

**Follow: Learning from Matthew to Live Like Jesus**  
Faith UMC Lent Bible Study, 2025  
Week 3

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. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>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.' <sup>29</sup>He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

**Courage to Trust**

Who doesn't love a good ghost story?

My favorite ghost story comes from my sister-in-law, Ashley. Ashley was a nurse in a hospital, and one of her patients was nearing the end of life. The patient was polite to all the nurses on the hospital wing- except Ashley. Whenever Ashley walked into the room, the patient lost her mind with rage. The patient had never met Ashley before, but that didn't stop her from throwing her lunch tray at Ashley's head. It was a narrow miss. One night, Ashley walked into the patient's room to check on her, and the patient screamed louder than ever, "Get out! Get out now!" Ashley got out.

The next day, the screaming and projectile lunch trays had been replaced by a sweet old lady who talked to Ashley like Ashley was her precious grandchild. Ashley asked the patient if she had slept well. The patient said, "Not really. I was up all night talking to Shirley Ann."

There are three things you need to know right now. First, Shirley Ann was Ashley's and my wife's grandmother. Second, Shirley Ann had been dead for years before this story took

place. Third, there is no reason to believe the patient had ever met or heard of Shirley Ann. In fact, Ashley asked the patient if she had ever seen Shirley Ann before that night, and the patient said, “No, never.”

The patient told Ashley, “Shirley Ann was sitting right there in that chair. She said I don’t have to be afraid of you. She said you’re a nice girl and you’re not going to hurt me. She said I really don’t have anything to be afraid of at all.” The patient died the next day. True story.

The patient was visited by someone who had tasted death herself, and having been encouraged by an eyewitness testimony that there really is nothing to fear about death, she could pass in peace. I can’t explain what happened, but then again, neither can I explain a dead man from Nazareth turning a tomb into a two-way street.

The best ghost stories aren’t meant to scare the daylights out of people. Those are the mediocre ones. The best ghost stories are like what happened to the patient, or to Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. They involve the dead paying a visit to the living with the goal of inspiring the living to have less fear and more faith. The ghost doesn’t come to scare; they come to encourage. The ghost makes a special trip with the explicit purpose of convincing the living to be braver and more trusting, to help the living take heart.

Smack in the middle of the Gospel of Matthew is the best kind of ghost story. The disciples think they see a ghost. Jesus is no ghost, but the disciples sure think they see his ghost hovering over the Sea of Galilee. But Jesus doesn’t come to terrify. He comes to encourage. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

The next marker of a person who follows Jesus is Courage to Trust. Trusting God is *hard*. Peter discovers that trusting is harder than walking on water. Trust is so difficult, it requires an additional virtue that we must unlock before we ever make it to trust, and that virtue is courage. Trust is one of the bravest acts a human being can do; therefore, courage must precede it. Trust depends on us being encouraged by Jesus, who visits us from beyond the grave, takes a seat in the boat with us, and reminds us to take heart. Followers of Jesus have Courage to Trust.

## Six Word Gospel

If you've read the story of Jesus walking on water before, you may have wondered, "Why did the disciples think Jesus was a ghost?" A giant fish would make more sense, or a man-shaped piece of driftwood. Why a ghost?

First, it's not just dark on the Sea of Galilee, it's *dark* dark. Matthew 14:25 says, "early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake." Matthew's original Greek doesn't say "early in the morning" but rather "fourth watch of the night." Roman soldiers divided the night into four "watches," or four blocks of time when a soldier had to stay awake and stand guard, and each watch was three hours long. The fourth watch was 3:00am-6:00am. It's the darkest part of the night. It's dark *dark*.

Then there's the detail of the boat being "far from the land" (Matthew 14:24). There was an ancient Jewish belief about the center of the Sea of Galilee, the part farthest from the shore on all sides. The center of the Sea was called the abyss. The abyss supposedly was so deep, it extended down to the underworld, the realm of the dead, creating a watery portal between the land of the dead and the land of the living. That meant the dead could make the trip *up* to the surface of the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen in Jesus' day would avoid the middle of the lake at night and stick close to the shore, for fear of hitting a ghost or demon. What if a ghost hopped in the boat with you? What if a demon pulled you down to a watery grave?

Knowing it's the deepest, darkest part of the night and the belief that the Sea of Galilee opened up to the underworld, it's easy to see why the disciples were scared out of their pants before they ever laid eyes on Jesus. The wind had blown them off course to the abyss, the exact place they *didn't* want to be, and at the worst time of night possible. They were sitting ducks. They were totally exposed to whatever creepy, crawly thing might be waiting for them, and it was so dark, they couldn't see the quickest path to shore. Of course, the disciples were afraid. Anyone would be afraid! They're living a waking nightmare.

It is to terrified people like this that Jesus draws near. Jesus moved into their nightmare. Jesus doesn't simply speak *at* the disciples; he goes to be *with* them. Jesus takes his place as

God's presence in their presence. Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:27). I like the six-word translation of this verse: Take heart. It's me. Fear not.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ. "Take heart. It's me. Fear not." It's the gospel in six words.

There's a story attributed to Ernest Hemingway. Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway entered a contest when he was seven years old. Contestants had to submit a six-word story – yes, an entire story told in six words – and the best story would win the grand prize. The winning story was, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn," penned by none other than a seven-year-old Hemingway. His six-word story is tragic, to be sure, but it's also huge enough for us to find ourselves in.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a six-word story: "Take heart. It's me. Fear not." The gospel is the story of the God of the universe coming to be *with* us in the person of Jesus, and once we place our trust in the *withness* of Jesus, we can live an unafraid life. Believing in the gospel means believing God's presence is in your presence wherever you go, whatever happens to you, through all circumstances. The miracle of God's *withness* means you're never truly alone. The *withness* of Jesus means never go through our troubles and trials alone. That means our situation as it stands may not be okay, but even still, we as God's children will turn out okay. There's always a next thing after the worst thing because God is with us and God will outlast all of our worst things.

Will our fears still happen? Yes, it's a guarantee. Sickness, cancer, and tragedy will happen. Mistakes done by us and to us will happen. Job loss, soaring prices, political upheavals, hurt people hurting people, heartbreak, and the breaking apart of relationships, these will happen. There's no avoiding our fears, but we can make it *through* our fears knowing Jesus, God with us, is with us. Everything feels more endurable when we trust in God's presence with us.

The entirety of the Bible is the six-word story. One of the consistent refrains of both the Old and New Testaments is a version of "Take heart. It's me. Fear not." God appears to Moses in

the burning bush. Moses is scared. He says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharoah?” God says, “I am with you.” (Exodus 3:12). God tells Joshua, “Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9). God says through the prophet Isaiah, “Do not fear for I am with you.” (Isaiah 41:10). King David writes, “With the Lord on my side, I do not fear.” (Psalm 118:6). The angel Gabriel tells Mary, “The Lord is with you. Don’t be afraid.” (Luke 1:28, 30). The angel tells Joseph, “Don’t be afraid. Mary’s child is Emmanuel, God with us.” (Matthew 1:20, 23). Jesus tells the disciples at the Last Supper, “Do not be afraid.” He tells the women at the empty tomb. “Do not be afraid.” (John 14:27). Paul says in Philippians, “The Lord is near. Do not worry.” (Philippians 4:5-6). As a chronic worrier, that last one is my favorite.

It’s easy to say, “God is with me, therefore I shouldn’t be afraid,” but it’s not that easy, is it? We can know in our minds God is with us but still experience fear. Also, it’s not like all fear is a bad thing. When there’s a real and present danger and it’s happening right now, fear is what keeps us alive. Fear is what drives us to fight or flee. In those situations, fear is how we live to fight another day.

When the thing we’re afraid of isn’t a real and present danger to our survival, then fear becomes an intrusive thought haunting our brains- in other words, a mental ghost. The problem isn’t fear itself but the *fixation* on our mental ghosts, those fears we can’t seem to shake. We can fixate on our fears such that our fears receive most if not all of our attention. Now we’re not just experiencing fear; we’re becoming fearful people. It’s the fixation on the fear, rather than the real and present danger, that endangers our wellbeing.

The antidote to fixating on our fears is paying attention to what we’re paying attention to. Are we surrendering our attention to our fears? Or are we paying attention to Jesus in the boat with us? Are we letting our fears manage us, or are managing our fears? It’s all a matter of attending, choosing where our attention goes. What faith is, at the very heart of it, is the choice, the brave choice, to turn our gaze away from our mental ghosts and toward the presence of God with us. God isn’t far away on the lakeshore. God is in the boat at our side.

That begs the question, how do we turn our attention *away* from our fears and *toward* God with us? It's one word: courage. It takes courage, it takes real heart, to let go of fear and step out in faith. Let's go back in the Gospel of Matthew and learn how Matthew understands courage.

### **Heart of a Lamb**

After Jesus sends out the twelve apostles in Matthew 10, he resumes his preaching and healing tour of the villages around the Sea of Galilee. He visits each synagogue and kindles the wrath of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees believed the only way to be right with God and therefore a “good enough” human being was strict obedience to the law of Moses, or the commandments in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. But Jesus refused to follow the letter of the law at the expense of true holiness and moral living. Jesus held Scripture in the utmost esteem, and at the same time, he interpreted Scripture through the lens of the love of God and love of neighbor, which led him to applications of Scripture that went beyond the words on the page.

For example, in Matthew 12:9-14, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. Healing was considered “work,” and according to the Law of Moses, all work is forbidden on the Sabbath. Technically, working on the Sabbath deserved a death sentence (Exodus 31:14-15). But that didn't stop Jesus from healing the withered hand of a man *during a synagogue service* in plain sight of the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees have all the evidence they need to kill Jesus.

Why does Jesus risk his life like this? He tells the Pharisees, “It is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” (Matthew 12:12). Nowhere in the law of Moses will you find explicit permission for a person to “do good” on the Sabbath. A person isn't supposed to “do” anything! But Jesus disagrees with a strict, fundamentalist, letter-of-the-law interpretation of the law. Jesus sees beyond the words on the page to the deeper meaning, the thing the words on the page were pointing to, and that is, *do good*.

You might say it was bold of Jesus to defy the law of Moses right under the nose of people who'd like to stone him. You might say it was too risky, borderline foolish. You'd be right. There was something about Jesus that propelled him to choose the right thing when the right thing was the dangerous thing and everyone around him was choosing the easy thing. There was something about Jesus that led him to choose what he calls in the Sermon on the Mount the "narrow way," the path of fairness, compassion, mercy, returning evil with good and darkness with light, and choosing love for enemies. Let's call that thing "courage."

Our English word courage comes from the Latin root *cor*, meaning "heart." Jesus had heart, plain and simple. Jesus uses the Greek word *tharseó* in Matthew 14:27. Some English translations have *tharseó* as "Take courage!" or "Take heart!" *Tharseó* literally means "to radiate warmth from within." The image is a person glowing with heat like the coils of a toaster oven. Here is a person who radiates a positive force generated by an inner strength. This inner strength is what we'd call "heart," and the positive force visible to others is what we'd name "courage." Courage *is* the positive force of living generated by an inner strength of the heart

We might say someone is "lionhearted" or has the "heart of a lion." A Christian is supposed to be "lambhearted," having the heart of the Lamb. This heart is brave. This heart takes the high road. This heart stands up for what is right. This heart chooses the hard path of love over the easier paths of greed, ego, convenience, and pleasure. This heart is what inspires Jesus to keep trusting God when trusting God is the hardest of available options.

Jesus makes a stop at his mom's house in Nazareth. Jesus' mother and brothers look for him, wanting a private word with him. Jesus points to the disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:49-50). Now that takes heart. It takes heart to side with your chosen family over your blood family. You may have been faced with a similar choice in your life. You might have sided with your family of origin, knowing they're the ones in the wrong or the ones in the way of you pursuing God's will for your life. Or, you might have sided with your chosen family, your friends and others who were following God's will and doing good in the world. That's a call that takes guts, except Jesus doesn't call it "guts." Jesus calls it heart.

It doesn't take much effort to think of courageous heroes who stood up for what's right. The mind goes to Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Malala Yousafzai, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the martyrs of the church who died for the cause of Christ- these larger-than-life figures who inspire us to take the narrow way of doing good. "These people had heart," we tell ourselves. "I wish I had heart like them." But I find it's more helpful to think of having heart for the small choices of everyday life, for each choice can potentially have a huge impact. Don't focus on courage for huge things. Take heart for the small judgment calls of daily living. The huge things are made of hundreds of small judgement calls, heaping piles of little acts of courage.

I have a friend named Whitney. Whitney walks around with a wad of single dollar bills. The singles are *not* for a night on the town. Whitney works in a downtown office building, and on Friday afternoons, he takes the elevator to the bank on the first floor and withdraws the single dollar bills. The singles are for the poor and needy he encounters on the downtown city streets. He wants to be able to look in the person's eye and place a crisp dollar bill in their hand. Will the single dollar bill put a roof over their head? No. But the dollar bill is no less a courageous act, because in giving the dollar bill, my friend restores a little bit of dignity to this person and inspires an ounce more of hope.

We don't "take heart" in huge ways, a hundred dollars at a time. We take heart in singles, in little acts of bravery for the tough judgement calls we have to make every day.

We say "no" to working more and "yes" to playing with our kids more. We stand up to the bully at work. We start the collection for underwear and socks for the needy. We say something when a friend or coworker makes a nasty comment about a minority group. We dial the phone number when a friend is grieving. We stand up for the right thing when we're brave in the small things. As thousands of singles add up quickly to become a lifetime of generosity, so do our small acts of everyday bravery add up to a legacy of courageous living.



## Tale of Two Dinners

After a long teaching block about the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13 – one of the Five Discourses of Jesus in Matthew and the focus of our lesson next week – Matthew interrupts the narrative with breaking news: there's a VIP-only banquet happening at Herod's house. Like a TV station interrupting its regular programming, Matthew cuts the scene in Nazareth and pans the camera to focus on Herod, the ruler of Galilee. Matthew wants to teach us about the courage of Jesus by showing us its polar opposite in Matthew 14:1-12.

This Herod is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch, or governor, of the Roman province of Galilee for about forty years until the year 39AD. Herod divorced his wife, who was the daughter of the King of Nabataea (Nabataea included what is now Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula), and married a woman named Herodias, who was the ex-wife of his half-brother *and* one of Herod's nieces. John the Baptist condemned Herod's marriage to Herodias and rightfully so: not only was it incestuous, it was also a geo-political blunder that led to warfare with the Nabatean Kingdom and the avoidable deaths of hundreds of Jews. For John's vocal opposition to the marriage, Herod Antipas had John thrown in jail.

Matthew zeroes in on the night when Herod has John executed. Herod is throwing a lavish dinner party, the exclusive kind where celebrities and politicians light up the invite list, the sort of party where the decision-makers are in the room and the sausage gets made. Herod's daughter, Salome, is prompted by Herodias to ask for John's head on a platter, and everyone in attendance hears it. Herod, like Pontus Pilate later, doesn't want to say yes, but he's driven by fear and people-pleasing. Herod "feared the crowd" (Matthew 14:5). He wants to be seen the right way by his guests rather than do the right thing by God. (Matthew 14:9). Though having a position of power over others, supposedly a big man, Herod is exposed as spineless, small, and scared of losing the approval of the "right" kind of people.

One of my favorite insults (I know I shouldn't have one) is the word "feckless." Feckless means lacking strength of character, no backbone, no sense of responsibility for doing the right thing. Herod is feckless. A Texan at the rodeo would say he's "all hat, no cattle." Herod wears a

big cowboy hat, meaning he has the job title, the salary, and the authority to influence people, but he doesn't have the cattle, the strength beneath the skin. A feckless person like Herod looks good on the outside but there's no heart on the inside.

Now, let's pause for confession: we've all been feckless. This study is for the Lenten season, after all, and Lent is for letting the light into the shadowy places within us, the parts we'd rather overlook and would *definitely* like to hide from others. So, let's take heart and admit there were times when we did *not* take heart, when we were the feckless ones, when we chose to look good on the outside at the expense of heart on the inside.

We were the ones who fudged on the expense report. We were the ones who posted mean-spirited stuff on social media so we could be seen as siding with the right crowd. We were the ones who caved in to the pressure to look like the pretty, polished people around us. We were the ones who withheld the truth from the people we love the most. Does that make us Herod? No. Herod is the extreme, an exaggeration of what a heartless person looks like, but the exaggeration proves the rule. We're all somewhere on the spectrum of falling short on strength of character.

Compare Herod's banquet with the dinner immediately following it. Right after the beheading of John the Baptist is the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21). One meal happens behind closed doors; the other happens out in the open. One meal is invitation-only; the other is open to all. One meal leads to death; the other leads to full bellies. One meal is hosted by a man under the management of fear; the other is hosted by a man who manages his fear. One meal applauds hardness of the heart; the other celebrates bravery of the heart.

When Jesus heard of John's death, he retreated from the public eye and took some time for himself. Jesus is grieving. John was Jesus' friend, mentor, former spiritual director, and cousin. Jesus is heartbroken and takes personal leave from fulltime ministry to grieve his loss.

Except not really, because the crowds find Jesus and interrupt his personal leave. Jesus has "compassion" for the crowd (a marvelous word!) and cures their sick. Is Jesus still grieving?

Yes, and it's a fact of life that there is no convenient time for grief. Grief is always with us like a third arm. There's no getting rid of the feeling of grief; we can only grow around it. Also, our grief is constantly being interrupted by the people who depend on us for love and survival. We'd like to shoo these people away so we can take all the time we need, but we can't. Jesus is a model for how to take heart when we're grieving: be vulnerable and feel the weight of your loss, and at the same time, continue to show compassion for the people who need the loving of the living.

The disciples are overwhelmed by the sheer number of people. It's dinnertime, they're in a "deserted place," and there's no food. The disciples want Jesus to send the crowds away so they can buy their own food, but Jesus won't have it.

We should notice the shadow of heartlessness in the disciples. After all, the disciples *do* have resources to share: five loaves of bread and two fish. They don't immediately come forward with these resources to share with the crowds. They reveal their resources only when asked. The disciples are all of us when we notice the widespread hunger on earth. We say, "How can we meet this huge need?" Jesus asks us, "Well, how much food do you have?" We look in our well-stocked pantries and freezers and our cash to buy more if we run out, and we say, "Oh. I see what you mean." Like the disciples, we don't automatically default to sharing. We tend to default to hoarding what we have until Jesus asks us to share with those who don't have. The shadow of heartlessness runs deep.

Jesus takes the loaves and fishes, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them away. The fourfold pattern of Jesus taking, blessing, breaking, and giving is the pattern of Holy Communion, or Eucharist. Jesus follows the same pattern at the Last Supper in Matthew 26:26. All the hungry are filled. In fact, there's more than enough- twelve baskets of leftovers!

Here we see what it looks like for the disciples of Jesus to take heart. When we see scarcity, we're to take heart and see abundance. When we feel the urge to hoard, play it safe, and withhold our resources out of fear of not being enough, we're to take heart and share what we

have, believing that in the hands of Jesus, our generosity will be multiplied into more-than-enough blessing to go around.

Taking heart *is* practicing abundance. A scarcity mentality doesn't take courage; it takes complacency. An abundance mentality takes courage. It takes heart to overcome our aversion to loss, our innate fear of losing what we have and there not being enough to meet our needs. It takes real inner strength to open our hands with generosity, put our resources into Christ's hands, and trust there will be enough, both for the giver and the receiver.

Yes, the disciples learn how to take heart and share, but the crowds that day learned how to take heart, too. Jesus made the crowds "sit down on the grass" (Matthew 14:19). That's an interesting detail, especially given Matthew told us the crowd was in a "deserted place," meaning the barren Judean wilderness where there was no grass. We're supposed to remember Psalm 23, where King David says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures." The crowd are the hungry sheep, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd who makes them lie down, because they can expect to be filled up.

The crowd learns – and we must learn, too – how to have courage to trust in Jesus the Good Shepherd. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus will always give us enough. *Always*. It takes real courage to have this trust. It takes heart to lie down in the green grass and expect Jesus to meet your needs. Does that mean we do nothing? No. It means we live with *expectancy*: we expect the Good Shepherd to provide for us. We expect Jesus to give us more than enough of what we need for joyful living. Such expectancy takes guts, or heart.

While the disciples learn the courage to share their enough, or the courage of generosity, the crowd learns the courage to believe there will be enough, or the courage of expectancy. Both are necessary. Both are hard. Therefore, both require taking heart.

I was part of a student group in college that hosted community dinners for the homeless. These community dinners had a fancy title. The title was my idea. They were called "Community Dinners." College students bought the food, cooked the food, and ate the food at

the same round tables as the homeless folks who slept in the shelter or on the sidewalk. We broke bread together. It was a sharing of loaves and fishes. I admit, when I was leading these Community Dinners, I thought I was the one mustering up the courage to step out in faith, raise the money, and feed the least of these.

I was halfway right. I *was* taking heart, and along with my friends, we practiced an abundance mentality. But the homeless neighbors were taking heart, too. They practiced a different kind of courage: the courage of trusting that God would satisfy their need for enough food, enough warmth, enough love, enough human connection.

What made these Community Dinners a practice of “Community” was the joint exercise of taking heart, both the learning how to share and the learning how to trust, the courage of generosity and the courage of expectancy. We were all learning together how to take heart and trust in God.

### **The “It” Factor**

Let’s return to the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14. The story zooms in on Peter.

Notice the first two words out of Peter’s lips in Matthew 14:28: “Lord, if.” The first word is a confession of faith, and the second word is a confession of doubt. “Lord” means king or ruler. Peter is already calling Jesus his King and Ruler, his Lord, far before any of the other disciples. Clearly, Peter’s faith in Jesus is an all-in faith.

Or is it? Peter adds the pesky little word “if.” He *doesn’t* say, “Lord, it’s you.” He says, “*If* it is you,” as if Peter isn’t totally sure this phantom is Jesus defying gravity. Peter’s faith is mixed with doubt. Peter believes in Jesus, but at the time same, he’s not totally sure about Jesus, either. Peter is a mixture of a confession of faith and a confession of doubt. Of course, Peter is us. We’re all a mixed cocktail of faith and doubt.

The mixture of faith and doubt is another kind of courage. It’s the courage of curiosity. The word “if” doesn’t mean Peter lacks faith; it means Peter is deeply curious about Jesus. His

doubt is the leaning-in kind: he leans in to wanting to learn more about Christ, as opposed to the kind of doubt that leans away from Jesus and faith in God. Peter is leaning into a healthy curiosity about this Jesus he can't fully understand.

Jesus even *rewards* Peter's "if" with an invitation to walk on water. Jesus *wants* to see the courage of curiosity. Jesus wants to see the learning-in kind of doubt, for it shows we're blending our faith with courage to keep asking tough questions. We can understand the phrase "you of little of faith" as a compliment, not as a critique, because it means Peter has just enough faith to step out of the boat and try something brave for Jesus. As one of "little faith," Peter's faith isn't too little, it's just enough. Peter's little faith is just enough to stay curious about Jesus, and for Jesus, that's a win.

Peter steps out of the boat and walks on water. Jesus gives Peter control over the water under his feet. But what does Peter do? He starts to focus on the winds around him. Jesus gave Peter control over the water, but Jesus didn't say anything about the wind. The water is within Peter's power to control, but the wind is not. As Peter focuses on what is not within his power to control, he starts to sink.

How often are we like Peter and we turn out attention to the winds we cannot control? We experience a lack of control as stress about the present and anxiety about the future. We feel our ability to control the hurry, workload, and mental load of life slipping away, and it feels like stress. We look into the future and see the possibilities of how life could go sideways, how we could fail, how people could hurt us- it's all beyond our control, and it feels like anxiety. These are the winds beyond our ability to control, and like Peter, we tend to focus on the winds.

Then there's the water under your feet. How you act, how you show up in the world, how you treat people, how you respond to unfair situations, everything that is within you and your power to influence, this is the water Jesus has placed under your feet. The wisdom we need to learn is the difference between the waters we can control and the wind we must trust to God. We need to control the waters we can, and trust the rest to God.

But this is *hard*. It's so hard, it takes courage, the courage of surrendering everything we cannot control into God's hands. I believe this kind of courage is the "it factor" of faith. The word "faith" has an "it" in it. The "it" in Faith, or the "it factor," is the courage to surrender. Surrender doesn't mean giving up; it means lifting up. Surrender is lifting up all the winds we cannot control to the wisdom of God who knows far more than we do and can see much further into the future.

I saw this courage when Hurricane Harvey shutdown Houston in 2017 with record rainfall and flooding. The street in front of my house became a river four feet deep. My neighbor, also named David, rowed down this river in his kayak, and more than once I saw him pull a stranger out of their vehicle, now submerged in the floodwater. David might have saved their life. A few days after Hurricane Harvey, a woman knocked on my door and tried to offer me a fruit basket. I'd never seen the woman before, so I knew I hadn't earned the fruit basket. She said she was looking for a man named David, who rescued her from her car and said he lived at this address. I said, "You have the right name but wrong house. You're looking for my next-door neighbor."

This example, and there are countless more like it around Houston, is an example of walking on water. Here was a normal person taking control of something within their control. My neighbor did what he could: he could row down the street and pull people out of vehicles. He *couldn't* turn away the hurricane. He couldn't stop the winds or the floods. He couldn't stop vehicles from driving into high water. What he *could* do was use his kayak. He controlled what he could and surrendered the rest.

Followers of Jesus have this "it-factor." A follower of Jesus controls the water under their feet. They influence what they can, push back the darkness they can, love all the people and in all the ways they can. As for the winds beyond their control, they surrender: they lift up to God. It's hard. That's what it takes courage.

Just imagine- how much more water could you walk on if you moved all your attention off the wind and onto the water? How much more service to Christ could you give if you

redirected your energies away from the winds you cannot control and toward the waters you can control? That's the difference the "it-factor" makes.

We feel this difference the most when we're faced with the greatest wind of all: death. The thing about life that is most uncontrollable is death. Indeed, the thing this story, the story of Jesus walking water, points to is courage when we're faced with death and dying.

Let's take a look at the story with fresh eyes. What are the disciples afraid of? They're afraid of dead things coming out of the Sea of Galilee and dragging them down. They're afraid of death and dying. What do they think they see hovering toward them? A ghost, something from beyond the grave. Where does this ghost come from? We're not sure. It's somewhere *beyond*. What happens to Peter? He falls into the water, just like he, and all of us, will one day fall into the ground, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. What does Peter say? "Lord, save me!" We'll all need saving from death. What does Jesus do? He pulls Peter up, as Jesus will pull up all of us in the resurrection.

The story of Jesus walking on water is a foreshadowing of Easter. Easter asks us to take heart and surrender our death and dying to Christ. There's no controlling our death or dying; it's water we cannot walk on. All we can do is surrender our death and dying – and much harder, the death and dying of our loves – to Christ, trusting that Christ will pull us up one day, as Christ came to pull up Peter. If we can do this, if we surrender even death and dying to Christ, we'll have the "it factor" of faith: the courage to surrender to God what we cannot control.

I visited a dying church member in the hospital. Her name was Ermarie. The doctor had just told Ermarie that morning that she wouldn't live another 48 hours. I told Ermarie, "You have nothing to worry about. You're going to go sleep, then you'll wake up, and it'll be great!" Ermarie looked me in the eye and said, "I know that! Do you?" She had the "it factor." She had courage to trust.

Easter asks every follower of Christ if we have the "it-factor," the courage to trust all our living and dying to Christ. Do we?



## Leader Guide

Ask someone to read Matthew 14:22-33. Ask if there are any initial questions or inspirations in reaction to the text.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you ever had a visitor from the great beyond like the visitor in the beginning of this lesson? Or has it happened to someone you know? How did the visit change how you or that person approached life on this side of death?
2. How does knowing about the “fourth watch of the night” and the abyss under the Sea of Galilee change the meaning of the story?
3. When have you felt like your fears were managing you instead of you managing your fears? What was going on in your life? What helped?
4. How does trusting in God’s presence with you help you navigate your fears?
5. In your own words, what does it look like to be “lamb-hearted” or having the heart of the Lamb? What does it mean to be brave as Jesus was brave?
6. Name three examples of small acts of great bravery that have inspired you.
7. Compare the fearfulness in Herod’s dinner party with the courage of Jesus’s dinner party (the feeding of the 5000). How does Herod show us the opposite of courage? How do the disciples and the 5000 show us the courage to trust in God?
8. How is staying curious about God an act of courage?
9. What about your life is causing you stress and anxiety, and needs surrendering to God today? What are the winds you need to let go and lift up to God?
10. How does the story of Jesus walking on water point us to trusting Christ with death and dying?