

# A Little Test

*Matthew 14:22-33*

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22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' <sup>29</sup>He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

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When I was in the fourth grade, life as I knew it was about to end. My dad was finishing his Ph.D. at Virginia Tech and this meant that, most likely, we would be moving at the end of the school year. Eventually - as I recall - it came down to three possibilities: Gainesville, Florida, Griffin, Georgia, and Lubbock, Texas.

I remember discussing the reality of moving to one of these three locales with my best friend at the time. In our fourth grade minds, these were the issues (all cons, no pros). In Florida, there were alligators. In Georgia, there was quicksand – at least that's what we regularly saw on *The Dukes of Hazzard* which was supposedly based in Georgia. Plus, Charlie Daniels had been singing that this is where the devil had taken up residence and there was no way I wanted to be neighbors with the devil. Those were two big strikes against Georgia.

And then there was Lubbock, Texas. While I had been to Georgia and Florida before, I had never been to Texas. Again, much of my knowledge of the state came from what I had seen on that television show that immediately followed *The Dukes of Hazzard* on Friday nights: *Dallas*. However, I did know that Lubbock was significantly different from Dallas. And the big issue in our fourth grade minds about moving to Lubbock, Texas, was tornadoes.

I thought about that issue earlier this week as the Storm Prediction Center issued the very rare PDS – Particularly Dangerous Situation – Tornado Watch for areas including Wichita Falls. Without a doubt I had a healthy dose of respect for the devastating power these storms could bring us. But I was also thoroughly intrigued by how these storms might play out. And so, Monday night, I sat on my couch and alternated back and forth between the local news and the Weather Channel, fascinated by the reports of what could soon be coming our way.

I don't know when this flipped for me, because I used to be scared of thunderstorms and severe weather. I didn't like the bright flashes of lightning and the rumbles of thunder, particularly in the middle of the night. Perhaps, with the benefit of age and experience, though, that all changed. I switched to being a fan. Now, I love to watch bolts of lightning streak across the sky. Now, I love the cracks and the booms of thunder.

But, this kind of weather fascination wasn't shared by everyone in my family. It just seems like yesterday that the first crack of thunder at night would be followed by the sounds of little feet hitting the floor and scurrying down the hallway to our bedroom, where then Abby would launch herself into our bed to lay down beside us. As a preschooler, she didn't like storms. And yet, she usually wasn't in our bed long before she would fall back asleep, even though the wind continued to howl, the lightning continued to flash, and the thunder continued to rumble. In the midst of the storm, she felt more secure close to us.

Nearly all of us have something that scares us; some sort of fear; something that wakes us up or keeps us awake at night. For the last few months here at First Christian, we have been experimenting with the little tear off section in your worship bulletin. These connection

cards are a way of marking attendance, but they also provide an opportunity to make a prayer request – to ask the ministers and the elders to partner with you in prayer. One of these requests might be from a woman whose daughter is struggling with depression. Another might be from someone whose marriage is going through a rough patch. Yet another might be a prayer for someone struggling with an addiction or from someone who recently lost a loved one. And the list could go on: economic worries, political worries, social worries, medical worries, ecclesial worries. On this past Wednesday, the Elders prayed for 41 requests specifically received from these little tear off sections. These requests represent people in the midst of storms in their lives. Some have been tossed about by the waves for months and are holding on with white knuckles for dear life. For others, the storm just blew in last week. For most, it’s a frightening experience. Perhaps you added your particular storm to the list a few minutes ago as you filled out your connection card.

Fortunately, if you are currently experiencing a storm in your life, or if you see the storm clouds forming on the horizon, there are some words of hope and assurance and peace in our scripture lesson this morning – hope that comes from the story of Peter and the other disciples in the midst of a storm.

I suspect this story is a familiar one. Matthew, Mark, and John all tell this story, though with some variations. Even if you didn’t grow up in the church, you probably know the contours of this story. The phrase: “She or he can walk on water” is based on this passage from Matthew – the only account in which Peter walks on water.

This story opens just after the feeding of the 5,000. In that passage, we tend to focus on how five loaves and two fish were multiplied to the point that all 5,000 were fed and leftovers remained. It is a nice “child-friendly” story.

Yet, we overlook the fact that this feeding miracle occurred right after the death of John the Baptist. The Gospel of John says that the crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force. In other words, there was the possibility that an insurrection or riot was about to break out. Some scholars speculate that the 5,000 may have gathered with violent intentions. They were going to take the matter of John the Baptist’s violent death into their own hands.

That may have been one of the reasons that Jesus compelled his disciples to get into the boat. Maybe it was to get the hot heads out of there. To get big, strong, impetuous Peter away from the situation before he did something rash. To get James and John, the Sons of Thunder out of there before they “called down the thunder.” Or perhaps someone had to get the departure started – to be the trendsetter – and who better than the disciples.

Or maybe Jesus had something else in mind. Regardless, the disciples got on a boat and set out across the Sea of Galilee.

The fact that the remainder of the story occurred on water is not insignificant. Throughout scripture, the water or the sea are seen as a sign of chaos – a power God controlled and held back in creation. To the biblical mind, being on the seas is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order.<sup>i</sup> The sea was a powerful analogy to represent all that sought to oppress God’s people through the scope of the Bible’s history. In our day, our seas are things like terrorism and uncertainty, the pain of broken relationships, disease, despair, hopelessness.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the Sea of Galilee is not that big – thirteen miles from north to south and eight miles at its widest point, east to west. It has a surface area of 41,000 acres and is 141 ft. deep. In comparison, Possum Kingdom Lake has a surface area of 19,000 acres and has a max depth of approximately 100 ft. Yet, in biblical times, no one knew quite how deep the Sea of Galilee was – it was deeper than they could measure. This caused some to believe that it was “unfathomable” – endlessly deep, opening into the underworld.<sup>ii</sup> It represented the depth of all those things working to undo the faithful.

As we know, the journey across the water was not uneventful. The winds blew the boat on the water, tossing it about left and right (or port and starboard). Some might wonder, why didn’t they land the boat and get out of the water? But, given the terrain, they couldn’t land because the boat might be blown into rocks, battered on the shore. The risk of that might be worse than the waves. And so the disciples spent the better part of an anxious night navigating the waves.

Meanwhile, Jesus, from the land, knew the disciples were struggling. They were too far from shore for him to literally see them struggling. But in his mind's eye he could see them, and he knew they needed help. So, as Matthew says, Jesus came to them. He went out to them walking on the water.

Jesus' approach in the midst of the storm was a little unsettling. The disciples were already scared, but now they were terrified. In their minds, the figure on the water was probably a spirit that had escaped from the underworld just below them. Yet, Jesus told them – take heart, it is I, don't be afraid.

This is where Matthew narrows the story from 5,000 characters and from 12 characters to one – Simon Peter. Only Simon Peter was bold enough to speak out. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

There is a great scholarly debate over one word of Peter's statement. Should the Greek word – *ei* – be translated “if” or “since”? And it makes a big difference. If the phrase is, “Lord, IF it is you,…” then Peter's request could be seen as a little a test of Jesus – similar to the way the devil tested Jesus in the wilderness. “If you are the son of God, then turn these stones into bread.” Perhaps that what Peter was doing, demanding that Jesus prove who he is.

On the other hand, “Lord, SINCE it is you…” implies that Peter was confident in Jesus' amazing power and presence. And in making the request, he wasn't trying to be Jesus; he's trying to be with him. Peter wanted to walk where his Lord walks.

When Jesus told Peter to come, keep in mind that the water was not calm. Jesus hadn't stilled the storm. Unlike the old hymn, “Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea”, in this case, Jesus actually called Peter into the tumult. Peter did not trust in his own ability to walk on the water. But he trusted that if Jesus called him to do it, he could. And so he stepped out of the boat

Matthew doesn't tell us how far Peter walked on water, but I suspect it was a distance further than the normal laws of gravity might allow. In my mind, I imagine this a little like

the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote walking off the edge of a cliff and still continuing at the same level...until he realizes where he is.

So it was with Peter. When he noticed where he was, when he noticed the wind, he got scared. The truth is, it's only normal to be frightened in the face of such a storm. He was a lot like us...only human.

As a result, he began to sink. So he cried out, "Lord, save me." And the fact that he couldn't walk on water might be the moral of the story if not for what happened next.

It turns out, Jesus was close by, and he reached out his hand and caught Peter. He kept him from sinking and as he did, he said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" "Why did you waver?" This wasn't a rebuke as much as a statement of encouragement, something like the response a parent makes to a child who has fallen while learning to ride a bicycle: "Don't doubt yourself, you had it!" Perhaps this was a little test of Peter.

Two things became abundantly clear in that moment. First, water-walking was reserved for God. The Old Testament books of Job, Psalms, Isaiah, and Habakkuk (Job 9:8, Ps. 77:19, Isa 43:16, 51:9-10, Hab. 3:15) all describe this as a power belonging to God alone. And Peter's sinking while Jesus walked confirmed for the disciples that Jesus was the Son of God.

Second, the gospel writers also wanted readers to see Jesus coming to his disciples in their hour of need. This is intended to be a picture of what Jesus still does in the lives of believers when we're sailing through our own storms in the darkness.<sup>iii</sup> That in our moments of struggle and heartache and hurt, we can cry out to Jesus with the familiar words of Thomas Dorsey's hymn:

*Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light  
Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home.<sup>iv</sup>*

It's really easy to suggest that the point of the scripture is to have faith – a faith big enough to overcome all our problems. The problem is this interpretation identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to our ordinary days – days that are subject to the laws of

physics and biology.<sup>v</sup> Yes, Peter should have kept his eyes on Jesus...and so should we. But when we don't when we falter, or even fail, Jesus will be there to grab us, to catch us, to support us, and set us up straight again, ready to give it another go.<sup>vi</sup> In other words, the focus of this story isn't on Peter's water-walking. It's on Jesus' saving acts.

The disciples seemed to get that. Jesus had just fed thousands upon thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing both divine power and divine compassion. And yet it's here, at this moment of extremity, when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.<sup>vii</sup> Celtic Christians have a term for this kind of perception: thin places. A thin place is one of those rare locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses. Places where God comes near. And I believe that in the storms of life, God comes near. That turbulent places are where God breaks through and comes to us.

Jesus still walks on water to wherever we are. He gets in the boat with us. Jesus may not make the storm go away, as he did for Peter and the disciples. The cancer may still be there. The spouse may still be gone. But Jesus is riding it out with us, and somehow that makes the storm less terrifying.<sup>viii</sup> We feel more secure in the presence of Jesus.

And what's true for us personally is also true for us as a church. Because the other thread running through our scripture lesson is a word to the church – to Jesus' disciples. A ship was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity. In fact, you are sitting in what church architects would call the “Nave” – a word whose origins come from the Latin *navis* which means “boat” or “ship”. A boat or ship was often used as a metaphor to describe the church.

In our scripture lesson, all the other disciples stayed in the boat, thinking it provided safety and security. John Ortberg calls them “boat potatoes.” It was easier and less scary to stay put. But fear also has an amazing capacity to keep us trapped and paralyzed. It can keep us from experiencing the life God intends for us. However, when we are motivated primarily by faith rather than fear, we recognize, as Peter did, that the adventure is outside the boat.<sup>ix</sup> We can be scared or we can take heart.

This kind of whole-hearted living is God’s desire for us. God desires that we trust that God is with us and for us and thereby live with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationship, seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us, all the while remembering that even when we overlook God’s presence yet God is always there, sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears, sometimes sending us out ahead, and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace.<sup>x</sup>

So imagine the hopes and dreams God has for us – both as individuals and as a community of faith. The promise is that in the midst of alligators and quicksand and storms, God is encouraging us to cross rough waters and even to step out of the boat in faith, trusting that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is there to grab hold of us in need.

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<sup>i</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. “The Gospel of Matthew” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol. VIII*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Hamilton, Adam. *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Dorsey, Thomas. “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” in *Chalice Hymnal*, #628. Unichapel Music, Inc. 1932.

<sup>v</sup> Boring.

<sup>vi</sup> Lose, David. “The Road Less Traveled” in *Working Preacher*. July 31, 2011. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1594>

<sup>vii</sup> Lose, David. “Pentecost 9A: Whole-Hearted Faith” in *Working Preacher*. August 4, 2014. <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-9a-whole-hearted-faith/>

<sup>viii</sup> Hamilton.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Lose, *Pentecost 9A: Whole-Hearted Faith*.