

## “Out of the Boat”

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Psalm 105:1-10, 42-43      Matthew 14:22-33

Good morning! It's good to be back here for worship. Whenever I go away on vacation I really miss the energy and style of worship here, and worshipping with people I know and love. On vacation it's hit or miss when you're looking for a church, and this year we missed. So thank you for being here today. And if you are new here, we welcome you. I hope you can enter into this worship experience, and feel God's presence with you today.

Tom and I just spent two weeks on Long Beach Island, with lots of family members coming and going. Some nights there were 14 or 15 for dinner, and long lines at the outdoor shower. But it was wonderful to spend time together, and the swimming was great!

Tom was worried this summer, because he's still fragile from his back surgery last fall, and he wasn't sure he could take the rough and tumble of the waves. But Tom is a water person and he managed to swim several times a day, even when the rest of us thought it was too cold or windy to get in the water. He could do things in the water that he hasn't been able to do on land for the last year – like jump and fall down, without hurting himself. And he also got a kick out of watching his grandchildren frolic in the waves. And if the water was too rough at high tide in the ocean, he packed up his beach chair and towel and spent the afternoon swimming at the bay.

Tom's brother, Angus, came to visit the first weekend, and he, on the other hand, was not eager to swim, and was terribly anxious watching our little ones tumble around in the waves. Granted, some of the youngest were a bit reckless. But Angus had had a traumatic experience in the ocean as a teenager, when a friend of his got caught in a current and drowned while they were swimming together. And Angus is also a boat person. Ever since he was a kid, his idea of a good time was to go sailing, or take a boat out and fish. And as he pointed out to us, if you're a boat person, being *in* the water is not a good thing. To be *in* the water means that something has gone terribly wrong.

Many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen and boat people, so in the story Maurice read this morning, when Peter stepped out of the boat and onto the water, that was a big deal. Jesus had instructed them to go ahead of him and take a boat across the sea to the other side. But it was a difficult journey and they were battling the wind all night. Early in the morning Jesus came to them, walking on the water. They were afraid it was a ghost coming after them. But Jesus reassured them that it was he.

Now, as in any Jesus story, the point is not the amazing things or cool miracles Jesus can perform. To spend our time trying to figure out whether Jesus was *really* walking on the water, or whether it just *seemed to the disciples* that he was, is missing the point. The real question is what it's all supposed to mean?

In the creation story in the book of Genesis (chapter 1), water represents chaos. Creation begins with a dark and watery void. And God brings order to this chaos, separating the dry land from the sea, and creating light and life. And then in the story of Noah's ark (Gen. 6-9), we see the destructive power of water in the great flood. The story of Jesus walking on water is not about how people can defy gravity with faith. It's about who Jesus is, and what it might look like to have faith in him. Like God, Jesus masters the chaos and destructive powers of the earth. And he comes to those who cry out to him for help.

Now Matthew is the only gospel writer to include the part of the story about Peter. When Jesus said, don't be afraid, it's me, Peter said, OK, *if* it really is you tell me to come to you on the water. And Jesus said, "Come." So Peter started walking on the water toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, it says he was afraid and began to sink. He cried out to Jesus for help and Jesus reached out and caught him.

But at first Peter did walk. Why did he start to sink? Was it because his faith wasn't strong enough? Was it because he got distracted and took his eyes off Jesus? Or was it because he really should have stayed in the boat to start with?

The fact is, Jesus did NOT command Peter to walk to him on the water. He did tell the disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side. But for Peter to get out of the boat and walk to Jesus, was Peter's idea. Why would Peter want to do something like that? Was it a test? Peter said, "If it is you, command me to come." Satan said something similar when he tested Jesus in the wilderness: "*If* you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." Perform this miracle.

Usually Jesus refused to perform a miracle or sign when someone demanded it. But this time was different. Peter wasn't testing Jesus. He was testing his own faith. And he wanted to be where Jesus was and do what Jesus was doing.

Walking on water is not something Jesus asks or expects his disciples to do. But he does want us to get in the boat and sail, even when the water is rough.

Now, we're not sitting in sanctuary for worship today (and for those of you who are visiting, we do have a sanctuary behind these doors here. But it's not air-conditioned, so we worship in this room for the summer.) Anyway, the main part of the sanctuary in any church is called the nave. It's where the people sit. The word "nave" comes from the Latin word for ship or boat. And if you think about it, a sanctuary is a little like a ship or boat. We're in it together. Jesus is with us, and directing us. And together we find refuge and salvation from the stormy seas of life.

But a ship is not meant to stay tied to the dock. Hopefully we're going somewhere together. The ship of the church is supposed to take us places where we can minister to others in Jesus' name. That's what the disciples were doing in the ship in today's story – crossing the sea to the other side, where they would help Jesus spread the word, the good news of God's presence or kingdom on earth.

Today we will commission a group of volunteers who are leaving on Thursday for Guatemala, to help build bottle schools with an organization called “Hug It Forward.” I don’t know how many are able to be with us today, but we have a total of 29 people going. This is a wonderful opportunity to experience and learn about a new country and culture, while helping to spread God’s love in the world. But you don’t have to fly to a strange land across the sea to live out your faith. There are plenty of places we travel to as a church right here, volunteering with Habitat for Humanity and the family homeless shelter, feeding the lonely and hungry at Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen, sheltering victims of domestic violence with the Oelhaf House, supporting the rights of day-laborers with CoFiA, to welcoming young people in the youth group and teaching English classes in this room. Our ship travels many seas and goes many places to be part of what God is doing in the world.

To have faith is not about walking on water, or overcoming problems in spectacular ways. Peter tried it, and it was exciting for a moment. But he couldn’t really walk on water. Still, to have faith means daring to believe that all things are possible with God. To have faith is to launch our ship into the turbulent waters of life and expect to find Jesus there. And it means crying out to Jesus when we begin to sink, or can’t find our way.

Today we gather at the table of our Lord for communion. At this table we affirm that we are the body of Christ together. Faith is something we do together. And it is here that we find sustenance and strength to do God’s will in the world. We don’t have to get out of the boat and strike out on our own, although it’s always great to have a few people like Peter, who will try things that nobody else thinks we should be doing. We need that kind of daring courage to stretch our imaginations and challenge us to try new things. We may not always be successful. We may falter and sink. But Jesus is there to catch us. And with faith we can do and be more than we believed we were capable of.

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Credit for some of the ideas in this sermon to:

Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, “Stay in the Boat!” Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33, at [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?comentary\\_id=985](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?comentary_id=985).

And Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks Christian Resources, at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt14x22.htm>.