

The Rev. Luke Selles
Proper 14, Year A
Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields
9 August 2026

“But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”” In the name of One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don’t know about you, but being at the ocean, or a large sea or lake, inspires in me a deep sense of awe that can awaken both deep peace and fear. Encountering something so massive, mysterious, powerful, and beautiful awakens something spiritual in us. And there’s a fine line, sometimes between awe and terror, especially when you find yourself at the mercy of the wind and water.

In today’s Gospel, Peter is starting to walk to Jesus over the stormy waves, but we are told he “became frightened” “when he noticed the strong wind” and sinks. What begins as his test of Jesus – his test of the ghostly figure that he and the rest of the disciples spot walking over the water that night on the lake – seems to turn into Jesus’ test of him, his trust in Jesus’ power, in Jesus’ name, as the Son of God.

Three of the four Gospel accounts – Mark, John, as well as Matthew – report this story “immediately” following Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000, when Jesus miraculously provides enough food for the crowds that are now flocking to him and his disciples night and day, gathering from all corners of the region to be healed and to hear his teaching. There are so many people that Jesus, at the end of this miracle, “compels” his disciples to get in the boat and cross the lake without him – this language makes me wonder if the disciples, including Peter, may have initially pushed back at the thought of leaving Jesus behind. But they do, and he stays on the shore, lingering a little while longer with the people, sending them on their way. And afterwards he climbs a mountain overlooking the lake to pray, to rest.

So, it is not until the “fourth watch of the night,” when a great storm has arisen and is battering their boat about, that the disciples spot a figure walking over waves. Already afraid for their lives because of the storm, they are justifiably terrified. The word here translated as “ghost” is phantasma – a spirit, often one that is disturbing, malevolent. In the midst of the storm that may mean the end of their lives, the disciples see a new threat, a new enemy, across the water. But “immediately,” we are told, when Jesus hears their cries of fear, Jesus speaks: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

But Peter will not accept this word of comfort – he wants nearness, he wants certainty, he wants to understand. So, he puts Jesus to the test: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus replies, “Come.” And Peter walks, across the water, to his Lord. But the fear, the terror for his life in the face of the storm, of its danger, chaos, and brute power, distracts him from Jesus and he sinks. And then he remembers himself – he calls out to Jesus, and again, Jesus “immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, this mirrors an earlier episode six chapters before when Jesus, in a boat with his disciples, falls asleep. And while he is asleep a great “windstorm” arises, “so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves,” and his disciples, fearing for their lives, go to wake him up. And he says to them “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” After Jesus rebukes the storm and it calms, the disciples, awestruck, confused, and still afraid, turn to each other and say, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

In our lesson today, Jesus has just demonstrated his power over Reality, he has responded to his disciples’ anxieties about “enough,” their exhaustion and their desire to escape the Great Need of the crowd, by staying back on the shore. When Peter seeks to test him in the storm, Jesus reaches for Peter, and lifting him from the waters says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” In Matthew’s account, this story ends with Jesus getting in the boat and the storm abruptly ceasing, and the disciples prostrating themselves in worship, naming Jesus as the “Son of God.”

What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? And why would Jesus send out his disciples, and us, into a storm?

In the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is described as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” Jesus is God, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Almighty Creator of all things, who separated the sea from the dry land, who rules over the winds, waters, and all creatures. To call on Jesus, to be called by Jesus, is to call on the name of the One God, the source of all authority over things visible and invisible.

This story is part of the unfolding revelation of Jesus’ glory, Jesus’ full identity to disciples and to Peter. The disciples will not worship Jesus again until he appears to them after his resurrection, when they will again mistake him for a ghost. Following Jesus will bring them to that threshold of awe and terror – and it will take them to a new place – a place of love and courage beyond their fear of death. It takes practice to follow Jesus, and it takes a lifetime of walking out and then stumbling and sinking,

again and again. We will lose sight of who we are following – we will get lost in questions of what we are doing, who we are becoming, how we will make it happen. If we do not lose our focus to terror, it may be to anxiety or anger – why would Jesus send us out, command us even, to go out into the storm, after all?

Friends, to follow Jesus is to do the humanly impossible – it is to trust in a power over and beyond death, sorrow, fear – and to give ourselves over. It is to trust in God who made all things, gave all things, so that we might call on God, and live. Amen.