



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON RICHARD C. WEYLS, COMMUNITY LIFE & SENIOR ASSOCIATE RECTOR

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 9, 2026

GENESIS 37:1-4; 12-28; PSALM 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45B; ROMANS 10:5-15; MATTHEW 14:22-33

JESUS MOVES TOWARDS THOSE HE LOVES

Matthew 14:22-33 *[Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."]*

FEAR. I want to talk about it today. I grew up in a home where I felt secure, stable, and safe. However, as I got older and I encountered the outside world, I became fearful. I was especially fearful of my peers. I was constantly concerned about what they thought of me. I was sensitive and spiritual, more interested in music and theater than sports. I knew I was gay, but no one else did. This was the 1960's and I couldn't imagine ever sharing that with anyone else. I had

never met anyone like me, and I was afraid that I would be found out.

This continued until at age 25 I had a profound spiritual experience in prayer. I encountered the complete and unconditional love of God through a mystical experience. This fed my desire to become a priest, and I was no longer afraid. Sure, I would get scared especially if something was threatening. My fear would remove me from the threat and ensure my survival, but I no longer lived with a

sense of constant fear and dread. However, something happened this week in my life that re-stoked that irrational fear. I had to grapple with the reality that, as I age, I am afraid of a future that I cannot control. I'm working through it, but I must tell you, this week I was afraid. Really afraid.

Thank God that the church offers us the Gospel that we just heard today. In it the disciples contend with deep, primal fear. Fear like I felt this week. Fear of the unknown. Fear of suffering. Fear of sickness and death. Fear of oblivion. Unfortunately, I have heard many sermons on this passage that suggest that if we have enough faith and trust in God, we will not be afraid. For example, in our Gospel when Peter exercises bold, fearless faith in Jesus, he does the impossible. His faith empowers him to walk on water – just like Jesus! But as soon as Peter gives in to fear, he nearly drowns.

I think simplistic interpretations like this are dangerous. Nowhere in the Gospels are we called to prove our faith by taking pointless risks that threaten our lives. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach us that bad things happen to us because we're too frightened to earn God's protective care. Whether we're talking about respecting the power of the sea during a vicious storm, or heeding expert medical advice during a global pandemic, the same caution applies.

Recklessness is not faith. Stupidity is not courage.

Notice the timeline of events as Matthew relates them. The disciples are frightened because they are in a small boat in a storm. When they see Jesus walking on the water, they're terrified. They don't recognize him; they think they're seeing a ghost. Naturally, they cry out in fear. "Immediately" Jesus offers them comfort and reassurance. He tells them exactly who he is. "Take courage! It is I! Do not be afraid."

And then Peter tempts Jesus. He gives Jesus an identity test. "*Lord, if it's you...*" When else did we hear those words? Remember the beginning of Matthew's Gospel? Can you hear the echoes of another famous identity test in Peter's words? The identity test Jesus faced in the wilderness, forty days after his baptism? They came from the devil, "*If you are the Son of God...*"

This is not about the morality or immorality of human fear. This is about how we respond to God's presence when we're afraid. It's about what we say and think and feel and do when the divine comes to us in guises we don't recognize.

The disciples are not wrong to be afraid. Of course they're afraid! They're afraid because they aren't keen on drowning. They're afraid because gigantic waves in the middle of the night are scary. They're afraid

because they lack the tools with which to process what they're seeing; human beings don't have the ability to walk on water.

If we extend the meaning of "drowning" to include all the ways in which we human beings find ourselves in over our heads in this world, then of course we experience fear. Of course, we feel afraid amid political brokenness, rampant social injustice, struggling economies, and escalating international warfare. Of course, we feel afraid when unhealthy marriages, sick children, unfriendly neighbors, grinding jobs, and financial uncertainty threaten our lives. Of course, we feel afraid when our basic biology betrays us into anxiety, panic, and depression.

The issue is not fear; the issue is where fear leads. Notice the first place that Peter's fear leads him. His fear leads him straight to suspicion and distrust. His fear leads him to test and question Jesus's identity, instead of taking Jesus's self-disclosure at face value. "*If it's you, enable me to do the impossible. If it's you, reorder reality and prove to me that you're God.*"

Interestingly, Peter's test fails. Despite his initial boldness, he cannot prove who Jesus is by walking on water. He fails within seconds. Why? Because Jesus doesn't calm the sea for Peter's convenience. Even though Peter steps out of the boat, his circumstances remain wild and turbulent and dangerous. If Peter thinks he can

manipulate Jesus into making faith easy, he learns otherwise fast.

To truly trust Jesus is to hold two pictures of God's kingdom in productive tension. Yes, sometimes Jesus demonstrates his power in miraculous ways. But most often, we need to trust that his Incarnation – his quiet, abiding presence in our wild, untamed lives – is sufficient for the circumstances we face. Usually, Jesus's power is paradoxical; it comes to us in what looks like vulnerability, like weakness, like strangeness. The image of Jesus' power is a beaten man on a cross. The wildness of the sea is no proof of God's absence.

In my mind, the power of this Gospel story doesn't lie in Peter's faith, doubt, courage or fear. Peter's trajectory is not the point of the reading. Jesus's trajectory is the point, because unlike Peter's, it never changes. It is constant, focused, relentless, and directed. Did you notice? *From the very beginning of the story, Jesus moves towards his disciples.* He moves towards them when they're struggling at sea. He moves towards them when they decide he's a menacing ghost. He moves towards them when they're terrified by his approach. He moves towards them when they're reckless enough to give him a dare. He moves towards them when they begin to drown. He moves towards them when they cry out for help. He moves towards them when they're shivering and sorry for

their rashness. He moves towards them when they realize, for a beautiful, flickering instant, who he is and what he is. He moves towards them when they worship him.

In other words, ***Jesus never stops moving towards the ones he loves.*** He never stops crossing the dark water to come to where we are. Neither our

fearfulness nor our faithlessness ever alters his steady approach. We are the ones he's bound for. Our flailing bodies are the ones he pulls out of the water. Ours is the boat he climbs into. It is for us that he calls out across the terrifying waves, again and again and again:

Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!