

“A Little Faith in a Powerful Headwind”
Matthew 14:22-33

Matthew 14:22-30

²²Immediately [after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 families, Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.”

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Romans 10:5-15

⁵Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says,

“Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’”
(that is, to bring Christ down)

⁷“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’”
(that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

⁸But what does it say?

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart”
(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,
you will be saved.

¹⁰For one believes *with the heart* and so is justified,
and one confesses *with the mouth* and so is saved.

¹¹The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek;
the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

¹³For, “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?
As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet
of those who bring good news!”

Prayer

Creator God, Righteous and Merciful Judge,
we pray with the fishermen on the frigid waters off the coast of Brittany:

“O God, protect us:
Your sea is so vast, and our vessel so small.”ⁱ

The headwinds feel strong today, O God.

Black and white images from what, not so long ago,
we had hoped was a bygone era

flickered back to life two nights ago, in color and in real time:
white men gathering by torchlight,
chanting about race and territory,
twenty-somethings declaring their intention to take something back
that they think once belonged to them and them only;
simultaneously battling and stoking their own fears and everyone else's,
with the force of intimidation,
the implied threat or the explicit, appalling use of violence,
the misplaced self-righteousness
bastardized from the very gospel of the Prince of Peace
and the historical witness
of the God who commanded hospitality to the stranger.

Call to us, Jesus, in the evening, from across the water, we pray.

Call me to dare to do what you do.

Give me, I pray with equal parts impetuousness and trepidation,
a courageous heart, to step believably from the safety of my contraptions
onto the mysterious deep that you have conquered
and over which you reign;

Give me, I pray with equal parts recklessness and intentionality,
fleet feet, to step gingerly on the strange surface of seeming impossibilities,
to walk over waves of terror, and threat, and smothering darkness,
without being taken under, without being swept away;

Give me, I pray,
a faithful mind, capable of discerning enough perspective
to see and hear you clearly,
your commanding call comforting, even in the most ferocious storm;

Give me
able arms, strong enough to reach out in need,
able to grab onto you and hold on tight
in moments of crisis and fear,
childlike vulnerability and wizened self-doubt.

All the evidence that I can muster—the only evidence I can believe—
leads me to say: “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

Catch me, Jesus, before I go under.

Many of us, O God, feel that the world as we thought we understood it
is changing beneath our feet.

Some things, and ideas, and judgements, and assumptions,
that used to seem so true they were just obvious,
now leave the bitter aftertaste
of pointless condemnation and heartless exclusion.
But we used to feel like we knew where we stood,
we were confident in who we were and where we were going.
And we were good, God, or we meant to be,
and we usually thought we *were*
being the generally decent people that we generally mean to be.
We have been forced to find out about some of our blind spots
and, with new eyes with which you equip us,
confront the worst of ourselves,
particularly when we see it reflected back to us in others.
Give us, we pray from a position of need,
wisdom and courage and faith and hope and love, Loving God.

Recast us, O God,
into something more useful and beautiful and true.
Where the Church of Jesus Christ has become a yacht with no lifelines,
no lifeboats, no flotation devices,
no supplies to share with castaways caught in our wake,
refit us, reshape us, recommission us for useful service.
Where we have lost our bearings,
replace our faulty maps;
refresh the compasses that have lost their magnetism
and can no longer discern true North.

If we must learn again how to steer by the stars,
we pray for clear skies and manageable waves.

And when we finally gather the courage
to put it all on the line,
to climb out of the boat to test our surefootedness,
be there to catch us, O God,
when our spiritual weakness gets the better of us.

Help our faltering steps, O God,
when we climb out of the boats of our own safety, security and luxury,
to embrace you
and bring your transforming word to life in this world:

to feed people like you do,
to heal people like you do,
to support the weak and strengthen the fainthearted like you do,
to think of others before ourselves, like you do;
to sit with the poor and the rich, like you do;
to be with the sinner and the self-righteous, like you are;
to offer the good news of the availability of transformation and renewal,
just like you do,
to all the inheritors
of the legacies of a nation
built on both the nobility of the highest ideals,
and the depravity of slavery;
built on waves of immigration of brave pioneers,
and theft of land from native populations;
built on ideals loftier than anywhere in history,
with still more potential yet to be realized
in the pursuit of our greatest and most honorable possibilities.

Equip us, we pray, at all times and in everything we say and do,
with the same, consistent message of love, love, love, love, love,
like you do.

And catch all who step out in faith
to stand courageously for your truth and your love.
Please, God, do not make us who remain in the safety of this boat
watch Peter go under.
Spare us from witnessing yet more tragedy,
yet more suffering; yet one more being swept under and away.

Catch them, O God, catch everyone;
catch them all, before they go under.
Help us, Mighty Savior, in the evening, in the storm.
Truly, you are the Son of God.

Wherever you send our feet, our crutches, our canes, our wheelchairs,
wherever you send our words, our thoughts, our prayers,
our embracing arms—
on land or water, in air or in cyberspace—

May they carry us effectively enough

to deliver your good news to an insecure and frightened world.
May they move in places we cannot even imagine going.
And may they be beautiful for you.

Amen.

The Sermon

The Earth is surrounded by a magnetic fieldⁱⁱ that extends from beneath its surface to the outer space around it.

Its existence is a *practical* miracle on at least two counts: one, it protects us from being bombarded into oblivion by a phenomenon known to scientists as solar wind.

And two, it allows travelers anywhere on the surface of the earth, on land or on sea, to look at a compass and determine the direction they are headed. It doesn't deliver them home by itself, but it gives them an understanding of their position—a sense of where they are—and a fighting chance to be able to navigate the way to get them where they need to be.

The permanence and reliability of the Earth's magnetic field feels like one of those great, fundamental realities: the physical laws God has established that govern and maintain the order that exists in the universe.

But it turns out that the geomagnetic field is not nearly as stable as it seems. In as short a time as 20,000 years, or in as long as 37 million, the earth's magnetic field from time to time reverses itself, so magnetic north, inexplicably and unpredictably, shifts toward the south pole. The average is about every 500,000 years; the last time it happened was 750,000 years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ Great!

Probably there would be no real harm in that—other than having to switch the N with the S on all our compasses—but something about that idea doesn't sit very easily.

It feels like it means that any day now—or any century, or millennium now—a fundamental aspect of how we experience and understand the world and our place in it could be turned upside down, without warning and without explanation.

When Jesus came into our lives, we had known for a long time where we stood.

The glories of King David were a thousand years in our rearview mirror; an empire not our own occupied our land and governed our daily affairs. We were observant enough to believe Isaiah's prophecy as a philosophy, but we were practical enough that it rarely even crossed our minds to dream that it might happen in our lifetime.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, news came traveling that a baptizer named John was setting the world on fire with his prophetic preaching and baptism, and all of a sudden this other man whom John the Baptist was announcing appeared on the scene, and started collecting us—whether methodically or randomly was never clear—from the lakeside, from our fishing boats,^{iv} from the tax collector's booth.^v

His early sermons were about a new light dawning (4:15); his early ministry was teaching in synagogues, preaching good news, and healing every disease and sickness that people had (4:23).

He blessed all the people whom we had known as cursed:
the poor in spirit, those who were mourning;
the meek, the merciful, people who were hungry for righteousness
(what innocent fools we'd thought they were);
the "pure in heart" and the peacemakers—I mean, *give me a break*.
People who were persecuted for righteousness' sake.

These were history's losers, and as far as we were concerned,
it was plainly obvious that they were destined—
they were *cursed*—
to keep losing.

And all of a sudden, when this man came into the world,
it felt like the everything we thought we had understood
was being turned upside down.

We'd had faith, but we had long since become less familiar with hope.

We knew an awful lot about the habits of fish,
but we didn't know very much about people.

Sometimes you feel like you know where you stand
in relation to the most fundamental laws of the universe.
We know our true north,
and it's how we gauge where we stand in the world

and it helps us know how to get to where we're trying to go.

So when everything you thought you knew
about the way the world is supposed to work,
and how you're supposed to live in it;
when your understandings, your assumptions,
the things you relied on to give you your true north
get turned upside down,
no matter whether or not you've been told to expect it,
it feels like it comes unpredictably and unexpectedly.

The late twentieth century alone seemed to bring geomagnetic shifts in relentless waves. Even for those who had become somewhat accustomed to serially losing and then regaining their bearings, the 21st century has only accelerated the pace of great shifting in the field.

What once were monumentally titanic struggles,
tectonic shifts—racial equality, for heaven's sake;
women in the workplace, including the pulpit;
public acceptance of people other than heterosexual cisgender—
what were at the time seen as difficult, iconoclastic struggles
less than a generation later seem kind of roll-your-eyes quaint.

Mary Tyler Moore, a single woman of marriageable age working in a newsroom? Network executives were apoplectic. They drew the line with her character being divorced. They said “You can't do that! That's not comedy! Everybody'll think she walked out on Dick Van Dyke!”^{vi}

These days, if you're not on board yet
with treating every human being with the full dignity of being a human being,
that train isn't waiting around for you to get your head around it anymore.

Twenty years ago, ten years ago, and right now, churches have been faced with grave decisions about whether certain people can be married in church, can hold office in church, can be part of church life like every other sinner in the pews.

The message used to be, “We are trying to be faithful in deciding whether you can come in and be one of us.”

And now the message coming back is, “Why on earth would I ever want to come in? I’m having more trouble finding Jesus in there than out here.”

Tectonic shifts. Geomagnetic reversals. Sometimes it feels like they’re happening not only more frequently but exponentially faster.

I saw a T-shirt several years ago that said, “If you’re too weird for Asheville, you’re too weird.”

What’s too weird anymore? The bar moves all the time.

And one hopes that the moral arc of the universe,
long as it may be, ultimately bends toward justice.

But it’s a long way there
from the pain of exclusion and oppression that people start with,
and a lot of people get hurt along the way,
and we don’t all get on board at the same time.
Sometimes we really want to. But we just can’t.

We’d like to get there and be more accepting of things that didn’t used to be classified as acceptable, but it’s just so much different than we were raised; and you may get impatient, but we can’t just flip the switch.

So there we were on the boat, battered by waves coming at us,
far out from the land where we’d be able to stand up straight,
in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. And the wind was against us.

And early in the morning, we saw him walking on the surface of the water, moving toward us.

When the world is turning upside down, and when you’re scared, and when the wind is blowing and you’re in a flimsy vessel at the deepest point in the middle of a wide lake, and the waves are pummeling your boat, you’ll entertain just about any possible explanation.

Some of us, though we doubted our senses, could come up with no other explanation, and could only think it had to be a ghost, walking with horrifying ease on the stormy water toward our little boat which suddenly felt incredibly lonely out there.

And we shrieked with terror.

But immediately, we heard *his* voice calling out.

He told us to take courage—in Greek, “*Tharseite*” (Θαρσεῖτε):

the same thing he’d said earlier, back in his own town, to a paralyzed young man who was being carried on a bed by some people: “when he saw their faith, he said to the man they were carrying, “*Tharseite*—take courage, son—your sins are forgiven,”^{vii} and he healed him;

the same thing he said, not long after that, to a woman who had touched the fringe of his cloak, believing that if she could just do that, she could be made well from her devastating illness of twelve years. He turned and saw her and said, “*Tharseite*—take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly she was made well.^{viii}

“Take courage,” said the voice in the wind coming from across the water in the wee hours of the morning to a cluster of terrified disciples. “It is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter said, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus said, “Come.”

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

It worked for a minute, but the wind was strong, and the sea was deep,
and it must have felt something like vertigo
when every physical law of Peter’s universe and ours
seemed to have been suspended,
meaning Peter’s own disbelief had to be suspended, too.
And that is a mighty heavy load to hold suspended for very long.

And his doubts got the better of him, and he began to sink.

And he cried out, and maybe we in the boat did, too: “Lord, save me!”

“Does anyone know where the love of God goes
when the waves turn the minutes to hours?”^{ix}

Peter, the brave, the impetuous, the strong, the determined, the guy who always seemed like he most wanted to be faithful, most wanted to prove his loyalty, most wanted to protect Jesus from the tough guys of the world by being an even tougher guy than them—

started to go down; we thought we were going to lose him—

and suddenly Jesus was *right there*, and immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, and he said, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Strong headwinds and battering waves
can make even the bravest and most faithful among us
lose confidence even in what we trust the most.

In times when our understanding of who we are, and where we are,
and what it means, and how it’s supposed to work—
in times when all of that feels like it’s being turned upside down,

faith that is not large enough to withstand strong winds
is not enough, by itself, to distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian;

A little more faith than that is required
to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God;
It takes a little more faith than that
to love the Lord your God
with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.

The good news being:
Regardless of how strong or durable your faith is,
Jesus is not going to let you go under.

In our darkest hours, we reach for an embrace, we reach for help, we lift up our hands, hoping for rescue.

We move toward our salvation tentatively,
and Jesus catches us before we go under

When Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, the wind ceased.

And we did the only thing we knew to do.

We worshiped,
and we confessed the only truth that could see us
through every strong wind and every threatening wave:

“Truly, you are the Son of God.”

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ⁱ This appropriately simple prayer is an old traditional one from the fishing communities of Brittany; I remember seeing a version of it in a collection called *Celtic Prayers*.

ⁱⁱ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. (Crown/Archetype. Kindle Edition) 218-19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryson, Bill. *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Crown/Archetype. Kindle Edition) 219-220.

^{iv} Matthew 4:18-22

^v Matthew 9:9

^{vi} Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, *Mary and Lou and Rhoda and Ted: And all the Brilliant Minds Who Made The Mary Tyler Moore Show a Classic* (Simon & Schuster, Kindle Edition), 35

^{vii} Matthew 9:2

^{viii} Matthew 9:20-22

^{ix} From the Gordon Lightfoot song “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” (©1976 by Gordon Lightfoot and Moose Music, Ltd.)