

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Jesus Repowered

Matthew 14:22-36

When I was a seminary student, I served and trained under a pastor whose experience and wisdom I valued greatly. I remember a story he told me about something he observed when he and his wife were still dating. Her father was a pastor, and they would often go home with her family for lunch after church on Sundays. At first, my friend could never understand why his future father-in-law would arrive home from worship, go into his room, and collapse on the bed. That was, until he himself became a pastor and went through the experience of pouring himself into preaching the Word of God to his own congregation. Only then did he know more about the fatigue that comes from declaring the good news in weekly worship.

I've never gotten to the point where I've considered asking our congregation for permission to put a bed in my office here at the church, but I will acknowledge that after a Sunday morning full of worship responsibilities, particularly preaching, and an early afternoon of steady fellowship and church administration duties, it does feel good to drop myself into the big chair next to my office table and catch a breath before transitioning to the rest of my Sunday work. That becomes more and more the case as the years pass and my body doesn't have all the capacity it did when I was a student intern training for ministry.

But I take reassurance from Jesus himself who, though he was approximately three decades younger than I currently am, understood the necessity of retreating for prayer and renewed dependence on God. That's how today's text from Matthew opens. Sometimes we're so eager to rush to Jesus' miraculous act of walking on water that we forget how it all begins on a mountainside, where Jesus spends time in fellowship with the Father. Remember that our Lord has just finished feeding thousands. His newly acquired celebrity has begun to attract enormous crowds, so maybe he's growing in knowing how to navigate the move from intensely engaged compassion to crowd fatigue. In this case, even before he dismisses the multitudes, Jesus makes his disciples get into a boat and go forth, without him, to the west bank of the Sea of Galilee. Meanwhile he stays put in prayer, on into the evening, while his boatful of disciples, far from their teacher, is under attack by wind and water.

That's when Jesus, who is God with them, rises from prayer and comes. He comes in the latest and darkest part of the night, walking on the sea. Matthew isn't trying to highlight how Jesus can defy the law of gravity. He's emphasizing how Jesus is doing something that, in various parts of Scripture, only God can do. Only God walks on the sea and overcomes the watery power of chaos. Only God speaks the words "I am," as he does to Moses at the burning bush. That's what the Greek essentially says when Jesus tells his storm-tossed disciples, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." So Jesus is doing things that only God does, and saying things that only God can say. Jesus is God, present and with them.

That's when Peter decides to take what looks like a bold step. Maybe, by attempting to walk on water, Peter hoped to be a hero. A hero who exemplifies faith. It's hard to tell.

People have different interpretations of what Peter does in today's Scripture passage. Some folks see him as the model of faith. After all, he leaves the safety and security of the boat and ventures out onto not-so-solid ground in order to get to Jesus. He steps out and takes the risk of faith in order to be with Christ. Of course he does end up in deep water, literally. When Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and pays more attention to the violence of the storm, that's when he starts to sink. That's when he cries out for Jesus to rescue him. So from this vantage point, the take home lesson is simple, namely, that robust, abundant faith doesn't seek personal security and comfort. True faith takes risks, abandons the zone of safety, and keeps its focus on the Lord. Bottom line: We need to get out of the boat and have more faith.

But others read Peter's behavior differently. True, he does show us that just trying to stay safe in life can run counter to the nature of faith. But at the same time, remember that Peter is the one who initiates his attempt at water walking. "Lord, if it's you," says Peter, "tell me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). Only after Peter proposes the idea does Jesus tell him to go for it. To some folks, this sounds less like an act of faith and more like an act of putting the Lord to the test. In other words, faith is one thing, but foolishness is another. Why do something that's reckless and potentially life-threatening when Jesus is already walking on the water himself, making the hazardous journey to be with you in the boat? So you can see how there's more than one way of interpreting the bold steps that Peter takes in this story.

Whatever your own personal take on this familiar story, it all just goes to show that ultimately, this story is more about Jesus than about Peter. Oh yes, Peter rightfully gets a lot of attention in this episode, but for reasons beyond just himself. He's also there in the story as the representative of all disciples. He exemplifies and embodies the meaning of discipleship, which can be bold and daring one moment, and helplessly drowning the next. In other words, we can look at Peter and see reflections of our own uneven efforts to follow Jesus. Our own faith often moves in fits and starts. One minute we get it, the next minute we don't. One moment we're courageous, the next moment we're afraid. Within the scope of a single experience, we may find ourselves vacillating between trusting and doubting.

The most important thing is knowing whom to call upon. That's where Peter gets it right and shows us all that the Lord and his power to rescue us are our only hope. "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" (v. 30). Jesus reaches out his hand, pulls Peter into the boat, and the wind ceases. That's when the rest of the disciples, who've witnessed this rescue, worship Jesus and say to him, "Truly you are the Son of God" (v. 33).

Note how this declaration reemerges later in the story at the moment of Jesus' death. When Jesus gives up his spirit and an earthquake ensues, a Roman soldier and his associates at the cross proclaim, "Truly this was the Son of God" (27:54, RSV). Here is confirmation and confession that by not saving himself from crucifixion, Jesus saves us, not from death by drowning but from the death-dealing power of sin. We end where Matthew's Gospel began, with the declaration that the goal of Jesus' life would be to "save his people from their sins" (1:21). Looking to Jesus and crying out, "Lord, save me" — that is your greatest expression of faith.

And in our text, it all began with Jesus spending time in communion with the Father. Before there was any walking on the water, there was a meeting on the mountain, where Jesus retreated for some "self-care". I use that term cautiously, because I know it has become increasingly popular. It's generally used to refer to the importance of taking care of yourself, especially in situations and circumstances where you're heavily and sacrificially involved in caring for others. This past week, while checking on someone who was ill, I

spoke to one of their caregivers, who noted how she had been so invested in supporting her loved one, to the point that she has procrastinated on some much-needed surgery of her own. So it was now time to take care of herself as well.

Self-care can involve things like nutrition, stress reduction, exercise, adequate sleep, learning how to say no, taking a trip, reading, cultivating a hobby, being with friends, or if necessary being with no one, or at least no one besides God. It's true that when Jesus dismissed the crowds he had just fed, and sent his disciples out on a boat, on their own, he was practicing some self-care. But this self-care was also, and above all, a kind of soul-care. It was a return to and renewal of the Father-Son relationship that was the source of his identity and energy.

For Jesus, his self was inseparable from the life and work of the Father. Recall how, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus stands not on the water but in it, as he gets baptized by John. At his baptism, Jesus hears the voice that matters most: "This my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (3:17). I imagine how often, during the course of his life and ministry, especially in moments of spiritual depletion, experiences of rejection, and situations of suffering, Jesus must have gone back to that defining word, "You are my beloved." Maybe on the mountainside, before he would descend to set foot on the surface of the sea, Jesus, in communion with the Father, was refreshed in his identity as the beloved Son, and reenergized, repowered for what was ahead. That's self-care, in the form of soul-care, at the deepest level.

Julie Canlis says, "This is true self-care, where we're given the gift of seeing ourselves as God sees us and loving ourselves with his unalloyed love.¹ Care for self has to be grounded in the reality of God's care for you. Love of self has to be rooted in God's love for you. His love for you has been revealed in the Son, whose death rescues you from the watery grave of sin, lifts you up and puts you in the boat with others who know what it means to call out to him as Savior and confess him as Lord.

The thing that makes the difference is the presence of the Lord in your life and in the midst of the community of believers as we make our way through the storms. That's why across the centuries, the boat has been one of the primary symbols of the church. On my desk, I have a cup that has a picture of a boat on it. The boat sits in the midst of the waves, and in the midst of the boat sits a cross, a sign of Christ's presence in the church. Some churches have stained glass windows, and one of the windows may contain a picture depicting a wooden boat with a sail. This type of image is often used to portray the church as a vessel of salvation, a fellowship of disciples that will only reach its destination because Christ is with it and in it.

I go back to Julie Canlis, who writes, "Knowing oneself and being oneself can only happen in relationship with knowing and being known by God and others. And to go one step further: Truly caring for oneself only happens when we have something bigger than ourselves to care about."² For us, that something bigger is the kingdom of the Father and the community gathered to worship the Son, this boat called the church where we share life with one another, lean upon one another, and care for one another. Our life, our energy, our power come from the presence of the Lord, who still sees us and knows us, who still comes to us, especially in the midst of the storms, to bring us help and hope.

¹ Julie Canlis, "Self-Care Only Works in God's Care." Christianity Today. March 10, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/lent-self-care-discipline-discipleship-works-gods-care.html> (August 10, 2023).

² Canlis, "Self-Care Only Works in God's Care."