

Matthew 14:22-33 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, <sup>[d]</sup> for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, 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."

<sup>28</sup> 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 toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, <sup>[e]</sup> 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 worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Fear and response to fear is a central theme in this passage from Matthew. The storm arises and the disciples are all alone in the boat. Jesus had left them to be by himself; taking a little 'me' time to go and pray. So that left the disciples to fend for themselves. And then the storm strikes. Now, did the storm frighten the disciples? I'm not sure, but I do know that the group had a fair few fishermen, so probably they knew how to handle it. I'm sure they didn't relish the idea of being stuck out at sea in a storm, but they've been through this before. They knew the drill. What they did not expect, however, was to see someone walking over to them. I love the way the disciples react to Jesus walking to them. It's that perfect Scooby Doo style reveal. "Zoinks, it's a g-g-g-g-ghost!" only to realize it's no ghost, it's their buddy Jesus! This is the first reaction and fear in this passage, the surprise of an unexpected visitor doing the impossible. Jesus attempts to calm them down, but it doesn't take. The first reaction to their fear is disbelief. "If it is

you, command me to come to you on the water”. That’s kind of a weird reaction, but Jesus rolls with it. And Peter gets out of the boat and walks on water. Here’s a second reaction to fear. Peter actually gets out of the boat. Despite his uncertainty, despite his fear, despite his hesitation. He gets out of the boat and walks on water!

But boy, that doesn’t last. And we come then to the third reaction to fear that we see in this passage: panic. Flailing and drowning, he cried out for help.

Disbelief, confidence, panic. Three different responses to the same emotion. Three different ways of responding to a scary situation. And boy, doesn’t this current time count as a scary situation. The fear of the unknown is at our doorstep. We can’t open our computers, look at a newspaper, leave the house, without being reminded of the ways in which the world is scary. Jesus tells the disciples “take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”. So we listen to Jesus and declare that we will be unafraid! Great! But what about tomorrow? What about the days when things seem bleaker? What about the days when we don’t know what’s coming? Don’t be afraid? I don’t know. Disbelief, confidence, panic. Just three of the different ways a person can react to fear. And notice, these reactions are all felt in a jumble by the disciples. The fear of the unknown gives way to boldness which then leads to panic. Can we expect to be better than that?

I don’t know. I don’t know if I can do it. Just this morning, I looked out the window and thought about how much I miss going to the library. And it hit me hard, and it knocked me back for a bit. I had a hard morning and felt fear and loss for what was going on. Should I be chastised for my lack of faith? Should I be blamed for feeling disquieted in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic? Peter panics because he’s walking on water in the midst of a thunderstorm – yet another unprecedented circumstance. How many of us in the midst of this thunderstorm have felt the panic? Have felt like they were sinking and flailing around?

Peter flails about and cries “Lord, Save me!” and Jesus responds by helping him back into the boat while saying “you of little faith, why did you doubt?” I understand where Jesus is coming from, he told Peter to come to him over the water and Peter didn’t have the confidence to believe that he could do what Jesus told him. But look, even in his panic he has the faithfulness to call out for help from Jesus. Was he afraid? Yes. Was he faithful? Yes.

So what does it mean for us? This morning, when I was feeling the weight of our current reality I talked about it. I told my wife about how I was feeling and expressed my fear and exhaustion. I went on a long walk around my neighborhood. How do you cope when fear sets in? Who do you turn to? Where do you go for help?

Do not be afraid is a great sentiment, but not always a realistic one. How we respond in times of fear, how we manage our responses is something we can realistically work through. The biggest thing we can do is, like Peter, to say “Lord, Save me”. Looking for help, asking for help, is the first step to finding help. Technology is an amazing thing, and through technology we are capable of finding ways to get help. And don’t think I just mean Zoom meetings and Facetime, but phone calls count as technology too! Calling someone, anyone you feel close to, or anyone you know who will be there for you, can be a huge help in the midst of the pandemic. And if you aren’t sure about who to call, let me know. I have a churchload of people who care and will be there for you.

Right now, it is ok to not be ok. Because this is unlike anything we’ve ever seen. But know, just like Peter knew when he felt himself sinking, that Jesus is there for us. I mean this in the sense that our prayers and scripture are there as a comfort. But I also, and especially, mean it in the sense that we (the church) are called to be Jesus hands and feet in the world, and that we are always going to be here for each other. So maybe I can’t tell you that you can’t ever be afraid, but I can tell you that whenever you feel afraid, know that there is help for you, and if you call out, we can get back into the boat together.