

# Step Out of the Boat

Jesus and Peter walk on the Sea

Matthew 14:22-33  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Not surprisingly, I'm going to set aside any discussion as to the possible historical literalness of the biblical story that I just read from Matthew 14. This story involves Jesus walking on the sea, and for a short time, Peter, as well. I'm doing so because this particular story, along with many others biblical stories, is embedded with the very rich and dynamic symbolism associated with the sea and the boat that sails upon it. Those in Matthew's community of faith were well aware of the metaphorical imagery in this story.

Let's start with the sea. In both Old and New Testament times the sea was a very common metaphor that represented a dangerous, unpredictable, and chaotic place. Stories that involve 'the wilderness' carry a similar connotation. Going all the way back to the first chapter in Genesis we learn that **the waters of the sea symbolize the forces of chaos in the universe**. In the creation story we learn that it is God who brings order out of that chaos. We'll look at how that directly applies to our New Testament story in just a moment.

To extend the metaphor further in today's Gospel story, Matthew introduces a boat sailing upon the sea. Surviving a trip across the sea of chaos was determined by the strength and nature of one's boat. And more importantly, by recognizing God's presence. This story, then, can be understood and basically interpreted as a parable.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, **a boat has stood as a common symbol to represent the Church**. That's what the boat in our stained glass window represents. And those people in the boat represent Christians. **The storm-tossed sea, just like in Old Testament days, continues to mean chaos and the dark forces that threaten the goodness of life and the created order**. In the particular historical context of Matthew, the rough sea refers to the hardship, conflict, temptations, and persecution that battered the early Christian church. The church today faces similar rough seas.

Jesus, of course, plays the most important role in this story. Beyond any literal meaning of Jesus walking on the water to save his disciples – as in defying the laws of gravity and physics – this story *always* carried the metaphorical meaning that Jesus, who obviously represents the presence of God in this story and throughout the gospels, overcomes the power of chaos – just as God had done at the beginning of creation. The traditional understanding of this story reveals that God, in Christ, will ultimately prevail against anything that might try to destroy the Church and Christianity itself.

When it comes to a faithful interpretation of this story, it's very important to note how it begins. We're told that, "**Jesus made the disciples get into the boat** and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee" (vs. 22). The disciples were simply being obedient and faithful in following the instructions that Jesus gave them. It was Jesus who sent them out onto sea. Therefore, the difficulties they experience on the sea are

not of their own making, but stem from their compliance with Jesus' command to venture forth. So I ask, how often do we conclude that any difficulty or storm that we face in life is sometimes the result of *our* own making, that it's somehow our fault? Yes, sometimes those storms may be part of the consequences of our actions. But oftentimes, encountering storm are just a part of life.

What this teaches us is **that we shouldn't be surprised that when following God's directive to venture forth in life and ministry, that the sea of life we travel upon also sometimes becomes chaotic, unpredictable, and perhaps even a bit threatening. It is God who sends us out in mission and ministry onto an often-dangerous sea, which is the world around us.**

It is true that most mainline denominations are currently facing challenging and difficult times, finding ourselves being tossed about on rough seas. I find it disheartening, however, that so many folks have chosen to abandon the church, or Christianity altogether, rather than to ride out the storm until the seas are calmer. This is what the leadership within the Presbyterian Church (USA) is hoping to prevent by trying to convince those who are so distressed and disheartened by the recent decisions of our General Assembly to stick around and see how all this plays out.

When I last preached on this biblical text, three years ago as part of the 3-year lectionary cycle, I entitled my sermon, "**Get In the Boat.**" I emphasized that we need the courage to stay engaged in the ministry of the church and within our denomination, even when the going gets tough, perhaps even threatening. You may have noticed, however, that I have entitled this sermon, "**Get Out of the Boat.**" That doesn't mean, however, that I'm now encouraging folks to abandon ship and leave the church. Yes, like most biblical stories one can find new and different meanings and applications, maybe even paradoxes, each time one takes a close look.

Getting out of the boat is something that Peter does in this story, and for Matthew it didn't Peter was abandoning the church. So let's take a look at what that can mean for us today. Peter responds to Jesus' command to not be afraid by asking permission to come to Jesus on the sea. It's important to note that he does not impulsively leap out of the boat. Rather, he waits until he hears the command from Jesus, "Come" (Matt. 14:28-19). Many folks miss the point that it is Jesus who calls Peter forth out onto the rough sea so that Peter can be closer to him. Did Jesus do this in order to humiliate Peter, knowing that he was going to get frightened and then sink? I don't think so. Let's not forget that for a brief time Peter, just like Jesus, is able to walk on the water. It is in this instant that we catch a brief **glimpse of what Matthew believes discipleship is all about: obeying Jesus and moving toward him confidently even in the midst of threatening and dangerous circumstances.** But Peter, we're told, cannot maintain his posture. He catches sight of the wind and becomes frightened.

There are now two rival powers symbolically in view for Peter: Jesus, who represents God, and the forces of chaos. Peter's faith is now mixed with fear and doubt. Wondering whether Jesus or the raging wind will finally prevail, he begins to sink beneath the surface of the sea. Matthew wants his readers to know that **even when disciples falter, and that includes each one of us, God continues to be present.** Jesus rescues Peter, and us as well, but not from experiencing the storms of life themselves. We are rescued from the chaos they can cause when we forget that God is always present with us.

In our own journey of faith we, like Peter, are people caught between faith and doubt, between courage and anxiety, between peace and fear. Yet Peter, rather than

representing some kind of failure, **took the risk of getting out of the relative safety of the boat in order to get closer to Jesus.** Is it not true that oftentimes it is in the storms of life that we draw closer to God? We too, then, are called to take risks, even when the outcome isn't certain. That's why biblical commentator Andrew Foster Connors writes:

Step out of the boat and risk preaching news that might disrupt the way we have always done things in the community, in our political life, or in our congregations. The church should be willing to risk our own well-being to try something foolish, borderline crazy in the midst of raging storms. **We should be willing to step out of the boat, driven by an impulsive desire to get closer to Jesus,** even when he is miles from solid ground.

If the boat represents the Church, then it's very interesting, in fact surprising to some, to realize that **Jesus can also be found outside the boat. In other words, we are reminded that God is not the property of the Church, confined and held tightly within the box of our sanctuaries.**

That is why we are called to step out of the boat, out of the relative safety of this sanctuary and into the stormy world outside. We do that every time we face and respond to the ignorance and prejudice and hatefulness that we encounter on a daily basis. We do that whenever we encounter and respond to the very real issues faced by those in this neighborhood and beyond. College Hill steps out of the boat each time we bear witness to God's inclusive love, grace and acceptance. I'm sure you can reflect upon other risks that you have taken in your life in stepping out in faith.

This biblical story is misinterpreted, however, with the common platitude, "If you just keep your eyes focused on Jesus, then all the storms of life will disappear." As Connors reminds us:

These fears are real, as real as the storm that Peter steps into. **Simply focusing on Jesus may not necessarily do anything to calm the storm. No amount of faith may end the difficult times the church is negotiating...No amount of prayer is guaranteed to calm the storms that sometimes rage within every life, within every home.**

Nevertheless, the words Jesus offers, even before Peter steps out of the boat, could not be more clear: **"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid"** (v. 27). Whatever the storm, whatever the uncertainties, whatever the fears, **the church that is willing to risk a closer step toward Jesus has nothing to fear.** With him, there is courage to engage every change, every uncertainty, every fear. Without him [without the presence of God], we do not have much to offer the world.

So take heart. Let us not be afraid. And let us have the courage to step out of the boat – in our personal lives, and in the life of the boat called College Hill.

Amen.

Resources:  
*Feasting on the Gospels*