

*“Take Heart. I am coming.”*

*Matthew 14: 22-33*

*Preached in worship at Oak Hill Presbyterian Church, St. Louis on 8/10/14*

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They must have been tired.

They must have been exhausted. Perhaps that’s why they were so scared.

I try to put myself in their sandals. To put myself in their boat.

They’d done everything he told them to do. They’d just feed all those people. Thousands and thousands of them. They passed out that bread and those fish, all the while wondering why they hadn’t run out, but with hungry mouths and reaching hands greeting them at every turn, at every rock and on every hill, they just kept passing it out. Then going back through the crowd, clenching the baskets in their hands, feeling those same rocks and grasses beneath their feet, they picked up all the scraps, the bones, and the crumbs. They brought it to him. And immediately he made them, the word in Greek means he compelled them, he drove them, he sent them into the boat. To go on ahead to the other side. It was late already and they’d already worked so hard.

And now there was a wind. Didn’t he see the wind? Didn’t he know it was coming? So they prepared the boat, they worked in shifts, they readied the vessel for each wind-stirred up wave after windier and more aggressive wave. Over and over and over again. Getting worse and worse each time. The salt water chapping their faces as it hit them with the first punch, the wind chapping them back with the second. It got darker as the night wore on. They’re arms, sore already from the baskets, now shook with urgency, holding the boat together, trying to keep on some kind of course, holding each disciple in the boat.

They'd been through this before, of course. They were used to boat travel. They knew the dangers of the water. They'd already survived a terrible storm. A storm that had them scared for their lives. But he had been with them that time. Sure Jesus had been asleep, but he was there. They woke him and he stopped the storm. He stopped it. Just like that. It made no sense. It left them confused. How could he have done that. How could he have healed all those people? How could he have fed all those people? How could he have done all that and then sent them into this wind? Into these waves? Into this danger?

And the waves battered them. And the wind battered them. For hours. But of this, they were not afraid. This wasn't like the last storm. I bet they were tired. I bet they were exhausted. They didn't call out to Jesus. The text doesn't say that they were afraid of the storm. It was what happened next that frightened them.

They saw something. Something on the water. Something coming towards them. It was coming right for them. It wasn't a creature of the water, because it wasn't in the water. But they knew that waves like this, sea with such violent force, could be full of all manner of evils. To people of this time, the sea was the source of evil. It was full of chaos. So, what horrible phantom could it create to bring on the next assault on their boat. What could it be... It looked like a ghost. They cried out. What would that ghost do? What would it do to them?

The text says they were terrified. That they cried out in fear. But I wonder, did they also tremble? Did their teeth chatter? After they called it a ghost, did they fall silent and still? Did they try to row the boat away? Did they try to escape the oncoming phantom? Did they cling to one

another? Did they pray? Or did they fight it? Try to overtake it? Face their fear with force? If they had stones in the boat would they have thrown them toward the ghost? What if they'd had guns? Would they have shot at Jesus?

Yesterday afternoon, not all that many hours ago, not all that far from here a police officer shot and killed a teenager, Michael Brown. I wasn't there and I didn't see what happened. But I am all too familiar, as we who are paying attention are these days, to the shocking reality of how our dark skinned babies are being profiled, beaten and killed by the very people who have committed their lives to protecting and serving. As I read news reports and watched videos and read eyewitness accounts and twitter reactions last night I couldn't help thinking about the fear. The kind of fear that makes a cop pull their weapon. The kind of fear that our black sons and brothers and friends face just walking to their grandma's house. The kind of fear we have of those who don't look like us and who don't act like what we think they are supposed to act like. The kind of fear we have of things we don't understand. Of things coming our way that we can't quite place. That we can't recognize.

Because, the disciples, that night, weary and battered, in the midst of the storm, couldn't recognize Jesus. He didn't look the same. He didn't look like what they thought he looked like. He looked like a ghost. Like a phantom. And he wasn't doing what they thought he could do. He was walking atop the water.

Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.

Don't be afraid. The sea may be swirling and the winds may be howling, but it is I. I am. And I am coming to be with you.

Those disciples were tired and afraid. They were surrounded by wind and chaos but also by a God they didn't understand, but who they needed. They needed that surprising, mysterious Jesus that night, just like we need him today. Even if he doesn't look like what we think he looks like. Even if he doesn't appear how we think he should appear. Even if he seems to sprout up from the most evil looking place we can imagine.

For me, last night, when I couldn't sleep, thinking about a mom who wouldn't get to say goodnight to her son one more time, thinking about a community with broken trust, thinking about an unnamed cop and his family too, thinking about how to talk to my own kid about what happened, even through all that, I still saw Jesus. I saw Jesus walking across not the water, but across the pavement. In a what the news media reported as an "angry mob" I saw Jesus in a peaceful crowd of grieving neighbors with their hands held up high saying this isn't okay. Gathering to mourn and shout and to say enough! Not one more child. I saw Jesus in that crowd. In those neighbors. With his hands held high. In their broken, wind-ravaged boat. With them.

Because our vessels are battered. And our arms are tired. And we keep holding on. Our world is getting hit by wave after wave of chaos. Airstrikes and diseases, violence and lack of quality health care, and lack of good jobs, and racism and shootings.

We need a Jesus, who surprises us and terrifies us and tells us things we don't expect to hear. "Get into the boat. Go into the wind. Sure it is dangerous there, but I will be with you. Go on ahead. Take heart. Don't be afraid. It is I. I am."

Jesus is coming towards our boat. He doesn't look like what we expect. He can do more and that is exciting and terrifying. And whether or not you are one who rushes out to meet him, to test that he's real, or one who trembles in the boat, waiting and welcoming his presence, and worshiping his arrival, wherever we are in this story, we will all be amazed. We will be amazed at what he can do.

So today, if the wind has picked up in your life, if the seas are raging, look into those waves. Look right into the water and the wind. Look for him. And do not be afraid when Jesus shows up. He may not look like what you're expecting. He may not look like anything you can imagine. But he is coming to be with you and he will calm the storm.