

Matthew 14: 22 - 33

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14A

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It's scary out there. And by out there, I mean out on the sea, whether you're sitting in the boat or walking on the water. The waves batter the boat, and the wind is against the disciples, far from land, and when they see Jesus approaching, they are terrified. Peter is scared right there with them, and when he climbs over the side of the boat and onto the surface of the water, the fear comes along with him and he starts to sink. It's scary out on the sea, whether you're sitting in the boat or walking on the water.

I get it. I understand the constant presence of fear. I live in the same world that Liza Fletcher lived in. Some mornings I watch the little blue dots on my phone that are my children making their way the mile and a half to school and feel better when they get there; some days I worry until we're all back at home again. There are big fears: how can we possibly turn the tide of vitriol in our politics and violence in our neighborhoods, and there are small ones: why did I say that in the meeting the other day, do I even belong here? Not to mention that we all know it's been the hottest summer globally since we started keeping track. It's scary in the boat and outside the boat. The wind is against us and the waves are battering, so I find myself repeating that old Breton fisherman's prayer, "O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small."

This old story is set in boats and is about waves and fears, yet the conversation between Jesus and his friends is also about something else, something more; Jesus tells them and us how we are to navigate these treacherous seas. It's true that Jesus speaks only briefly in this story, but twice he addresses the **hearts** of Peter and the disciples. "Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'" *Take heart, be courageous, use your heart muscle in this moment of fear. When you are clenched and frightened, when you are terrified, thinking you see a ghost or any number of dire visions, take heart.* And then again, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" But where, you're asking, is the heart language in that line? Another way that some translate these words from Jesus is less chastising and sounds more like he sees into Peter, "Faint-heart, what got into you?" *I know your heart is beating a mile a minute. I know it's scary. You're doing a really hard, impossibly brave thing, of course, you're shaking and trembling.*

Our little hearts, a half pound of muscle for women, just nine or ten ounces for an average guy, can seem just like the Breton's small boat awash in a vast sea. It's scary in the boat and outside the boat. Against the battering winds of fear, the dire news of the day, all the things that could and sometimes do go wrong, how in the world is my little heart going to produce the requisite courage to meet the moment? The answer is to practice climbing out of boats; not because that's not scary but precisely because it is. We have to keep climbing out of boats, because the only other word that Jesus says in this whole story is, "Come." *Come on out here, this is where the world is, this is where life is happening, this is risky and windy, and this is where I am.* Our hearts were built for propelling us out toward God, and even though they tremble and skip a beat, our hearts were built for the open waters.

I didn't really want that to be the answer. Because I live in the same world you live in, and I know that it would be nice to stay home and lock the doors and maybe unplug the wifi. Because the sea is deep and wild and the winds are shifting and because our hearts and our boats are just ridiculously small. But even poor old Peter who got so many things wrong knew that staying in the boat wasn't the answer. Because if it's scary in the boat and outside the boat, then maybe the answer is actually to ask Jesus to help us climb out: to say our prayers, to take a breath, to feel our heart beating, and to put one leg over the side and take a step or two. Because fortifying our hearts behind walls isn't going to make them stronger. And waiting until we're not afraid will be a long wait. So Jesus says "come," even while your heart is fluttering.

Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, once described a drive he took along the ocean-side coast, "when the wind / And the light are working off each other / So that the ocean on one side is wild / With foam and glitter ..." He said almost to himself at the end of his poem, a poem about writing a poem, "Useless to think you'll park and capture it / More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there, / A hurry through which known and strange things pass / As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways / And catch the heart off guard and blow it open."

It's scary in the boat and outside the boat. It's unnerving just skirting the coastline sometimes. And it's wild with foam and glitter. As we make our way through this known and strange world, buffeting winds will come at us sideways and catch the heart off guard and blow it open. I imagine that's something of what happened to Peter in the predawn hours. He was scared in the boat, and he was scared walking out on the water, but that strange morning blew his little heart open just a little bit more than it was before. He was still living in the world, a world that would stay violent and confusing, but his heart kept beating and kept propelling him out toward God and out into the open waters. He had quite a ride still in front of him when that boat pulled up onshore.

Of course, none of it was easy for him, and it won't be easy for us to climb out of our little boats. And sometimes we won't do it, we'll stay put and watch someone else and be in charge of the sails or just lay low. Other times a big, buffeting wind will catch the heart off guard and blow it open before we know what's happened, and we'll be dazzled by the light and the foam and glitter, because it can be beautiful. Still, other times we'll get hurt, and cry out for help. It's scary out there. And by out there, I mean out on the sea, whether you're sitting in the boat or walking on the water. This world is just as broken and prone to violence as it was when Jesus and the disciples pulled ashore and turned toward Jerusalem. Our hearts are just as small and fragile as theirs, and our hearts are also capable of being blown open by the beauty and wonder of it all, by the unimaginable depths of the sea, of its glitter and foam. O Lord, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small. Help me, help us to clamber out of these rickety vessels, out into the open water where you are waiting for us. Show us what it means to take heart, to feel our hearts beating, and to trust that you are in our hearts and in the boat and out at sea.

"Postscript," by Seamus Heaney

"If you wait to be unafraid, you will die waiting.

The terrors of this world do not sleep. Liberation is for those who tremble." Cole Arthur Riley