

*Echoing in Our Ears: “Do Not Be Afraid”
What if I Sink?*

Matthew 14:22-33; *The True Love*, by David Whyte

We’re focusing for these weeks following Easter on stories of Peter, because it seems that the Gospel stories where we Jesus say, “Do not be afraid,” often include Peter. And I’m working out my hunch in these sermons that maybe that’s because Peter had a fear problem—an anxiety issue—that makes him very much like some people I know. Friends of mine. OK—me.

One of the strands in these Peter stories is that they almost always include water. There’s a practical reason for that; Peter was a fisherman, so he hung out near water a lot. That’s where Jesus found him—on his fishing boat. And it’s the landscape Peter seems to be in every time some important faith thing is about to happen to him.

In addition to being Peter’s natural environment, water is one of those symbols that shows up over and over again in the Bible. Richard Rohr says it’s a bookmark: that whenever you see the word “water”, you know that it signals an invitation from God, a sign of an opening into a spiritual experience. Baptism, the Israelites crossing through the Red Sea into freedom.

But water has another meaning as well, in biblical symbolism. Water can signify danger. Remember the beginning of the creation story, when there was nothing *but* water—the water of chaos, nothingness, the waters of *un*-creation. In the Bible’s stories, storms and floods always suggest the possibility that water can *un*-make what God has made, take the order of creation and turn it again into chaos.

That’s the image with which this story in Matthew begins. Jesus has sent the disciples out in a boat, across the sea, while he stays behind to pray by himself. Now a *boat* has symbolic significance too. A boat is always a place that is safe from the storm—think of Noah’s ark. The early Christian church used a drawing of a boat as its logo; there are many, many images of boats etched into the catacombs around Rome, to symbolize the church—a place where Christians could be safe from persecution once they were inside, and together. Today the main part of a classic church building, like this one, is still called the *nave*. It comes from the Latin word *navis*, which means “ship”, from the same root as the English word *navy*.

So danger and safety are the two things this story is about. It promises an opening into new life, an enlightenment. And I want to suggest this morning that this is a story offered to us in three scenes.

Scene 1. The disciples are out on the lake in a boat—and I’m sure it was a small fishing boat rather than anything we might call a *ship*—when a storm comes up. These guys are fishermen. They had been through storms before; storms are scary, but they know what to do on a lake. Only this storm lasts all night. Just before dawn, they see a figure walking toward them, as if it’s walking right on the surface of those rolling, churning waves. Now *that’s* frightening. Terrifying, Matthew says.

It's Jesus, but for some reason they don't recognize him at all. "A ghost!" they shout—not just whispered under their breath, but out loud. They cried out in fear, Matthew says. And then Jesus calls out to them. "Take heart," he says; "It is I; *do not be afraid.*" And those words that have been translated "It is I" are the same words that elsewhere in the Bible have been translated as "I Am", the very name of God. Jesus doesn't calm the storm; he doesn't make the waves and wind stop, but God shows up—the one who has, countless times before, all through history, mastered storms like this one. And they are calmed—reassured—by his presence.

Scene 2. This is where Peter takes his place on center stage. He knows who Jesus is; he's just seen Jesus take a couple of fish sandwiches and turn them into a meal for 5,000. He's a miracle worker; *and* he's walking on the water, which suggests to Peter that this is what Jesus-like people are supposed to be able to do. Suddenly, Peter is feeling *very* confident...maybe even a little cocky. He has never before done anything as risky as getting out of a boat in the middle of a storm, but he's got Jesus!

So *Peter* tries to initiate a miracle. "If *it is* you, Jesus, call me to come out to you on the water," Peter calls. And I can almost see Jesus' eyebrows go up, as he shoots the other disciples a glance. "OK," he says; "Come on." And Peter climbs out of the boat and starts walking, on the water.

Suddenly Peter realizes that the wind is flapping his robes around pretty hard, and the water is really rough. It's actually kind of hard to stay on his feet. This was not what he had imagined when he was in the boat; he sort of thought that Jesus would make a little layer of smooth glass under his feet, so that walking would be easier. He could drown, actually; in fact, maybe he *is* drowning! And indeed, he looks down and sees that the water is up to his knees, and just might be pulling him down.

"Save me!" Peter cries out, and as soon as he does, there is Jesus' hand reaching out for his, much closer than he had thought it was a second ago. He is safe, holding on to Jesus' hand, even as the storm rages on. "I'm here," Jesus says. "Why did you doubt it?"

I don't know about you, but this is the scene where I can see myself in Peter's place. There are moments when I think I've got the faith thing settled. I'm pretty sure I've got a grasp on God. I can check off "Have faith" on my to-do list. I get out of the boat confidently. For a moment I am ready to do what I'm sure God has beckoned me to do, confident that I too will be able to walk—on my own--on that well-paved path across the water.

But the storm of other voices is still there:

What if I offend someone?

What if they don't like me?

What if I can't make a difference?

Who do you think you are?

Like Peter, I thought faith could make all that stuff go away and turn me into the hero in my story. But it turns out that I too will sink—maybe even drown—in my own storm unless I keep holding on to that hand. Jesus isn't my life coach; his work is not to build up in me my own supply of God-like miracle ingredients. He's the one I have to *stay* connected to, when I'm

feeling confident *and* when I'm not. I have to hold on, even in a storm that makes me want to get out there and start paddling as fast as I can, with *both* hands.

Scene 3 happens in the boat. Peter and Jesus are back, safe, with all the others. *Now* the wind stops. And the disciples—all of them—recognize Jesus in some way they hadn't before. They have an epiphany. They worship, Matthew says; they find themselves on their knees—with gratitude, with recognition, with a little bit of awe.

This happens in the boat. In a safe place like this one, where they are all together, they gather faith again. They see, together, closer-up, the face of this one who saved them from *this* storm. Together they memorize his profile, so that when the next storm of worry and fear comes—as it no doubt will—they'll know it's not a ghost who is coming across the water, but someone who has his hand outstretched to them for safety. The boat is not a place to stay; God wants much more for them—for us--than safety and stability. But it's a place to return to, to gather your strength again, to remember together who to look for when the seas start to roll.

I wonder if you too have felt Jesus reach out his hand to catch you at a time when you were deeply afraid, sure you were going to drown. Maybe you haven't recognized it, because that hand comes wearing different disguises—a flash of light in the middle of a routine spiritual practice, a moment of unexplainable peace in the middle of what felt like only struggle or failure. Often it shows up in community; in the love of family and friends.

When I met with the confirmation students this morning we did a little exercise together that I want to invite you to share. Clench your hands together, in one fist. Grab tight. Do you know how it is to feel tight like this inside? To hold on to something that is knotting you up or causing you worry? Maybe something that you're afraid to let anyone else see you struggle with?

Notice that when you're holding on like this, it's impossible to hold anything else. If someone else came along with a hand outstretched to you, to save you from drowning, you simply could not respond.

A hand reaches out to you. "Do not be afraid," are the words that come with it. Open your own hands to take hold of what is offered. Maybe this morning you are sitting right next to someone who has been that hand to you. Take it, as a way of saying thank you; I see you. Maybe next to you there's a hand that you would be glad to reach for to save that person from drowning. Take that hand and hold it. And maybe this morning you can simply acknowledge your need for a hand—if not at this moment, then at least from time to time. Open your own hands and wait for it to come.

...if you wanted
to drown you could,
but you don't
because finally
after all this struggle
and all these years
you don't want to any more
you've simply had enough
of drowning...

(From *The True Love*, by David Whyte)