

“Courage for the Called”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

For an Advent series, Stepping Into the Waves

Matthew 14:22-33

November 27, 2017

See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

Those disciples are in the boat. Jesus walks to them over the water.

Did you notice when in the story they get scared?

The theme for this year’s Advent season is “Stepping Into the Waves.” We’re going to be hearing the events leading up to Jesus’ birth, and I want to ask how God called people to “step into the waves.”

- How God called an elderly couple to step into waves of prayers answered as they had never imagined.
- How God called a young woman to step into waves that deeply upset everything about her.
- How God called a young man to step into waves of a new and surprising understanding of himself.

God called each of them into God’s Promise. Each stepped more deeply into God’s Presence. At the heart of all this, we find God who steps into the waves!

Today’s story isn’t “Advent-like.” It’s not “Christmassy.” It’s where we start, though. It tells us important things about how Jesus might be calling us to step into waves.

II

We start with Jesus’ disciples in the boat. Yes, you could fit the whole church as it existed then into one fishing boat. Even when his church is small, Jesus still calls us.

Hours earlier, they’d pushed out from shore. Jesus told them to. He ordered them out onto the water. But he did not go with them. Why do you suppose Jesus sent them without him?

In the hours since, the wind picked up and waves started rolling.

We easily confuse this story with an earlier episode. That time, they were on the same lake and a real storm came over them. That time, they were in trouble. That time, their craft was swamping. That time, they were terrified.

This time is different. They are not in danger. It is not a storm. Just wind. Just waves. Remember that some of these folks are fishers. The boat probably belongs to one of them.

Being in a boat is nothing new. Being far from shore is nothing new. This lake is nothing new. Wind at night and rollicking waters, nothing new. Pulling hard and tough going,

nothing new.

You know it: wind in your face, deck rolling under your feet, pulling hard, the going tough. That's life.

They are not in the wrong place, even. This is where Jesus sent them to be.

Wind blowing, waves tossing, pulling hard, tough going . . . you might be where Jesus has sent you to be.

What has scared them? Nothing. Not yet.

III

Then Jesus walks up. He is not supposed to be there, but he is. No one can explain it, but there he is. They are not sure what they're seeing at first. You can't blame them. But it is him! Walking *on the water*. . . .

Now they're scared.

I don't think Jesus means to scare them. Fear is not his purpose. "Fear not!" is God's message to us. (We're going to hear "Fear not!" quite often in the Advent and Christmas stories.)

Still, Jesus must know that his arrival is going to quake their souls. So why show up this way?

Why does Jesus come to us however he chooses to come to us? I don't know. From experience, mine and others, it seems he usually shows himself unexpectedly, disruptively, and he can leave us shaking . . . though he might not leave.

This time, it seems he stays off a bit.

So Peter shouts out, *"If it is really you, Jesus, command me to come to you!"*

That's perfect!

Preachers can go on for hours about what it means to follow Jesus. Peter gives it in a moment. Discipleship is not being sure what is going on. Discipleship is not even being certain that it's Jesus you're seeing. Discipleship is shouting over the wind and the waves: *"Lord . . . if it's you . . . command me . . . to come to you . . . on the water."* And then waiting.

Notice what Peter does not do.

Peter does not just leap over the side onto the water. We cannot come to Jesus unless he

beckons us. He calls us. Then we come. Peter does not come until he is commanded. Then, he trusts Jesus.

Peter does not say, “*Jesus, promise me I won’t sink.*” Peter is ready for Jesus to call him, not knowing how it is going to turn out. He does not ask for guarantees. He trusts Jesus.¹

Peter does not say, “*Jesus, come to me.*” That would have made sense. Peter is safe in the boat. He knows what is going on in the boat. He is confident in the boat. Following Jesus, though, is going to where he is. Even when where he is, is not making much sense. What matters is that Jesus is there. We want to be with him. And he is commanding us to come. And trust him.

IV

Of course, Peter sinks.

He does successfully take some steps on the water. Only a few, though. Then, down he goes.

Again, notice when he gets scared. He doesn’t start sinking, then freak out. No, fear strikes him when he is doing fine. He takes his eyes off Jesus, realizes what is happening, panics and plunges.²

Jesus saves him.

He scolds Peter, yes. But first he saves him.

Is following Jesus like that? Hearing his command. Stepping into the waves to come to where he is. Water-walking successfully! All the power comes from him. Even our tentative, unspectacular steps are gifts of his grace.³

Then, distracted from him we sink. The waves are real. The wind too. Sinking down. Crying

¹ Dale Bruner observes, “. . . Peter does not ask for a promise — for example, ‘Lord, promise I won’t sink!’ — but for a command. . . . Peter has learned that Jesus’ commands are literally ‘uplifting.’” Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 2 The Churchbook (Revised and Expanded Edition) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 76.

² Stanley Hauerwas notes: “*Peter does not begin to sink and then become frightened, but he becomes frightened and so begins to sink. Losing sight of Jesus means that peter, like all of us, cannot help but become frightened, which means we cannot survive.*” Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 140f.

³ Bruner asks, “*Does the story teach disciples that they can believe and do great things? Or does it teach disciples that they cannot sustain faith by themselves and that sooner or later they, too, disbelieve and sink? . . . The answer seems to be that the story teaches both — we can and we cannot. The ‘can’ comes exclusively from the powerful command of Jesus — ‘Come on!’ which Peter sought in bold prayer. The ‘cannot’ comes from our inevitable looking around at life’s ‘realities’ and so sinking. We do both continually.*” Bruner, 76.

out. Jesus pulling us up.

If only we could be super-disciples and race-walk across the deep. We're not. We step. We sink. Jesus saves. Wash, rinse, repeat. Again, and again.

Yes, Jesus scolds. *"Your trust is weak,"* he says. *"Why did you start to doubt?"* He speaks truth, to Peter and us. Is it also his promise? His invitation? *"Trust me. Trust me! I've called you. Come! You fall in. I'll pull you up. Keep coming. Trust ME!"*

V

We see Jesus where we certainly don't expect him. We are terrified. *"Courage!"* he says.

"I Am!" he says. That phrase is much more than "It's me, guys!"⁴ That phrase is flooded with meaning. God is the great *"I Am!"* The One and Only Being, Who creates all other beings.

In that earlier storm, after Jesus had calmed the wind and waves, his disciples wondered. *"Who is this guy?"* This time, they just wonder: *"Truly You are the Son of God!"* Not simply because he has done something unexpected and inexplicable. It's that Jesus does what only God does.⁵ If he was any other, he would not be standing on the waves, calling us.

Church, we are in the boat. We're far from shore, which is probably where Jesus means us to be.⁶ The wind is blowing. The waves are churning. We are pulling hard. Too often it feels like we are not getting anywhere. But to step out of the boat — the boat, where we are safe; the boat, where we know what we are doing; the boat, which is the only way we know how to be in the middle of the lake — to step out of the boat, and step into the waves, is insanity.

Except!

Except that the One who comes to us . . . except that the One who calls us and commands us . . . except this One is the *"I Am"* . . . except this One is God the Son!

⁴ *"This is no ordinary hello on water; it is the divine Lord addressing his storm-tossed church. The gospel of the story is in this great address."* Bruner, 76.

⁵ *"What matters is not that Jesus has done the seemingly impossible, but that he has performed action which the Old Testament associates with Yahweh alone."* W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., quoted in Bruner, 78.

⁶ *"The church is the ark of the kingdom, but often the church finds herself far from shore and threatened by strong winds and wavers. Those in the boat often fail to understand that they are meant to be far from shore and that to be threatened by a storm is not unusual. If the church is faithful she will always be far from the shore. Some, moreover, will be commanded to leave even the safety of the boat to walk on water."* Hauerwas, 141.

“Courage!” he comforts, as only he can with any credibility.

“I am!” he proclaims, as only he can with any truth.

“Do not be afraid!” he promises, a promise only he can keep.

Courage! I Am! Do not be afraid!

Now, step into the waves.

This is the Good News of Jesus. Amen.