

Matthew 14: 22-33 "Take Heart" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/27/17

So I made a huge leap of faith last Monday and took out my newly bought kayak to Whiskeytown. I was excited to get away from it all and just bob on the water. I had secretly practiced getting in and out of the kayak by myself on the floor of the garage so I wouldn't make a fool of myself when I got to the lake. You can imagine my embarrassment when my neighbor snuck up on me and cracked, "You know those things work better in water." Everybody's a wise guy. Turns out it was easier once I got it into the water and sat my butt down first as Val Jones taught me and swung my legs inside while keeping my core straight. I headed out from the marina and as soon as I got past the big silver barrels, the wind whipped up – it hadn't been windy at the shore but as soon as I started towards the center of the lake, waves began to bombard my little kayak. I began to feel like I was on a ride at Six Flags. It wasn't quite as relaxing as I had anticipated, but I saw a calmer spot on the west end of one of the islands so that's where I headed. Pumping the paddle as hard as I could against the wind for a good 30 minutes, I finally made it and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

I sat there in calmer waters thinking about our scripture for this morning – the fun thing about being a preacher is that you can do such things as kayaking and chalk it up to sermon research. So here we have a group of fisherman, Jesus' disciples, whom Jesus immediately sends off in a boat after the feeding of the 5000. Jesus apparently wants some alone time so he singlehandedly boots his friends into the boat and sends them on their way while also overseeing crowd control dismissing 5000 men, plus probably twice that in women and children. Personally, I would not have sent the disciples off until they had cleared the area of the crowds and picked up the mess but however it happened, Matthew wants us to understand Jesus is taking some time off. Everyone, including Jesus, must have been exhausted not just

from distributing the food but also from collecting the left-overs. The feeding was certainly the world's largest potluck and Jesus was ready for some down time. So after having time in the mountains to pray, he goes out looking for his friends and realizes the boat is now far from land. Even though these are experienced fisherman, the storm has pushed them out to sea and they have their hands full, trying to steer their little boat in the midst of high wind and waves. They are all, presumably soaked, their teeth chattering and their hands blistered from their efforts, when Jesus comes to them. It is around 3 in the morning, Matthew says. No one can sleep, even if they wanted to. They, like us, appreciate the awesome and dangerous power of water. We only have to see the devastation of flooding as it is happening in Texas or to remember the destruction of the Oroville Dam and the fear of flooding not far from us to recall what can happen. Those fisherman are diligently watching the horizon, looking for land, measuring the distance they have come against the distance they still have to go. I did the same in the safety of the cove of that island at Whiskeytown – the wind was growing stronger and I knew that in order to make it back to the shore, I was going to need to keep the boat at a slight angle so as not to get tipped over by the winds and waves hitting me full force to the side. I gauged whether it was worth it to try and get to Brandy Creek beach and then hug the shore from there or go straight across full speed to the marina.

I honestly don't know what I would have done if I saw a shadowy figure walking towards me across those choppy waters. I probably would have made sure no one had spiked my lemonade and then I certainly would have freaked out. On that fisherman's boat, someone did freak out as he screamed, "It's a ghost." Note here that no one was necessarily frightened by the wind or waves at this point; they are undone by that unidentifiable flying object on the

water. The story always reminds me of a joke my dad used to tell about the rabbi and the priest who invited the new pastor in town to go out fishing one day so that they all might get better acquainted. It was a beautiful sunny day and the two had brought lunch to share with the new pastor while they lazily let their lines bob in the water. After everyone had their fill, the priest said he thought he would head over to the latrine to go to the bathroom. The pastor picked up his paddle to begin to row but the priest just stepped out of the boat and walked ashore. The pastor sat in stunned silence looking back and forth between the retreating priest and the rabbi who was nonchalantly packing up the leftovers, unfazed by the priest's activity. A few minutes later, the priest returned again, walking across the water and climbed into the boat. The rabbi looked up and said, "My turn," and he stepped out of the boat and headed for the latrine. The pastor, not wanting to look naïve, tried not to stare as the rabbi walked from the center of the lake back to shore. When the rabbi returned, sat down in the boat and picked up his pole, the pastor couldn't take it any longer. If they could do it, so could he and he stepped out of the boat and promptly sank. The rabbi looked over at the priest, raised an eyebrow and said, "Do you think we should have told him about the rocks?"

The fishermen see a figure walking towards them on the water and they are terrified. The figure says to them, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." "It is I" says the ghost – these are the same words used to translate the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. "It is I" is a phrase packed with significance for Matthew's Jewish readers as Jesus uses God's divine name to announce his presence. "I AM" is here, trampling victoriously over the waves. But Peter doesn't trust him – maybe his voice sounds strange or he is too far away to be seen clearly or maybe he looks so rested after his time in prayer that he is unrecognizable. Whatever

it is, Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” What an odd thing to say – why not say, “Lord if it is you, calm these waves down.” After all, he had done it before. But Peter says, “Bid me come to where you are.” Sort of like, let me join you on the water; show me that what you can do, I can do also, if only you tell me to; take away my doubt and make me have faith, if it really is you? “Come,” Jesus says, so Peter swings his legs over the side of the boat and, while the others are watching, he places his feet on the surface of the water, takes a huge, trembling breath, and stands. He takes a few hesitant steps across the heaving surface, like the first steps he has ever take in his life and is doing fine until a gust of wind almost topples him, and he feels his feet sinking, and he goes down like a stone.

Even if you have never tried to walk on water, you know how he felt. Maybe you were crossing a stream on a fallen log, inching your way across its rough, rounded surface, doing just fine until you looked down at the rushing water below you and got frightened, and lost your balance, and had to drag yourself the rest of the way by the seat of your pants. Or maybe you were addressing a crowd, standing in front of them saying something you believed in, and at first the words flowed from your mouth, exactly the words you needed at exactly the moment you needed them, and then you looked at all those faces looking back at you, and you lose your nerve, and your brain turns to mush, and you sit down as quickly as you can. “Lord, save me,” Peter cries, and Jesus does, reaching out his hand and catching him, hauling him out of the cold water like a big, frightened fish and dragging him over to where the other disciples pull him safely into the boat. The problem with this story is that it has too often been allegorized and simplified with such platitudes such as Jesus helps us survive the storms of life, there is power in having Jesus in your boat, and we all need to let go and let God. It has become a self-help

story to get people out of their boats and take risks as we glorify what is fondly termed “Floundering Peter and Baywatch Jesus.” But, as Matt Lewis points out, this only diminishes the vast paralyzing fear that engulfs Peter. Baywatch Jesus wouldn’t ask, “Why do you doubt?” but Teacher Jesus would. Teacher or Rabbi Jesus asks that important question knowing full well that our doubts and our faith are often inseparable. The truth about us is that we obey and fear, we walk and sink, we believe and doubt; but it is not like we do only one or the other. We do both whenever we read the news, see the crime statistics, question whether the storm will ever end. We believe in a bright future with God but then we get terminally sick. We pray for a miracle but no miracle comes and the waves creep up our legs, and we begin to sink. Faith and doubt exist in us at the same time, buoying us up and bearing us down, giving us courage and feeding our fears, supporting our weight on the wild seas of our lives and sinking us like stones.

That is our reality and it is why we need a Savior. The truth is we should never be caught dead on the water without him. Our fears and doubts may paralyze us, but they are also what reveal to us our innate need for God; we are taught by them and through them, just as any great teacher helps us to discover the great mysteries of life which can only be learned by living through them. It is not that God wills us to be afraid but it is that God can teach us through our fears and doubts. As Jesus approaches the boat of battered followers, he says, “Take heart, I am, do not be afraid.” “Take heart,” have courage, for he is God’s agent and with him, the sea is calmed as we find our footing once more. As this story draws to a close, I choose to believe Jesus’ next words are more loving than judgmental as a parent might say to a child, “You silly one, why did you try such a thing?” “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Yet you still had a little faith, maybe “the size of a mustard seed, so that even with a little faith,

you will say to a mountain, move from here to there, and it will move;" you still had a little faith, possibly the size of five loaves and two fish, enough to feed a crowd of 5000 plus and still have left-overs. You still had a little faith so take heart, don't give up, because a little faith is all that is needed to change our story from one of choppy waves and wind to a story of worship and wonder, saying, "Truly, you are the son of God."