

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 08/13/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, August 13<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 14:22-33**

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### Get out of the boat

The Gospel lectionary text this week continues directly from last week and the Feeding of the Five Thousand. It includes the narrative unique to Matthew's Gospel of the story of Jesus and Peter as Jesus walks on the water. This narrative is full of reassurance for both the Church in the world and the faith life of the disciple. It is a story of Peter who came up short on faith but had enough to get out of the boat in the first place and take that first tentative step. He became only the second person to feel the chaotic water beneath his feet, miraculously supporting his weight, as he walked towards Jesus. Do we have enough faith to get out of the boat?

#### Matthew 14:22-33 Commentary

The text continues directly from the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21).

*<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,*

Once the crowds were healed and fed and the disciples collected up the excess food, Jesus compelled the disciples to get into the boat and go before him to the other side. Jesus dismissed the crowds while this was going on. Finally, Jesus can now go up the mountain by himself and pray. This was his intention of coming to this "desolate place" in the first place (v.13).

*<sup>24</sup> but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear.*

Strong winds are common on the Sea of Galilee since this body of water is below sea level and surrounded by mountains. Somewhere between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. Jesus walks out to the boat. By this time there can be no mistaking the fact that these events take place anywhere near the shore. Jesus is walking in the middle of the water, not paddling at the edge or on a sandbar. This sight terrifies the disciples. As bad as the storm was, at least it was in the realm of the known. A man walking on water was unknown. Perhaps they thought Herod had caught up with Jesus and had Him killed. Was Jesus now a ghost?

<sup>27</sup> *But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

Jesus gives His disciples a threefold reassurance. First, Jesus bids them *tharseō* (take heart; have courage). In Matthew, this expression is also used by Jesus when addressing the paralytic (9:2) and the woman with a hemorrhage (9:22). Second, Jesus refers to Himself as "I am" (*egō eimi*), a reference to God's name in Exodus 3:14. Third, the expression, "*Do not fear*" is used elsewhere in Matthew and is a sign of encouragement rather than a rebuke. To Joseph (1:20); to the women at the empty tomb (28:5-10); to reassure the disciples as they go on their mission (10:26) and with Jesus' inner circle of disciples on the mountain top during the transfiguration.

<sup>28</sup> *And 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 and walked on the water and came to Jesus.* <sup>30</sup> *But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."* <sup>31</sup> *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"* <sup>32</sup> *And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.*

This account of Peter is only found in Matthew. There are many ways to view Peter's behavior. Some see this as Peter's impetuosity – like the seed sown in the rocky soil. Others see this as the disciple telling the Master what to do. Others see this as Peter acting on the command of Jesus. Regardless, Peter got out of the boat and became only the second person to feel the stormy water beneath his feet yet have his weight miraculously supported as he walked towards Jesus – at least for a short time. Peter is still in training. He has some faith but not enough. He expresses doubt. The word Matthew uses for doubt is *distazō* which literally means "standing in two places" or "being in two minds." This word is used again in 28:17 where some of the disciples express doubt when they first meet the resurrected Jesus on the mountain in Galilee at the Great Commissioning.

<sup>33</sup> *And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*

In this narrative, Jesus is shown to have power over both the water and the wind. There is no confusion in Matthew's account of who Jesus is. Once He is back in the boat, they worship Him and confess Him as the Son of God. To a Jew, there is no doubt what the act of worship conveys. Equally telling is Jesus did not stop them.

### Reflection and Application

In an allegorical interpretation of this text, the disciples in the boat represent the Church. The Church is tossed about in the stormy world following the commands of Christ. In this narrative the disciples experienced difficulties precisely because they were following Jesus' instructions (v.22). In the same way, the Church can run into headwinds because it follows Christ's commands. During the times when the Church is plagued by worldly tempests and chaotic headwinds, we must remember Jesus is still present. He challenges us to have courage, remember that He is God, and that we should not fear.

The disciples in the boat had just witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand a few hours earlier yet they still demonstrated fear and doubt. Peter's constant flux between faith and fear is perhaps reminiscent of our own faith life. While Peter is sometimes maligned for taking his eye off Jesus and thus sinking into the worldly storm, the one thing we must take to Peter's credit is that he was willing to step out of the boat. None of the other disciples did.

There are some powerful metaphors in this text to reflect on our own faith, fear and doubt. Where are the places where we are standing in two places – between the Kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom? What is pulling us one way or the other? Where might we be failing to step out of the boat in our faith journey and ministries? What do we fear? How do we respond to Jesus' reassurance: Take heart... Remember He is God... We should not fear.