peter doubt? Often the assumption is that Peter lost faith in Jesus, but Jesus isn't sinking! Peter is. Peter doubted himself. Jesus believes in Peter, says to him, “Come.” In this command, Jesus is saying, you can be like me, I believe you can. I know your past and your history; I know your heart and your motivations, I know you better than you know yourself, and I have faith in you. When Jesus offers those words of rebuke, “You of little faith,” he seems more disappointed in Peter than anything else.

God believes in Peter. God believes in you, in me. Why then do you doubt? The savior is standing in the midst of the storm, beckoning you to cease clinging to the safety of the boat, to focus your attention on God, and to trust that God has equipped you for the journey ahead. God believes in you. Do you?

In her book, *The Dearly Beloved*, Cara Wall's two main characters are co-ministers at the fictional Third Presbyterian Church in New York City. The book chronicles their time in ministry together, narrating stories of their travails and joys, both professional and personal. In one scene, in response to the death of someone they both loved, the two ministers are speaking about the difference between love and faith. The one minister says,

“Love and faith are very different things. Very different things. We work to have limitless faith – faith that encompasses grief, faith that expands beyond doubt. When we see suffering, and it shakes our faith, we pray for those limits to be removed...Love, [on the other hand,] is the enjoyment of something. The feeling of wanting something deeply, of wanting nothing more. Our love of God is not as important as our faith in God. Love wanes. Faith cannot. One can have faith and anger, faith and hate. One can believe deeply and still rail against God, still blame God. In fact, if one can hate God it is a sign of deep faith, because you cannot hate and at the same time doubt God's existence.”<sup>1</sup>

Letting go of the boat to which you are clinging and stepping out to walk towards God will be scary. It will require a change of scenery, encountering treacherous storms, and, perhaps most of all, faith that it is possible. There is much in life that convinces us it is safer to cling to the inside of the boat, to resist change and to stay at a safe distance from our savior. To get close to God, to walk towards God, requires faith in God and ourselves. Even if other things fade – if community feels distant due to the pandemic, if companionship disappears because of the death of your beloved, if the plans you laid are uprooted by financial hardship or unexpected loss, if you are angry, tired, lonely, desperate, worried – you will always have a God who has faith in you, who beckons you to Come. Other things may wane; God's faith in you will not.

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<sup>1</sup> Cara Wall, *The Dearly Beloved* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), p.127.

Your savior stands in the midst of the storm, walking on the water. You are God's disciple; you are called to be like God, and God believes that you can actually fulfill such a high calling. You are invited to step out of the boat, to release your grip on the safety you have built, and approach your Savior who wants to receive whatever you are carrying. God believes you can do it. God believes in you; do you?

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.