

Fear Not!

There's an old story that's often been retold, especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the church. It goes like this.

A devout abbot from a monastery decided to take a prolonged spiritual retreat in a small cabin located on a remote island in the middle of a large lake. He told his fellow monks that he wanted to spend his days in prayer so that he might grow closer to God. For six months, he remained on the island with no other person seeing him or hearing from him in all that time. But then one day, as two monks were sitting near the shore soaking up some sunshine, they could see in the distance a figure moving toward them. It was the abbot, walking on the water. After he stepped onto dry land, passed by the two monks and continued on to the monastery, one of the monks turned to the other and said, "All these months in prayer, and the abbot is still as stingy as ever. After all, the ferry only costs twenty-five cents!"

I wonder if the lake that abbot supposedly walked on was as big as the body of water where this Sunday's account from Matthew's Gospel takes place. The Sea of Galilee is about

thirteen miles long and eight miles across. More like a good-sized lake than a sea.

But to first-century people without motorized vessels, without navigational instruments, without ship-to-shore radio, without radar, that lake must have seemed as wide as an ocean. That's how it must have appeared to the twelve. In the boat. By themselves. Without Jesus.

For it hasn't been long since Jesus learned of the violent death of someone close to him. John the Baptist has been murdered by Herod. At the end of a full day of ministry, in great need of solitude, of time and space apart to grieve and pray, Jesus has told his disciples to get into the boat and cross the lake to the other side.

But their voyage isn't going so well. Our translations of the Bible read that *the wind was against them*. But the original text suggests more than just a headwind. A contrary wind. A hostile wind. In total darkness, the twelve have been rowing for hours, rowing with all their might into towering waves that threaten to capsize the boat. Overcome by fatigue. Out in the middle of a turbulent sea.

Years ago, I participated in a confirmation retreat down at Short Stay Recreation Area. We were staying in a cottage on the shore of Lake Moultrie, only a few feet from the water. A sudden squall came up and—just outside the window—sheets of driving rain and gale-force winds whipped the lake into a frenzy. Waves leapt up high. I remember thinking that the setting might have been very like a storm on the Galilean lake.

Where those in the boat discern a barely visible figure emerging out of the black night. Approaching the boat. Walking on the surface of the water. Filling exhausted disciples with terror. Because Jesus isn't with them in the boat.

Now you may know that the image of a boat, since the time of the earliest Christian communities, has been a symbol of the church. In many sanctuaries, including [your sister church's] [this one], the ceiling is built to look like the interior of an upside-down boat. A vessel containing a small band of Jesus' followers, sailing off into wild and windy seas.

Just like those on the Sea of Galilee on a long-ago night. Filled with fear. And—in at least one of them—doubt. In a favorite hymn, we sing about the howling storms of doubt and

fear. Now fear and doubt aren't the same, but they *are* kin to one another.

Do you think that doubt is part of the nature of us human creatures? Have you ever had the experience of believing something in your heart, but you had trouble wrapping your *head* around it? Has there been a time in your life when with your ears you heard the word of God? But so transfixed were your eyes on the raging of the storm that it was difficult for you to be certain just who it was who spoke to you?

That could be what's going on with Peter, in the boat with the other eleven. Peter's heard the voice of Jesus. He's heard the words of Jesus. But Peter just isn't sure. What's the first thing he says? *If! If it's really you, Lord, call me to come to you on the water. Lord, if you are who you say you are, prove it! Make a miracle. And let me be in the miracle.*

We love Peter, don't we? We love him because, in Peter, we see ourselves. Maybe that's why, through the centuries, many artists have portrayed Peter trying to walk to Jesus across the surface of the sea. Maybe you've seen a print of one of these artists' conceptions of Jesus and Peter. When Peter gets

distracted by wind and waves—when he’s no longer focusing on Jesus—he starts to sink, terrified, into an angry sea.

For people of Peter’s day, for people of the Bible, the sea represents chaos. In Matthew’s narrative of twelve men in a fragile craft in swirling darkness, the sea symbolizes the chaotic world that Jesus’ followers inhabit in *every* age. In Matthew’s time. And in our own time.

Because even though we’re not *of* the world, we are *in* the world. In this vast world that sometimes feels as though it’s spinning out of control. In this world that can be a scary place. In this world of violent winds and waves. In this world of storms that frighten us and paralyze us with fear.

What do we most fear? Could it be loneliness? Serious illness? Pain? Weapons of annihilation? Being separated from those we love, perhaps even by death itself? Do we fear change? Judgment? An unknown future?

Or is it the possibility that we won’t have *enough*? Enough resources, enough money? Enough time to do everything we want to do, everything we need to do? Enough gifts to do all that Christ calls us to do? A whole litany of fears beset us and batter us and threaten to capsize us.

And in this world, we hear myriad voices that intensify our fear. Voices that don't belong to Jesus. But when we pray, he is the One who hears us. So, sooner or later, we offer some version of a fisherman's prayer that goes something like this: *Dear Lord, be good to me...The sea is so wide and my boat is so small.*

But sometimes, as with those first disciples, it can seem as though we're in the boat alone. Maybe for a time we, like Peter, have left the boat—the faith community—behind, and struck out on our own. Tried to get to Christ on our own. And become overwhelmed. Become afraid. With Peter, we get scared. And we start to go under.

We cry, *Lord, save me!* In Paul's letter to Christians in Rome, he proclaims that you *will* be saved *if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord*. Now in the first-century world of imperial Rome, there is one who has already assumed the title "Lord." And it's Caesar himself! So confessing that *Jesus is Lord* is a dangerous thing to do.

And in this twenty-first century, in some places at least, confessing that Jesus is Lord can still be dangerous. Caesars always demand our allegiance and our loyalty. But God's holy

word tells you and me that Caesar has no power over Jesus. And Caesar has no real power over us.

For it's the amazing power and presence of Jesus Christ—the power and presence Matthew shows us today—that is the one authentic reality, the one unchanging reality of our common life. It's the amazing power and presence of Jesus Christ that moves Peter to call on the name of the Lord. It's the amazing power and presence of Jesus Christ that enables you and me to trust that *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord and believes that God raised him from the dead will be saved.*

Confessing that Jesus is Lord and calling on his name isn't something you do just once, but again and again. You confess him with your lips and with your life. You confess this One who assures you: *It is I. I AM.* You confess this One whose name is I AM. You confess this One who bears the name of God. You confess this One who speaks with the voice of God. You confess this One who finds you and says to you: *Take courage. It's me.*

Fear not! These are the words spoken through the prophet Isaiah. *Fear not!* These are the words of Gabriel to a young, unwed mother-to-be in Nazareth. *Fear not!* These are the words

heard at dawn by terrified women beside an empty tomb. *Fear not!*

These are the words you hear in your darkest hour. When your need is greatest. When terror holds you in its grip. These are the words you hear when Christ draws near to you and draws you out of the chaos that surrounds you and into the boat with him. Bringing peace. Calming every storm.

So that, with your companions in the boat, you can keep pulling faithfully on your oar, even as you navigate into uncharted seas. Because you know that the One who walks on water is still working miracles.

And the miracle of this story is that those first followers—and we today—*believe* that Jesus is with his disciples. The miracle of this story is that we believe that the Son of God is right here with us and will be with us wherever we go, to the end of the age. The miracle of this story is that this One we worship reaches out his hand to you today and invites you to *Come. Take heart. It's really me. I AM. Fear not!*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.