

Take Heart

1 Kings 19:9-18 | Psalm 85:8-13 | Romans 10:5-15 | Matthew 14:22-23

MATTHEW 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the 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 towards them on the lake. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, 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 towards 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 worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by reading:

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. 'Fly, you fools!' he cried, and was gone. The fires went out, and blank darkness fell. The Company stood rooted with horror staring into the pit. Even as Aragorn and Boromir came flying back, the rest of the bridge cracked and fell. With a cry Aragorn roused them. 'Come! I will lead you now!' he called.¹

You may recognize this passage from Tolkien's classic *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It's a major turning point in the first part of the story—the fellowship is on their journey and the wizard, Gandalf—the old, wise, most powerful, leader of the group has just been taken from them. It's an important moment because we see just how important Gandalf was to the group. While it is not a perfect analogy for our Gospel reading this morning, I think it helps us to take step back and enter into our story. And we can learn something from the story in front of us—a story of Jesus, marked by his departure and return, and who he truly is—and a story of Peter, who walks to the front and then sinks.

1. JESUS: WALKING ON WATER

The first question we will consider is the question of who it is that is absent. And for this, we need some context. It's actually the same context as our passage last week—Jesus had just learned of the death of his family member and arguably mentor, John the Baptist. He'd attempted to get some solitude, but ended up having a long day of healing and feeding the multitudes. And as our passage begins, he's gotten his moment apart.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), 412.

The absence of Jesus is an important facet of this story because it is addressing an important question. *What do we need to know when Jesus is not here?* It's a sensible question. Christians in that first generation after Jesus had ascended, including the first readers of this Gospel, wrestled with it. Jesus was here. Everything made sense. We knew what we were doing. But now he's gone back to his Father in heaven and we're...a bit lost. It can be hard for us to imagine because we never had that personal, earthly relationship with Jesus. But it's not a completely foreign concept. We know what our homes are like when mom is away and then there is a crisis, or the office when the manager is out and then a problem arises, or the church when the Chaplain is on leave and then something happens. The absence of the leader acutely points us to what is about that leader that is missed.

Meanwhile, the winds came upon the boat that the disciples were occupying. The distant Jesus eventually appears to these fearful disciples, but looking like a ghost—walking across the raging waters. And though this made them even more afraid—notice the repeated references to their fear—Jesus came right up to them and began to speak: *'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'*² Take heart, that is be of courage, and do not be afraid—he begins and ends his statement. But nestled in the middle is a profound statement: "It is I." This is a very particular pair of words: ἐγώ εἰμι, most often translated simply as "I am." It is a theologically loaded phrase. It is God's divine self-identification. Speaking to Moses from the burning bush. "I am."³ It was how Yahweh marked his Laws: "I am the Lord." It is how Jesus speaks in the Gospels: "I am...the bread of life, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, and the life."⁴ It is how God reveals himself in the end: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."⁵ With these two little words, Jesus reminds his disciples that he is not only a powerful miracle-worker and prophet—as they have seen already and repeatedly—but he is himself, God.

This notion is reinforced at the end of the passage. After Jesus has gotten in the boat and the winds have ceased and the waters are still, the disciples respond to Jesus as God, worshipping him—something completely forbidden if he was a mere man. In Judaism, in the commandments, one worships God alone, never a human being. And to make it even clearer, the disciples proclaim that he is the Son of God in that worship. This is important. It is the first time that a human being in Matthew's Gospel has recognized Jesus as the Son of God—as God himself. They recognize Jesus as divine, as the "I am" he's claimed to be.

Friends, this should mean something to us. A true Christian faith is one that trusts that Jesus Christ is God. We proclaim it in our creed. We acknowledge it in our liturgy. And deep down, we need to simply know it. When we face the tough things in this life—and 2020 seems to be full of them, from viral pandemics to racial injustice epidemics—I pray that you and I not just cognitively recall, but truly believe, that Christ Jesus—the one in whom we've put our faith—is none other than the God who controls the uncontrollable, the God who rescues his people, the one who was and is and is to be. So, brothers and sisters, take heart. Even in these moments where it seems hopeless, where the bills are just too much, the quarantine is just

² Matt 14:27.

³ See Exod 3:14.

⁴ See John 6:35, 10:11, and 14:6.

⁵ See Rev 1:8.

making us too crazy, the pressure at work is just too much, and the price of this life just seems too high—Jesus is still God. He may not solve all of our earthly problems—this is no prosperity gospel, but we must not forget, he has not abandoned us. He remains God. This is what we need to know when Jesus is absent. Fear not. Jesus is God. Take heart.

2. PETER: SINKING IN WATER

Now of course, we don't just learn about Jesus in this passage. Matthew has told us a story of Peter—my favourite disciple. He's the kind of guy that speaks first and thinks second, the sort that is first to notice when mom is out of the house and... let's call it... instigates... trouble. He's the sort that—as has been said of me—is not always right, but never is in doubt. And this story is one of those stories that shows us everything I love about him.

Jesus, the guy that has been doing all of the miracles that the disciples have been watching for the last 10 chapters, who has been traveling with them—so, somebody that they know by sight—comes walking to them on water and declaring himself God. Peter's response? 'Look, Jesus, *if* it is really you, then tell me to come to you,' he says. Peter's not convinced and decides that what is needed right now is a test. Jesus, for his part, complies and Peter walks on water. That's right. He walks on water. And in typically Petrine fashion, it is not long before he sinks. That is, Peter steps up. He takes charge. He emerges as the representative of the disciples, and he does something truly miraculous. But, and this is really important, he doesn't make it very far. Literally, a few steps. The wind comes. His fear returns. And he sinks, crying out: "Lord, save me."⁶

Sometimes we may be walking on water. Other times, we may simply be drowning. In either case, it is the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that sustains and that saves us. But the story is about more than simply this life and its troubles. I want to be clear again, this is no prosperity gospel. There is no promise that winds will cease in this life and that we will be spared from the storms of hurt or disappointment or failure. And frankly, sometimes the storm is one of our own making—our own sinfulness. There are ups and downs, storms and then miracles and then sinking and then back in the boat. This is the story of our life. It is the best of times. It is the worst of times. And the only hope, the only rest, comes from Jesus, the great I am, the Lord who saves, who reaches out his hand and catches.

And what are we to do? I think the disciples actually show us. Peter, well, he gets in the boat. He believes once again—having just been rebuked for faltering in his faith. And then, they worship Christ Jesus. It's really a perfect response. Faced with a storm that he could not overcome, Peter looks to Jesus Christ as his Lord, believing in him as the Son of God, the great I am. And then worship follows. I don't know what part of the story you're in right now. The world is pretty messed up and it's hard to tell. You may be having the time of your life—work is going well (or better yet, you're retired), the bills are getting paid, the family are actually happy for once, and this quarantine isn't actually so bad. Or, you may be at the part of the story where you're drowning—where simply living seems like an unfair test of your faith. In both cases and every case between, Matthew's lesson for us today is this: Jesus is God. In him we can put our faith. And while it may not mean life is takes a turn up easy street, you can be sure that the destination remains worthwhile.

⁶ Matt 14:30.

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I will return us to where we started, only skipping to the last page:

So Frodo and Sam set off... Frodo paddled away from the shore, and the River bore them swiftly away, down the western arm, and past the frowning cliffs... The roar of the great falls drew nearer. Even with such help as Sam could give, it was hard work to pass across the current at the southward end of the island and drive the boat eastward towards the far shore.⁷

This life is hard work. And sometimes you're walking on water, and sometimes the falls are drawing near. No matter which, you can put your faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we come before you in the midst of the waters. Help us to trust that you have and will save us, through faith in your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), 513.