

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 13, 2023

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## Relentless Faith

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus tells the terrified and battered disciples. As has been mentioned before, some variation of “do not be afraid” or “fear not” comes from Jesus 13 times<sup>2</sup> in the gospels (that number rises further when adding angels saying the same). Now, I don't know about you, but I am relatively ambivalent about being told to not be afraid. On the one hand, yes, that sounds great, no one ever really wants to be afraid. But on the other hand...c'mon Jesus! That is far easier said than done!

Let's consider to whom Jesus directs this command. The disciples are crossing the sea, a place the Israelites understood to be dangerous and chaotic, full of monsters and forces just waiting to consume them. The text tells us the disciples are far from land, being battered by waves, and the wind is against them. As a quick aside, being a canoer I can share from personal experience that trying to travel into the wind can be one of the most frustrating and disheartening experiences a person can have. Then, amid this frightful and frustrating situation in the predawn light, Jesus appears, walking on water!

The disciples think Jesus is a ghost and they are **terrified!** That's the context of the command “do not be afraid.” Honestly, this doesn't strike me as all that fair. Were I in that same situation I would have been fearful too! And simply being told to not be afraid...well...that's not how fear works. Especially when I have evident cause for fear!

Fear is a defense mechanism. It helps keep us safe! And in the midst of high winds, on a wave-battered boat, fear is reasonable. Seeing a figure approach walking on water...once again, fear is reasonable. But the catch comes in our response to our fear. What do we do with fear when we experience it? How

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:27b (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:26; 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; 28:10; Mark 5:36; 6:50; Luke 5:10; 8:50; 12:7; 12:32; John 6:20; 14:27

do we handle it? How do we process it? Do we let it control us or do we control it?

Well, at first Peter seems to show us a faithful response to his fear. Seeing Jesus, he seeks confirmation of his identity. Then, once he knows who is approaching, he seeks to control his fear and tries to respond to the situation with faith: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."<sup>3</sup> Jesus then calls this impetuous Peter out of the boat, and he steps boldly onto the water.

Who knows how long Peter is on the water. Does he take just a few steps, or does he travel a ways before reality intrudes on his consciousness? We don't know. But what we do know is that eventually the fear returns. Peter sees the strong wind and the towering waves all around him. Perhaps he glanced down at the dark water beneath his feet, hiding who-knows-what in its depths. The fear returns and drives everything else out of Peter and he begins to sink.

In a panic (or so I imagine 'cause that's what I'd be feeling) Peter cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" And immediately, the text specifies, Jesus catches him and draws him out of the water to safety. "You of little faith," Jesus says to the frightened, anxious, soaked man. "Why did you doubt?" Wow...that seems kind of harsh, doesn't it? A place of chaos, in the pre-dawn light, with strong winds and battering waves...I am certain I would have doubted too (though I probably wouldn't have been bold enough to step out onto the water to begin with).

On the surface we could interpret this scene as Jesus testing Peter's faith. Or we could use it to say that when we're afraid we're not being faithful (and plenty of Christians make that argument). But I don't believe a loving and gracious God, one who promises to be God-with-us, would test our faith. Nor would our Creator, who knows quite well how fear helps keep us safe, chastise us for being afraid. So, what do we make of this?

Let's go back to Peter's first response to Jesus' approach: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Does any part of that sound familiar to you? How about after I read these two verses from Matthew

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 14:28b

chapter 4: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”<sup>4</sup> “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...”<sup>5</sup>

In the face of Jesus’ words of self-identity, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,” Peter responds to his fear with suspicion and distrust. If it truly is you, Peter seems to say, then make the impossible possible...pass my test. I wonder if this sounds at all familiar. It is to me. In the midst of my own fears and anxieties I have responded to the presence of God with suspicion and distrust. I have made similar statements to God...if you do love and care about me then do A, B, and C. At times I’m even magnanimous enough to say I’ll do D, E, or F in return.

“Why did you doubt?” Jesus asks Peter in the safety of the boat. The common mistake we make here is in thinking Jesus is referring to Peter sinking into the water. But I don’t think that’s the doubt he’s talking about. I suspect that what Jesus means by this question is more along the lines of: Peter, when you saw me on the water, I immediately identified myself, you heard my voice when I offered you words of comfort and assurance, words that you have heard from me before, why did you doubt I was who I said I was?

Jesus is asking Peter, “why did you doubt **me**?” A question we should grapple with as well. Why do we respond to God’s presence with suspicion, distrust, or fear? Why do we feel the need to test God like Peter does? Especially given what we know about Jesus.

The disciples are tossed about, up and down, forward and back, port and stern. They are terrified, wet, battered and lost. Peter, ever the impulsive one, tries to move towards Jesus, but even he loses focus and begins to sink into the water. What a perfect way to describe the church...to describe humanity.

In the midst of this all, despite water and wind, despite darkness and fear; Jesus moves towards the disciples...relentlessly. And not only is he relentless in moving towards the ones he loves, but he will also reach out and catch them when they fall and fail. Whether we’re full of fear or full of faith, Jesus is relentless in pursuing us. Jesus is relentless in being Immanuel, God-with-us. Jesus is relentless in loving you. Which is why I can say with

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 4:3b

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 4:6b

utter certainty, Jesus loves you and there's nothing you can do about it.  
Amen.