

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
9 August 2026

Matthew 14:22-33

Our passage starts with the phrase “Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side” but the original word (anagkazō) is much more forceful. Jesus compelled them, commanded them, forced them to go. The reluctance of the disciples to enter the boat doesn't seem to be related to the destination. The very next verse after our passage tells us that “They came to land at Gennesaret,” which is Jewish territory. They are not going into Gentile lands, which often caused so much anxiety for the disciples. So why the reluctance?

For first-century Judeans there is nothing more scary than the open water, especially at night. Many believed the lake to be possessed with dark forces opposed to God. To make matters worse, the boat was being assaulted, battered, tormented by the waves. The chaos and terrifying demonic forces of nature were threatening to capsize the small boat and the disciples were terrified. This was the type of storm where you work for hours and exhaust all of your energies trying to stay afloat, but the danger remains present and menacing until you have nothing left to give. They left it all in the field of battle but it was not enough.

Just as the disciples have reached this state of panic, they see Jesus walking on the waters coming towards them. Because they believe the lake to be filled with demonic powers, they believe they are seeing a ghost. Here, I believe Matthew is directing our memories and our imaginations to Genesis 1. At the beginning of creation the world is filled with chaos, darkness, and formlessness. It is a terrifying void unable to sustain life. Into this reality, God spoke the words, “Let there be” and life begun. Something similar happens here. Into the turmoil and chaos of this storm, Jesus boldly uses the word for God and says, “Take heart I AM; do not be afraid.” God is with them to bring order into the chaos, to bring life back from the jaws of death, to rescue his people once again. We see further the comparison with Genesis by what happens at the end of our passage, “When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.” Jesus has power over nature and brings order from chaos.

When Peter sees the apparition and hears Jesus' words, he exclaims, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” We know the rest of the story. He walks on water, becomes terrified, starts to sink, and Jesus rescues him. Then Jesus rebukes him, and through him the rest of the disciples, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” This is an interesting question given the context. “Why did you doubt?” because our ancestors have warned us to be weary of open waters

during storm season. Because there are legends of ghosts and demons hovering over these waters. Because it is dark at night and we can't see clearly with this terrible storm. Because we are exhausted and terrified and nothing good happens under these conditions this late at night. Because we are fishermen and we know of many boats who have capsized on this lake. Because we never expected you to walk on these terrible, rough waters. The reasons are plenty.

But I believe the rebuke is to all the disciples and not just to Peter, which means that the episode of doubting took place in the boat before Peter jumped on the water. "When I told you it was me, why did you doubt? Why couldn't you believe that I was in the midst of the storm and had the power to calm it? Why were you unable to see me and believe my words? The real doubt Jesus is addressing is the words, "Lord, if it is you..." After years of listening to his teachings, watching his miracles, spending time with him on the road, and experiencing the slow realization that this man was truly the Messiah, they still harbor doubts and are utterly unable to see him in their midst.

And it is in this doubt that we find one of the lessons for today. Matthew's community in the years 80-90 of the first century, about fifty to sixty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and ten to twenty years after the fall of Jerusalem, is dealing with all sorts of difficulties: Persecution by the empire, alienation from Judaism, divisions from within the Church over issues of authority, rapid growth in many areas which brought conflicts between the Greek and Judean members, a terrible famine in Israel and other areas, new taxes imposed by Rome after the war, etc. These are very difficult times in the history of the Church and many in the community were beginning to doubt if Jesus was truly with them and among them.

Matthew is addressing some of these issues in this parable. "Although your resources are spent and you are exhausted dealing with all these issues, Christ is among you. Even though you don't see him and feel alienated from him and the larger community, you must not doubt because he is in your midst. Even if all of the influx of Gentiles is creating some chaos and you often wrestle with issues of authority, Christ is among us and where he is there is order. Jesus is among us and there is nothing to fear because he has the power to calm any storm. He is the I AM. He is God with us. He is alive and he is in the boat.

This passage, which first became a source of comfort for the community of Matthew, today is a source of comfort for us as well. The boat of the Church today is also being tossed to and fro by the political upheavals around the world, by the immense poverty affecting many of our brothers and sisters around the planet, by persecution in many parts of the world, by culture wars that polarize and divide us,

by the apathy of rich nations, by the dark forces of racism and modern-day slavery, and by confusion and political instability. To the Church at large, Matthew has a message. Do not doubt. I AM is with you. The son of God has risen and has sent his Holy Spirit to be with you to the end of the age. Christ can calm the storms and give you the ability to see his presence among you even in the darkest moments. Focus your eyes on Christ and he will help you navigate these rough waters.

But there is a message for us as well. There are some that are concerned about our church. We have lost a few families to relocation. We have lost a few members to death. Our finances have slowed down, we are about to start construction and we wonder if we will have all the resources we will need. Our membership continues to age and we don't have as many young families as we would like to have. We are surrounded by big, prosperous churches, and we feel so small and inadequate. Some wonder if Christ is really among us. Some wonder if all our physical and spiritual resources have been spent. Some wonder if God has a future for us beyond the next five years. To all of us, Matthew speaks powerfully. Christ is in the boat. He is among us. He can calm the storms of our doubts and fears. God has a future in mind for us. We must have faith that as long as we remain focused on him and as long as we take care of the people God places in our lives, Christ will never abandon us. I AM is with us. We have nothing to fear.

There is a message for us here as well. All of us are going through our own particular storms, which are unique to each of us. Whether it is finances, health, interpersonal conflicts, employment, or a mental health condition. I know that we sometimes feel like we have spent all of our physical and mental resources dealing with our issues and we have nothing left. I know that fear is all around us. I know that life seems very uncertain for some. But please remember we have I AM among us. Remember that Jesus is in the boat. We are not alone. Trust in his love and providence. Trust that he will give you whatever resources you need to finish the race. He is in control and where Christ is there is order.

The passage ends with the following words, "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'" These words are repeated only once more in Matthew, by the centurion at the base of the cross of Jesus, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Matthew's community, the universal Church, Saint Dunstan's, and each of us must realize that the Son of God is with us and for us. Our ultimate vocation is to worship him. With him on our side, there truly is nothing to fear.

May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!