

Our passage for today is likely a familiar one to us: it's the story of Jesus walking on the water, and then Peter asking for and receiving the invitation to do the same. It's a story of Jesus doing the impossible—to fit in with our theme of Impossible Possibilities, where God is able to work the miraculous and turn the “can't” into the “can”. It's also a story of Peter momentarily doing the impossible as an example of our being empowered as believers... before he second guesses himself, loses connection with God, or loses faith. This morning I'd also like to pose that this passage is basically a parable for us, the Church—except it's an event that actually happened...so a real story parable. I'd like to pose this morning that this passage isn't just a call for us as individuals to believe in our ability to do the impossible, but that this passage is a direct call to the Church about our mission of loving, caring for, partnering with, and standing shoulder to shoulder with our neighbors.

Before we dive into the text, however, one additional thing I'd like to mention: when we deal with a familiar text, one major stumbling block for us is that familiarity. When preparing for today, I first had to realize that there was a whole list of preconceived ideas I brought to this text that just simply aren't there. I realized that this passage from Matthew 14, and the passage about Jesus calming the storm while in the boat with the Disciples in Matthew 8 were so intertwined that I almost viewed them as the same story. There was a colleague at Montreat a few years ago who said “when we are approaching Scripture we need to make sure that we are reading OUT from it....not reading INTO it.” I realized quickly I was reading into this Matthew 14 passage—adding details and thoughts not present, and it was only when I stripped them away that the beauty and call of this passage began to take shape. So this morning I invite you to do the same—listen afresh to the words of this passage—listen for what's said, what's named, the description of the events, the naming of the weather around them, when it says people were scared or not scared, and the simplicity of the dialogue.

I've heard it said that a Pastor really only has 3-4 sermons that they preach—they're just reorganized or presented differently depending on the theme, passage, or liturgical season of the church. And this makes sense, right? As humans we bring our particular set of lenses to almost everything we do—the ways we view the world based on our passions, the season of life we're in, previous major events, or what we know best. These lenses, for Pastors and for us as well, are also present when we read Scripture.

So you probably weren't surprised to hear me say I believe this passage is a parable of sorts for how we are to love, care for, and partner with our neighbors in a way that affirms and dignifies them and ourselves. You've likely heard me say that very same thing multiple times over my 10 months as Director of Outreach here—it's one of the lenses I read Scripture through...one of my major passions as an individual and as a member of the

Body of Christ. I believe this calling to affirm the dignity and partner with our neighbors is one of the major components of what we as the Church are called to be in our communities and throughout the world. If I did the sermon every week for a year (I'd be utterly exhausted), this message would be one that came through fairly often because it is one of the three lenses I approach Scripture with.

The second lens I approach Scripture with is a nerding out, language-loving one—I love comparing various English versions, and digging into the original Hebrew or Greek to see individual word translation options that speak to intent or connection to other passages in Scripture. But when I do a sermon largely based around this lens, the response from Becky is usually one of “Yeeeeaaaaah. It was nice.” So I won't bore you with that one today.

My final lens is similar to the first one, but with a slightly different intent, and is one that formed while reading and talking about Scripture with the youth I worked with in Seattle for more than a decade. It boils down to asking the question: “What is the Good News for all people in this passage?”

While this sounds and seems like a simple enough question, the kids, youth, and young adults in Seattle forced me to rethink a lot of what I thought I knew about Scripture because of their dramatically different starting point. Most of these youth came from tough backgrounds, and I heard multiple times over those years that they identified with Scripture because it contained and willingly named pain. They knew that this book called the Bible was legit because it was willing to “go there”—to go into and talk about hard and messy situations—and they would sometimes call us out if an interpretation or conversation started wandering too far into the “Hallmark,” feel good realm. They wanted what was real, what spoke to their situations and backgrounds, and what was good. This was a dramatic shift from my starting point, built around a view of Scripture that was mostly joyful and rarely dealt with the messy—unless it was to quickly name it before God redeemed it.

Now, I'm not saying my previous view is or was incorrect—it was just radically different, and as I walked with those youth, my previous view began to feel incomplete. As humans, we know the joyful, but we also know the messy and the painful, and we need a Gospel—a Good News-- that stands up to honest conversation in both seasons. What the youth instilled in me is that the Good News of Scripture can't just be good news for some people, or only when things are going well—that's watered-down Scripture. No, the radical nature of Scripture and the Good News needs to hold up and permeate every corner, every high and low, every season and circumstance, and the Good News needs to simultaneously resonate to believers here in Lynchburg, VA, in inner-city neighborhoods, in war-torn countries and “3rd World Countries”. Holding all of that simultaneously is difficult, but it's a challenge (and a lens) I readily thank those youth for instilling in me. This morning I hope

to present it to you as we walk through this Matthew 14 passage, because if this passage is one part a parable calling us out into the community to serve and partner and affirm dignity, another part of it (as we'll explore in a minute) is being equipped with a Gospel that stands up in all situations—a Gospel that willingly asks “what is the Good News to all believers...in all circumstances?”

So let's dive into Matthew 14 with those two lenses—those two starting points in mind.

The first thing that jumped out to me as I disconnected this passage from the Matthew 8 passage of Jesus calming the storm, is the differences in the description of the weather and the Disciples' reaction to it. In Matthew 8 we see the weather described as “a furious storm” that caused the waves to sweep over the boat, which sent the Disciples scrambling to wake Jesus up for fear of drowning. In Matthew 14 we see that the boat was “battered by the waves because the wind was against it” without a description of the state of the Disciples. It certainly could just be an omission of the Disciples' mindset, but seeing as how Matthew is usually fairly descriptive and in a couple of verses they're described as “terrified” and “crying out in fear” upon seeing Jesus, I think it's safe to say that terrified wasn't their mindset, and overly scared maybe wasn't either. There was certainly a strong wind that caused waves that pushed the boat around—these weren't glassy seas, and the description makes it sound like the boat was close to a state of being stuck in the middle of the lake as a result. But as former fishermen this was likely a weather situation they had encountered many times before, and one that could have caused some concern or nervousness, but stopped short of terrified.

The reason this distinction is important is because of what happens next with Peter—I'll come back to Jesus' walking on the water in a second. If we hold that the Disciples were mostly ok in the weather situation before Jesus' appearance to them, and then Peter gets out of the boat and still isn't described as afraid as he begins to do the impossible of walking on water, then verse 30 should strike us: “But when he (Peter) noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

So what changed? I find it interesting that Matthew's words here are “when Peter noticed the wind”—the same wind and same waves he had undoubtedly been looking at for quite a while, and that he had confidently taken multiple steps on already. This wasn't a new or strengthened version of what had been going on, and what Peter had undoubtedly felt blowing against his body and splashing over the sides of the boat. So why does he now “notice” it, and it now strike fear and cause him to lose faith and start sinking? Here is where the parable for the modern Church begins to form.

The obvious answer is that Peter had been safe in the boat previously—safe in a known environment, but now that his eyes were off Christ he was seeing the wind and waves (these things that had existed for a while) from

a brand new perspective—from literally standing on top of and amongst them for the first time, fully exposed. As a fisherman, wind and waves weren't anything new, and he had likely even been swimming in water that wasn't totally calm—but this perspective was brand new, and when he took his eyes off of Jesus he saw and experienced wind and waves in their rawest form...and it terrified him, causing him to sink and cry out. We can't blame Peter for that. For a moment he was doing the impossible, only to be undone by his humanity as he recognized his fragility and the feeling of being inadequate to stand up to this situation on his own power once his eyes were off Jesus. We've all been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt.

There's a second option for why Peter began to sink that I want to pose and explore. Let's consider some of the things Peter and the Disciples had witnessed up to this point: they had seen Jesus calm the storm previously, seen him perform miracles like Feeding the 5,000 just before getting in this boat to head across the lake; heard Jesus teach about building their house on the Rock (Him) so as not to be affected by the waves in Matt. 7, and about not to worry about anything because of God's provision in Matt. 6. So with all of that in mind, could it be that Peter decided to leave the safety of the boat in order to pursue what he believed to be the total safety of being with Jesus? Could Peter have believed in that moment that drawing closer to Jesus would cause the storm to subside, and then, as he drew closer and instead saw the wind and the waves continuing, he lost faith in what he thought Jesus meant in those teachings and in those miracles?

The reason I pose this option is because I think this is a fairly common view of what being a believer entails, and it's a Gospel I heard and saw presented to the youth in Seattle on multiple occasions. Folks from different areas, who didn't know these kids or their situations would present to them a Gospel that if they gave their lives to Jesus, everything would be ok. On multiple occasions we had youth respond to altar calls or pray to accept Jesus at the end of such messages. Then, after the camp or service was over the youth would return home to the exact same situations they had left—inadequate food, addiction, absent parents, etc., and they would return to us confused at best, frustrated or mad at worst that things weren't better—they had done their part...why weren't things better? We then had to walk with them through the questions, through the hurt that this Gospel that hadn't presented the whole truth had created. Is faith in God an assurance that God can work all things into a new creation? Yes. Is it a promise of unfailing hope, mercy, love, and provision? Absolutely. Is it a promise that we will never stand amidst storms and challenges—that we will never find ourselves fully exposed to the wind and waves that batter and toss us? Not at all.

I wonder this morning if Peter fell into that belief—if I just get to Jesus, everything will be calm and ok? When that didn't play out as expected, the illusion created by that incomplete Gospel picture crumbled and Peter was faced with the reality of what he was doing—walking on top of the water, staring down at the waves and

out at the wind...and his faith wasn't big enough to sustain the situation because he hadn't yet grasped the full picture.

And Church, here is where Jesus walking on the water becomes so important. Jesus could have chosen any number of methods at His disposal to reach the Disciples in the middle of the lake. He chose to do the impossible—to walk on water to them in the midst of the wind and waves, probably knowing it would terrify them, and I believe this morning He chose this method as a counterbalance to the Matthew 8 story where He calmed the wind and waves. If Matthew 8 showed the Disciples that Jesus has the power to do the impossible by calming the storms—both literal and figurative storms in our lives-- Matthew 14 showed them that Jesus is also perfectly comfortable doing the impossible by calmly standing firm as our Rock in the very midst of the storms. Throughout Scripture, the Spirit of God often hovers in places that are chaotic and turbulent—God's presence and ability to do the miraculous isn't limited to places that are calm, safe, have gotten better, or are "ok" from our human perspective. God is fine existing in the messy...in the "not yet." Matthew 14 was a call to the Disciples, and to us today, to take hope in the fact that Jesus is already standing in the turbulence of our lives, and often times willingly calls us out to Him to walk with Him there.

This is the faith component Peter was missing: whether Peter sank because he was seeing the wind and waves from a new perspective for the first time, or because he believed an incomplete Gospel about what being in the presence of Jesus entailed, he was lacking the knowledge that sometimes Jesus was going to call him out to do the impossible while the wind kept blowing and the waves kept rolling. He, and the rest of the Disciples were going to have to learn how to keep walking the impossible even when things weren't glassy calm. They were going to need to be equipped with a faith—with a Gospel—with a Good News—that holds up in every season and circumstance.

So let's talk about today. As the Church—as the literal hands and feet of Christ in our communities and in the world, we know we are called to be an out of the boat people. Historically, I hope it's not too much to say that the Western Church has had plenty of moments in its history where we have remained in the safety of our 4 walls—in our boats—instead of stepping fully into our call to be out amidst the wind and waves of ourselves, our fellow congregation members, our communities, and the world. In plenty of circumstances we've been content to ride out the storms our neighbors are going through instead of standing with them in the very midst of what seems impossible.

Church, every time we read this Matthew 14 passage though, every time we see Jesus standing on the water, calling Peter out to join him, and Peter momentarily walking on top of the waves, it should remind us of our call as Christians. People right here in the sanctuary today, listening on the radio or livestream are going through storms right now. Folks in our community are living amidst wind and waves that batter and toss their lives—almost every week as a part of my role here I’m a part of conversations ranging from food insecurity to homelessness to mental health crisis to generational poverty, and how we as a community can rally together to address these issues. There are more than enough wind and waves just outside of our boat, and almost all of them can feel insurmountable—impossible to address. The picture of Jesus standing there on the waves in our passage this morning should give us hope though: Jesus, the Lord of Creation is already standing in the midst of every storm we too often think is insurmountable, and He is ready to say, “Come on out” to us, empowering us to also stand and walk with our neighbors if we get the courage to ask, “Lord, call me out to you.” But we need to be careful with that question—because if we ask it, we know what the answer will be.

When we are ready to step out of our boat, though, when we are ready to pursue our call to stand with folks in their times of need, the crucial question we have to ask is: do we take with us a belief in a Gospel that will hold when we stare up at the impossible—when we stare up at systemic issues and wide spread poverty of spirit or finances, that will stand up to dire diagnosis and numbers and statistics about the needs our community that blow our minds? Do we believe in a Good News that extends to all people, in the midst of every joyful season and every storm, and a Good News that will buoy both ourselves and our neighbors for however long we are called to stand with them in the midst of that storm?

We believe in a God that can calm every storm—can make every impossible, possible. We also believe in a God that is able and willing to walk and stand strong in the teeth of those seasons. And we believe in a God that calls the Church out into the wind and waves to do the same. Amen.