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THE SCRIPTURE
Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he 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."

THE MESSAGE
"{UN} Series: Faith, Fer, and Freedom"
Mark Briley

Could I be so bold this morning to ask for a show of hands if you own a boat? Just as I suspected. If you own a boat, it's apparently un-American not to be out on a boat this holiday weekend? I figure we have some Broadway boaters out on the water today.

I was on a boat yesterday! We don't own a boat, but Carrie's cousin does, and he said we could get on his boat because it would be un-American not to be on a boat this weekend.

I don't know how all this works. We weren't a boating family growing up. We could all swim. It wasn't a fear of the water or anything. Just accessibility perhaps? Or just not something either of my parents grew up doing. Shout out to my mom whose birthday is today, and I know she'll be watching this from land. Love you, ma!

Over time, I've made some friends who have boats, and we usually end up on two or three over the course of any given year. The kids like to tube and fish. Our youngest, Hayes, was afraid of the boat when he was little until our friend invited him to be Captain Hayes. Jason put him behind the wheel and let him drive, and then he wasn't afraid anymore. Something about a perceived level of control eases the nerves for many of us.

Anyway – I was on a boat a bit yesterday. It was lovely. I like to feel the breeze, see the motor cut the water, turn up the tunes and share in the laughs. But today's passage was on my mind and I gotta say, I kept looking at the water thinking, "*That water would never hold my weight.*" I mean... I saw some other people on the water this weekend step out of their boats and were barefooting... water skiing behind the boat without any skis. Is that like walking on water?

Here's this story about Jesus water-walking, and Peter wants to go barefooting with him. It's a story as culturally popular and epic as David and Goliath, Noah and the Ark, Moses and the Parting Sea. Jesus walking on water became a social phenomenon over and ahead of some biblical miracle. Everyone has some connection to this story. People throw out the "*He thinks he can walk on water!*" comment to chastise someone who is arrogant. It's a well-known story. It almost gets used in as many jokes as Jesus turning water into wine. People write books about it. John Ortberg famously wrote a book entitled, "*If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.*" It's a fun story – a sermon even – if you want to look at it that way unpacking matters of faith, fear, and freedom – fitting as America celebrates her Independence and those who own a boat are likely out on the water this weekend.

Interesting enough, Jesus compels his followers to get into this boat and go ahead of him to the other side. Some versions say, "*He **made** them get on the boat*" or "*He **insisted** that they get in the boat.*" He didn't **invite** them to get in the boat or **suggest** they get in the boat or even strongly **encourage** them to get in the boat. He **demanded** it. However, you name it, he was bent on getting them on the boat *without* him.

Why force them on the boat? We know Jesus was seeking some alone time and was struggling to find it. Parents at home with kids this summer, maybe you get this sentiment. Jesus may have been saying to the disciples. *“Get out of my face! I just need a little ‘me’ time.”* Maybe he was sending them on because it was a dangerous season. His cousin, John the Baptizer, had just been killed after all. Governmental threats were heavy and real and maybe Jesus and his posse were next on the hit list. He may have needed some space to grieve the loss of his cousin. He’s Jesus, yes, but he’s got real human feelings and emotions, and maybe that’s why he wanted them to get on the boat – so he could have some space from them to grieve, raise a glass, listen to their favorite songs while he dropped a fishing line in the water. Maybe there were fireworks coming over the water later, and he didn’t want them to miss out. Whatever the reason, Jesus made them get on the boat and he scurried off to get a little break from the ongoing demands of the world on his life. We know it’s a critical time as this is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel where we are told that Jesus slipped away on his own to pray.

But... like those same parents at home with the kiddos, Jesus’ alone time is short lived. *“Can I not have a minute here?”* What had happened was that Peter and the crew were out at sea, paddling and paddling and not getting anywhere. It wasn’t a holiday on the lake. It was a storm with high winds, and they were terrified. They’re skilled enough, mind you. It’s not their first time in a boat but the storm was bad enough that they were thinking, *“This is it. We’re gonna die!”* And they’re probably getting frustrated with each other, and some of them are mad at Jesus for making them get in the boat, and some of them are wondering if they’ll see their families again and some are looking for the instruction manual to find a way out of this mess.

And... it’s night. Darkness exaggerates everything. That tree limb outside of your bedroom that occasionally brushes against the window by day is clearly a tree limb, but at night, it’s Freddy Krueger for sure. If your kid is 60 miles away from you during the day, you’re okay, but at night, when you’ve settled in and you miss tucking them in bed, it feels like they’re on the other side of the world. Night does things. Darkness brings out our worst thoughts and our greatest fears.

It’s part of the societal divide between us right now. It all seems very dark, and we’re hit with it left and right. And we’re losing our minds, it seems. The question is, *“How lost do you want to get?”* Because you can chase down any rabbit trail imaginable. Social Media threads – thousands of comments deep with back-and-forth threat and counter threat and the same links being passed back and forth to prove one point or another. We get so lost in the outrage that we forget the things that ground us in the first place. We become scared disciples of a political ideology or newsfeed, paddling as fast as possible in the middle of the storm, and not getting anywhere.

I was talking with Mayor Buffalo this week after she spoke to our Seasoned Spirits group. We were both able to acknowledge that when the chaos of the world looms big and beyond our ability to engage well, we need to get local – we make a difference at home, in our neighborhoods, in our city. Don't get lost in the outrage. Just show neighborly love and kindness to the next person in front of you and see what that does for your spirit and theirs.

This may be the way out of our stuck. I have a friend who said she was recently in a room with about 15 other women. Ten of the 15 confessed to feeling intense loneliness. She said, "*It was a mix of extroverts and introverts and every enneagram number present... and all so lonely!*" This really isn't all that surprising to me. I'm seeing this, too – in men and women. But then she says, "*It seems so silly to me that we all confess the same thing and then stay in our stuck.*" Stay in our stuck. That struck a chord with me. How many of us feel isolation, feel desperation, feel exasperation but have stayed in our stuck? Is it fear that keeps us stuck? Is it anxiety? Maybe it's a combo of things. The disciples are stuck, they're in the dark, and they are afraid.

As they are already on edge, they *really* start wiggling out when they see a figure walking toward them on the water. The text says they cried out in terror: "*A ghost!*" They're having a meltdown here... and just how visible must Jesus have been? It's somewhere around four in the morning, its pitch black, the boat's a rockin,' the wind is pounding. How well could they really see this figure walking at them, let alone hear him from a distance say, "*Take heart, it is I!*" And I don't care what they thought Jesus was capable of doing in this situation, I can hear someone say, "*Take heart?!! How 'bout take an oar and get your rear in this boat and paddle.*" I'm not sure what really changes the predicament here. If it's already chaotic and the disciples on board aren't even trying to balance the boat anymore – then how can they all stop and watch this swimming lesson Peter has demanded from Jesus? What does this tell us about this story?

It tells us something about fear and faith and freedom. You see, in ancient times, there were no marine biologists studying what was taking place in the water. People just saw the water as scary and mysterious and representative of all the things that we're scared of in the dark. There were assumed sea monsters like the great Loch Ness and other demonic creatures that push out evil. You didn't mess with the sea and because it was unknown, it was scary. Add a storm and some wind and the dark? It's the worst.

And while people have surmised about Jesus' feat (f.e.a.t.) of walking on the water that he simply "*knew where the rocks were*" or must have been wearing floaties or something that the disciples couldn't see... it is most likely that Matthew is preaching a

sermon here about God's presence amidst the stormy and chaotic realities of our lives. That's what's important here.

Notice Jesus' words are translated, "*Take heart, it is I!*" but what he literally says is, "*I am!*" which is God's name. It's how God is introduced in the First Testament. I AM. The disciples are scared when they make sight of this person coming on the water and cry, "*Ghost!*" and we get this, right? You may be here today and don't feel all that friendly with Jesus... you haven't warmed up to him much and he may seem sort of ghost-like to you. After all, you know quite a few folks who say they're Christian, but they don't get along with each other and don't seem to live with much trust in anything beyond themselves. Are we reliable witnesses? Actor Tom Arnold wrote a book called, "*How I Lost Five Pounds in Six Years.*" Are we looking to Tom Arnold for advice on navigating our diet? I think there are people outside of the Church who tilt their head looking at Christians who are the most vocal with their contradictory views from each other on today's issues and think, "*Why am I supposed to follow **your** Jesus?*"

But... here is Jesus saying, "*I AM*" ... God is coming through the storm to you. And Peter, right on cue says, "*If YOU ARE... call me to come.*" If "*I AM*" ...if God is out there... if "*YOU ARE*" out there, then "*I'll drop the oars, I'll toss the boat manual, I'll walk through the storm with you.*"

But do you catch what's being said here? It's the same phrase the devil uses with Jesus in the tempted time in the wilderness. "*If you are the son of God...*" Satan says to Jesus in the great temptation amidst Jesus' vulnerable state. "*If you are the son of God, make cheddar biscuits out of those rocks. If you are the son of God, throw yourself off this cliff and call on the angels to catch you. If you are the son of God, check out these Google Earth pictures of the world. Worship me and I'll retire, and you can own the whole thing.*" And what does Peter say, "*If you are... If it is you... let me walk on water, too... let me be like God, too.*"

It's no wonder that just two chapters later, Jesus says to Peter, "*Get behind me Satan.*" Peter puts Jesus to the test. And you may remember testing God is a no-no. But why? Shouldn't we commend Peter for being bold? If he wants to walk on water, he's got to get out of the boat. We honor such courage – like my friend who just sky dived over the Grand Canyon, or like the time I jumped off a high cliff into the water because everyone else was afraid. Look how brave! Ah... but why? Peter *is* brave here. But is it about the *test* or about the *trust*? A test says, "*If you fail, it's over.*" Trust says, "*I'm riding with you no matter the outcome.*" A test says, "*I'll follow you only as long as what you ask of me, God, aligns with what my favorite political pundit says I'm supposed to believe.*" Trust says, "*You said choose love always, Jesus, so I choose that love over and above my politic.*"

Many a preacher has come down on Peter saying it was when he took his eyes off Jesus that he began to sink. Some preachers read Jesus' remarks to Peter losing his balance on the water as a chastisement – *“You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”*

What about the rest of the team covered in the boat? I don't know. What if he was actually commending Peter because he *did* step out of the boat? He took that step into the water that he knows can't hold his weight... into the water that is full of the scary stuff of the dark... where the demons dwell. What a risk! And he stayed afloat on the water for a bit. Maybe Jesus was smiling! *“You of little faith. Why did you doubt?” “Why did you think you couldn't do it? See. You did it!”*

It's like your child taking that first step or swimming that first stroke or hitting off the tee for the first time – you don't degrade them for not running yet or not perfecting the backstroke or not knowing how to hit a curve ball. They're trying for the first time.

Jesus scoops him up, they get in the boat and the wind dies down. All is well. The disciples thought they were at it alone... they thought in their own power they could sort it all out... but when things got tough – they lost sight of what grounds them the most – the presence of God. The love of Christ. We cannot make it alone.

Look... in this day and age... as people are hungry to get behind someone or something... a candidate – dare we say a savior – and they're willing to put it on a billboard proudly that says, *“I follow this guy. You like this person, you'll love me.”*

You know what I'm saying? And people hear stories like this walking on water tale and they're all, *“Maybe felt boards in Sunday School as a kid ... maybe then I could accept it... but not now. I don't believe that stuff anymore.”*

I love what Fred Craddock said once in response to this sort of sentiment. He said, *“Why don't we all form a circle and get some garbage bags and put in them all the things we don't believe anymore. We'll fill up lots of bags, but the critical moment will come when we have filled the bags and then we look at each other and say, “Now what is it we do believe? What do I believe?” Of course, I'm not a child anymore,”* he said. *“I don't believe there are demons in the water. Nobody who jumps off the high dive into the water says, “Look out for the demons!” We don't believe that anymore.”*¹

Ah... but if the demons aren't in the water... where are they? And that's old school, right? Demons and all? But what if demons are out there? What if demons are our fears... jealousy for example – fear of the loss of love. Greed? Fear of insecurity. Lies?

¹ The Cherry Log Sermons by Fred Craddock. Westminster John Knox Press. 2001. This quote comes from Craddock's word, “Faith and Fear” grounded in this Matthean text. His influence is strong in this message, and I am grateful for his wrestling with the wind and waves long ahead of me.

Fear of punishment. And our fears of freedom for others? Paul wrote to the church at Galatia this word: *“It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows.”*

We’re all in this boat with Peter and the disciples, friends. You’re on a boat this weekend after all. Some of us are paddling as hard as we can. Some of us are frustrated with others in the boat. Some are mad at Jesus for forcing us into this boat in the first place. The storm is strong right now. And it doesn’t feel a whole lot like freedom. It feels like fear has us grasping for truth and lashing out and chasing after Saviors of our own making.

Truth is... we won’t make it to the shore without a renewed trust in God. But it’s possible, friends. And it’s the beauty of freedom. We can abuse it, or we can claim it to do good... to step forward... to release the demons of all kinds of fear and listen for hopes inflection instead of condemnation. Jesus is saying, *“You of little faith. What did you ever doubt? ‘Cause look at you. You did it? You’re doing it! And I AM with you the whole time.”*

A SONG OF FOCUS

“Love Lifted Me”

BY HOWARD SMITH AND JAMES ROWE

ALTERNATE LYRICS BY ED VARNUM

“Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus”

BY HELEN LEMMEL

1. Jesus, walking to their boat,
the sea beneath his feet.

With faith, Peter said, “I’ll come.” Jesus said, “Come on, Pete!”
Looked from Christ into the storm and sank beneath the waves.

Called to Jesus from the storm,
and he was saved.

He sang:

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
love lifted me.

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
love lifted me.

2. Eyes on Christ, not on the storm,
Peter walked on the sea.

Focused faith that cast out fear, he was completely free.
Overwhelmed by fear he sank, hands reached down from above.
He was lifted from those waves and saved by love.

He sang:

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
love lifted me.

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help,
love lifted me.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in his wonderful face,
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of his glory and grace.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH