
The Faith Jesus Has in You

Matthew 14:22-33

Bread scraps littered the deserted plot of land on which 5,000 men sat, along with their accompanying women and children, for an afternoon with Jesus. I imagine the scene looking like what would have followed a Woodstock for Jesus circa AD 32. The sight that bespeaks: "A good time was had by all here!" Last Sunday, we looked at that passage in Matthew 14, in which Jesus took a boy's meager lunch and multiplied it for the masses so they could be fed, body and soul. And fed they were, to 12 overflowing baskets. Now, before the crowd was even dismissed by the compassionate Rabbi, today's Lectionary text gives us a picture of the rare stern, parental Jesus. It says, "*Immediately* he *made* the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds."

My dad was an artillery sergeant in the US Army for many years, as tender of a human as he is today. When he charged us young boys to do something, it was always, "Sir, yes sir" (even if it we didn't say it out loud). He wasn't going to repeat the orders, so we had to catch it the first time. Jesus here gives a decisive command to his comrades. The Greek word used by the Gospel writer is *anagkazō*. One commentator calls the word: "The Compelling Power of God." It literally means to "make", "compel", or "force" them, even beyond their will, to push off from shore aboard the boat. Jesus usually woos followers by infectious invitation and peaceful promises. This was no invitation. And only nine times in all the New Testament do we get such a powerfully compelling verb.

I have flashbacks to early Monday mornings as a young student when the teacher walks by and slaps a pop quiz on your desk. It hardly comes when you are ready for it, but there it is anyway. And in that moment, there is only one option—you take it.

And as much as I fought against this logic for many years, it is in the test-taking where you best learn what has been neglected. You are left exposed to the very things you thought you knew as you kind of short-cutted your way through. You are confronted with the things you actually avoided, in the hopes that it would never show up on the test. The tests of life never ask if you are ready for them. Maybe like a Monday morning pop quiz, they are hardly something you can see coming. And never is there the choice to just push it off to the side.

The disciples had been schooled for many chapters now in Jesus's classroom. They sat under his tutelage when he gave the Sermon on the Mount. They had just witnessed the miracle in the feeding of the 5,000, coming out the other side having learned that scarcity never has the final word. They also could attest to their own call stories of how they graduated out of their former lives to be shepherds in the way of Jesus. Now it was time for the test.

The text softens it a little. Most English translations say that the boat was "battered" or "tossed" by the waves. Yet, the Greek here is *basanizomenon*, meaning "tormented"—the boat was being tormented by the waves. These were no mere rough sea waters. The converted fishermen would have been used to managing that. These waters had a sinister will of their own, relentlessly beating against the wooden boat, in a rhythmic cadence that doesn't allow you to figure things out. That word for tormented is repeated elsewhere in Matthew to describe the tormenting actions of demons. It's the kind of sea-nightmare that leaves you completely spent after countless hours at trying to stabilize yourself. Your arms are exhausted, your legs barely supporting you underneath.

These are the experiences of life that demand that you exhaust every resource you can gather to try and bring some sense of equilibrium. Yet nothing you seem to do can offer much relief to the situation. The moment you feel like things are settling in, another wave destabilizes you and demands your every strength to keep from being tossed overboard. The disciples would have been very adept at trying every corrective from what they learned spending so much time at sea. They would have tried every strategy, every protocol. It's only when they reach the limits of their ability, their knowledge, and their energy, the teacher shows back up.

It makes you wonder just what value holds in the education of life when you arrive at the place of coming to the end of your rope. Is there something we learn there that we wouldn't otherwise?

It says, "early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea." Other translations clarify that this occurred in the "fourth watch" of the night. That's an ancient military and nautical term referring to the last shift of the night guard, around 3 to 6 am. The dead of night. When the sun has sunk the farthest beneath the earth. Jesus waits not only until their strength was completely sapped, but also when they are in the dark depths of their exhaustion.

We traveled this weekend over Friday night so we could be in New Hampshire Saturday morning to pick up Elsa from her two-week sleep-away camp. When we got in the car to leave Friday afternoon, Lavender had just finished the second of a three-week Junior Orchestra camp at Juilliard in the city. These are long, 9 to 5 hour days for her with lots of instrumental playing and paying attention. On the drive up, Friday evening, Lavender was almost immediately falling asleep in the car when she made both me and Katie laugh. We asked: "Lav, are you tired?" Feeling the need to correct us, while also half asleep, she responded: "I'm not tired, I'm exhausted." Katie and I both agreed that we need that on a t-shirt.

Do you know those days? Life feels relentless with no regard to all the good you are working to accomplish. One trial after another as if the one wasn't enough by itself to try and overcome? The text says that the disciples were so utterly spent that in their blurry, dizzy state, they perceive Jesus as a ghost and become afraid when he approaches. That part feels relatable. Sometimes life becomes so disorienting by its trials and tormenting pace, we too can barely recognize the Christ in our midst. Jesus says, "Take heart. I AM. Do not be afraid." Here, note that he appears as the absolute, I AM. Maybe there really was something different about his appearance in that cosmic, ultimate form. He doesn't qualify that title with a predicate. He doesn't say, "I am the bread of life", "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd", "I am the way".

With the definitive I AM, he meets them as the one who "treads upon the wave of the sea" in Job 9, the one who rules over the raging of the sea and lays still the rising waves, in Psalm 89. He comes as the Cosmic Christ that hovered over

the formless, chaotic waters at Creation. He shows up in their midst as the Creator Christ that was there at the foundation of the world, is present with them as the Spirit-wind at their back, and will be ever before them calling them into a promised, hopeful future.

Peter, perhaps misses the first test of recognizing this. He sees Jesus and wants to do what he's doing, which is hardly something to dismiss. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter is looking for extra credit. He wants the test within the test. I have to believe that the others with him, in all their frail human nature, just rolled their eyes.

But Peter is ambitious and he steps out of the boat, onto the choppy waters, but almost immediately sinks. He thinks he has failed the test. He thinks he is being quizzed on whether he tries hard enough. Believes hard enough. Whether he will keep his eyes on Jesus clearly enough and for long enough to do something miraculous. This is what I think of as the belief of the Cowardly Lion in Wizard of Oz, who tries to talk himself into something that simply isn't true: "I do believe, I do, I do, I do, I do believe." Belief isn't something that you muster up. Faith is formed in the watery depths of life and only cultivated when things are much more stable.

Peter passes the test without knowing it. Just as he is sinking, he cries out: "Lord, save me!" (Kyrie, sōson me). Peter, in that moment, believes something about the Christ that cannot be prepared ahead of time, but uttered from the depths of your soul when all the chips are down. Jesus's response has perplexed even the best scholars. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" With that, the winds calmed down. Peter gets back into the boat. And the test is over.

With Jesus's question, "why did you doubt?", many have come to think of this narrative as a condemnation on the small faith of Peter, who didn't believe Jesus hard enough to suspend the laws of physics and conquer the waves. But I don't hear this as Jesus condemning Peter for lacking faith but as an encouragement to Peter, even if a corrective. I hear Jesus saying, "Remember Peter . . . I taught you that if you just have faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains. And with that mustard seed-like faith, you have everything already inside you that you need for the abundant life. You didn't lose faith in me. You lost faith in yourself. You thought you had to have faith as large as a mountain to move the mustard seed, when I meant it the other way around."

Peter didn't sink because he doubted Jesus. He sank because he doubted himself. The way I see it: He put his faith in question when he stepped out of the boat at all. We spend a lot of time critiquing our faith in Jesus. Jesus wants us to see how much faith he has in us. He builds his church on people who have a small amount of faith.

This is good news for us. God isn't looking for a bunch of super-Christian wave-walkers. He wants followers of the way who are committed to doing the small things, daily, and with great trust that God alone can bring about the impossible.

On the outside, it was a failed test for the favorite disciple—Peter, the rock on which the church is to be built. And yet, when he returns to the boat, they all say something we hadn't yet heard in the Gospel, "Truly, you are the Son of God." A recognition that can only come through such a trial.

Think about one of the most impactful lessons you learned at some point in your life. Something that so shook you that it forever changed the way you see life and live it out. Think about what were the circumstances that created the occasion for learning that lesson. Did you learn that lesson when times were at their best? No, likely it was during a very trying season, a dark night of the soul. And the potter hovered over the kiln, intently watching for the perfect timing to take the fired clay out and reveal a beautiful work of art.

We cannot know when the test comes. So, we show up here each week, we commit to meaningful community, in order to cultivate a life of faith so that when the trial comes, we too can put that faith on display. So, the challenge for us, friends, is to not dismiss the trial, no matter how deep those waters. There is something there we can learn that is not accessible to us otherwise. Remember that Jesus has faith in you, so have faith in yourself. Praise be to God! Amen.