

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 3 *Do Not Fear*

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From the Pulpit of
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Isaiah 43:1-7

¹ But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶ I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my

daughters from the end of the earth—⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Matthew 14:22-36

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” ³⁴ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. ³⁵ After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word to that whole surrounding region, and people brought all who were sick to him ³⁶ and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Of all of Jesus' miracles, this is the one that has become the common idiom when people describe a person almost too good to be true. A new hire is made, a promising figure arises as a leader, or a pastor is called to a new church position with resounding excitement. Let's take Andy on this day we celebrate his installation, and besides he's in Youth Gathering and not here to grumble at me. Andy's perfect for Bryn Mawr; he's the most seasoned Associate for Youth and their Families the church has called in a very long time; Andy's got a great rapport with the youth; he knows how to engage parents and volunteers; he's bringing a fresh dimension to men's ministry; he's a gifted preacher and worship leader; and he has all that wonderful outreach background from his years at Broad Street Ministry. Yeah, you might say, at the end of my honest string of superlatives, but can he walk on water?

You know, no one ever hears about someone's great gifts or ability to work wonders and then says sarcastically, "But can she feed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish?" Or, "Well, he sounds great, but can he cure blindness with a handful of dirt and spit? Can she raise the dead and bring them back to life again? None of Jesus' other miracles have become idiomatic like this one. It's always this story, that raises the rhetorical question about how great a person could possibly

be when described hyperbolically, almost beyond belief. “He sounds perfect,” we say with tongue in cheek, but can he walk on water?”

So, let me tell you why I believe this is the miracle story that sticks, that, over time, became the analogy, the operative comparison that God is God and we are not. I think it’s about more than Jesus could do it and Peter failed; even though the story gives us that side by side, human and divine comparison. None of Jesus’ other forty-some miracles became the expression that this one did. It has nothing to do with the walking. It has everything to do with the water.

In both the Old and New Testaments, large bodies of water are a thing to be feared. Remember how maps were drawn when people believed the world was flat. Where the land ended, those maps were inscribed pointing to the watery edge: “There be dragons.” In the Bible the sea is literally understood as the great deep, a dangerous place where below the surface the sea monster Leviathan lurked; or where winds and storms could sink a boat in minutes.

The other thing to remember is that in the Bible the sea is also highly symbolic of fearful things: darkness, death, evil, and unrelenting chaos. The sea is a source of life and livelihood but also a source of great danger.

From the Bible's beginning to end, God is frequently and consistently described as having power over the waters. This power is used to create, save, judge, provide for God's people; the repeated biblical proclamation of God's power and authority over the waters is meant to free us from fear.

Isaiah says it so poignantly: *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...do not fear, for I am with you.*" Jesus' feeding five thousand people with limited resources or even raising a friend from the dead, did not seem to his followers as big a miracle as his walking across the sea, where underneath is hidden every imaginable threat to human existence, darkness, chaos, random violence, evil, unpredictable currents.

These days it feels like the church is a fragile vessel upon a rocky sea. There is so much to fear. After yet another act of political violence, a newspaper article this past week captured the fear in its opening lines, "Americans agree on one thing: something is seriously wrong." In interviews across the country, across the political divide, across the spectrum of the free speech debate, it went on to say, "people expressed fear and wariness, and said the country seemed to be spinning out of

control.”¹ Add to the violence fires and floods, masked ICE agents showing up everywhere to cart people away and how medical science has plunged into its own kind of war, and people across the board are afraid. That’s the same watery chaos we read about in the Bible. We as a church are called by God across rough waters into a fearful world – in this season in which many in our country is on the brink. While we are desperately afraid God, the only One who really can walk on water and calm the sea, comes to us and calls us into the deep.

On the surface, Matthew’s account reads simply like a miracle story disclosing something extraordinary about the nature of Jesus himself. But on a deeper level, Matthew has shaped it into a parable about the church. At Jesus’ command the disciples are gathered in a boat and sent forth in mission to Gennesaret on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. In Mark’s gospel, the same miracle has them headed for Bethsaida, in John’s they’re going to Capernaum... recalling the exact destination doesn’t seem to matter so much as the memory that the church goes forth in a world of fear. The story tells how the church strains to be faithful in perilous times, including our time. The church is sent forth in the boat together to serve in this community and in the world, not because we are alike or like-minded but because Christ has called us together, and set us upon a dangerous sea.

¹ Shawn Hubler, Edgar Sandoval, Audra Burch, “After Kirk Killing, Americans Agree on One Thing: Something is Seriously Wrong,” The New York Times, 9/12/25.

This is the picture the gospels paint about a boat trip and a miraculous walk upon water, but Mathew also brings US into the telling with a focus on Peter, striving to be filled with faith but stumbling on his fear. When Peter steps out of the boat, becomes frightened and starts to sink, “Jesus beckons him saying, “you of little faith.” Matthew never uses this expression to speak of unbelievers. Its purpose is to rebuke those who fail to draw upon the faith they have, that is already within them. As biblical scholar, Eugene Boring says, “Little faith is the dialectical mixture of courage and anxiety, of hearing the word of the Lord and looking at the terror of the storm, of trust and doubt which is already an ingredient in Christian existence, even after the resurrection. In effect,” the scholar concludes, Jesus is not yelling, “What’s wrong with you? but rather, “You’ve got this! Trust it! Use the faith that is within you!”² The force of this text lies in the theological affirmation that Jesus is Lord over all the powers of chaos and destruction that threaten life, and our faith in him propels us - the church - into mission with courage.

One of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner’s rabbinic students told a story about her great-aunt Sussie. It took place during the rise of Nazi Germany when Jewish citizens were being picked up all over and thrown into vans and

² Rick Spalding, unpublished Moveable Feast paper for Agnes’ preaching group, 2011.

carted off. In Munich Great-Aunt Sussie was in a bus on her way home from work, when SS troops stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. Most on the bus were simply annoyed, but a few terrified Jews were being taken off the bus and ordered into a truck on the corner. From her seat in the rear, Sussie watched as the soldiers worked their way closer. She began to tremble and tears streamed down her face. The man next to her politely asked what was wrong. “I don’t have the papers you have,” she whispered, “I am a Jew. They are going to take me. Well the man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. “You stupid woman,” he roared. I can’t stand to be near you.” The SS soldiers looked up and asked what all the yelling was about. The man shouted angrily, “My wife has forgotten her papers again! I’m so fed up! She always does this!” The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw the man again. Never knew his name.³ But unafraid he had stood up to cruel and terrifying powers and saved her.

It breaks my heart that a story from Nazi Germany feels so relevant today. In our season of rocky and chaotic seas, my old friend Walter Brueggemann called the church not to fear saying: The truth is that frightened people will never turn the world, because they use too much energy on protection of self. It is the vocation of the baptized, the known

³ Grateful to Kim Clayton for sharing this story from Lawrence Kushner, *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary*, p. 81.

and named and unafraid, to make the world whole: While the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor, the unafraid are open to neighbor. While the frightened, in their anxiety must keep the store, accumulate, and make themselves safe, the unafraid are generous in community. While the frightened do not notice those in need, the unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy. While the frightened see the weak and the poor as threats, the unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor. The frightened are endlessly restless and dissatisfied, while the unafraid pray in the morning, care through the day, and rejoice at night in thanks and praise.” Concluding, Brueggemann bids us: “So dear people, each of you: Do not fear! I have called you by name; you are mine!”⁴

Words that echo for Peter when amid fearful and dangerous, evil and chaotic times, Jesus tells us, his church: “You’ve got the faith! Trust it! be courageous and strong. Use the faith that is within you!” Do not be afraid .

AMEN.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Terrified and Unafraid, Reformed Journal, 2017. I inverted Walter’s “frightened” and “unafraid” comparisons for emphasis on sermon theme.