

Peter's Unraveling
Matthew 14:22-33
July 26, 2026

This morning, we are going to be talking about a passage from Matthew.

This is from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 14. Verses 22 through 33.

Right then. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake, while he dismissed the crowds. When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came, and he was alone. Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong head wind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. Very early in the morning, He came to his disciples, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, it's a ghost. They were so frightened, they screamed. Just then Jesus spoke to them. Be encouraged. It is me. Don't be afraid. Peter said, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water. And Jesus said, come. Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, Lord, rescue me. Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, you man of weak faith, why did you begin to have doubts? When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. Then those in the boat worshiped Jesus and said, you must be God's son.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

I won't speak for any of you. But I know that in recent weeks, months, Years, life has felt unsettled, and tumultuous. And we find ourselves not sailing on a nice, smooth, calm lake or in a harbor close to land. But maybe feeling like we're adrift on the sea of modern life. The waters are choppy. The fires are frightening. The news is a relentless tide. And certainty, that sense that we know how things are going to go. is elusive. And I, for one, have been feeling a little, some days a lot, unraveled by uncertainty. And I think I can speak with relative confidence that I am not alone in that. And you may be thinking that you know how this sermon is going to go, but hang with me, okay? Hang with me. I want to, before I get into this the actual point of this sermon. I want to set the tone here. Because this was a time of turmoil, in the life of Jesus and his disciples.

Earlier in this chapter, this is midway through Matthew's gospel. Jesus had just received word that John. That John, John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, had been beheaded. And this may have been the moment that things really got real. For Jesus and his disciples. Jesus and John were fellow rabble rousers. They were both speaking against the power of the day, the status quo of at least the Jewish society and challenging the Roman oppression. And Jesus, realized in a very, very visceral way that this was not safe work. And we imagine his disciples also had a moment. And so they had gone off to try to find a quiet place to pray and reflect and talk. And what happened? Crowds. The crowds follow them. And Jesus, taught them, and healed them, and eventually fed them. In that miracle that we call the feeding of the 5000. A moment of God's, Overwhelming generosity and abundance. And so finally, the crowds have all gone home, they've picked up all the scraps. Jesus probably heaves a deep sigh, looks at his disciples and say, you guys, go. Let's go to the boat, and we'll go across.

And instead of getting on the boat with his disciples, Jesus sneaks off to pray for a while. And, you know, the timing here suggests that it's quite a while most of the night. He's finally found his time for solitude. And the disciples, you know, these are not novice boatmen. These are experienced seasoned fishermen. So they knew, they knew how to handle themselves. They knew how to handle a boat. They knew when things were bad. And for whatever reason, they did not take the boat back to shore when the storm came up. They kept on, and maybe that

was the only safe choice. Safe being a relative term. And in the midst of this, this storm they see something that looks frightening and impossible.

So, all right, I'm of an age. I'm of an age where I remember Gilligan's Island. And I remember the opening scenes of Gilligan's Island, right? With the waves and the wind and the holding on to the hat. And I have to confess that is what I see in my mind's eye in this moment. And in the midst of this, and I kind of see Gilligan when I see Peter. So okay, bear with me.

In the midst of this, they see this figure walking on the water. And this is a time when ghosts and spirits are real. And that's what they think Jesus is, and Jesus says, Don't be afraid. It's me. And Peter. Love, Peter. Peter. Peter's all in. "Yes, Lord, it's you. Tell me to come to you and I will." Jesus says, okay, let's do that. And Peter says, "really?!?" But he gets out of the boat. He walks on the water. And he gets afraid. He becomes afraid. His fear creeps back in. And this is the point where the preacher usually says, if only Peter, had had more faith, he would not have sunk. Maybe. But I think there's another point here.

And the point is that Jesus was coming towards his disciples. Jesus was coming to his disciples in the boat. Jesus was coming to Peter, and when Peter was overcome by his fear, when his walking on water unraveled. Jesus was right there. With a hand reaching out. To lift Peter back up. And that, I think, is far more important than Peter's momentary doubt.

God has never punished God's people for doubting. God has always been present, and responding to that doubt. We can look all the way as far back as the prophet Isaiah. Do you remember the big story of the prophet Isaiah? He kills all the queen's priests in a battle royale of Isaiah's God against their God. And then the queen says, okay, you're dead. And so Isaiah runs. And Isaiah gets tired. And he says to God, this is it. I'm done, just kill me. Just let me die. A moment of doubt. And what does God do? God sends an angel. And what's the angel say, does the angel chastise, Isaiah? No, the angel says, here's some food, here's some water, take a nap. Twice. Isaiah gets fed, watered and napped. twice. And then sent to a cave for some alone time, where he again says to God. If this is what it's going to be, there's no one left, there's no one faithful left except for me. Just let my life end. And God says, essentially, oh, just relax. There will be a remnant. There will be a faithful core. God meets Isaiah in Isaiah's unraveling, just as God met Peter, in Peter's unraveling.

Walter Bruegemann tells us. "Peter walks, becomes frightened by the wind, begins to sink and cries out to Jesus and is rescued. This familiar sequence of actions needs to be understood in the light of the obedient act that put Peter on the water in the 1st place. It is not the story of a skeptic who habitually doubts. But the story of a faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him. He begins to lose his nerve, and he discovers the odds of stack against him. But who from Jesus finds a steadying, delivering hand. This isn't a moment to judge Peter for that doubt, but it's a moment to find solidarity with Peter."

How often have we stepped out into something new, something spirit led, something challenging and frightening. And things go really well for a while, and then the fear creeps in. The winds of instability, the storms of challenges, the currents of unrest, the whispers of our own inner critics. Tell me I'm not the only one with one of those. Okay. Just checking. We start off strong. With a genuine spiritual impulse. And then we fall to the fear. We find ourselves sinking and overwhelmed.

And the fact is that Jesus is there. God is there. We are never alone. There is always an outstretched hand. Even or maybe, especially, in Peter's fear and panic, Jesus is there. Peter's doubt and uncertainty unravel into a deeper trust, and that's really where I want us to focus today.

This unraveling is not a problem to be solved. But a liminal moment, an opportunity for transformation. Something to be experienced, where we can find God. This is a moment of very real humanness for Peter. And it becomes a crucible. He's experienced probably not just intellectually, but deep in his bones the immediate unflinching grace and power of God. The very reality of God come near. And the unraveling of Peter's personal strength, his certainty that he's got this. He can walk on water. When that unraveled that personal strength, that certainty in Peter's self, turns to unwavering faithfulness. He learns that even when his life is unraveling God's presence is steady and true. And like Peter, the disciples in the boat, who were gripped by fear, so strong, they just lost all of their life's experience. They screamed. At the sight of the unknown. Their fear. That fear, that uncertainty, that terror. Is unraveled. Into a bone deep. Understanding that this is God's son. God walking among them, and in that moment, all the fear goes away. The storm stills, the waves cease. And this is the deep unraveling God invites us to.

When our fears, our anxieties, our deepest uncertainties and insecurities settle into us. We need to bring those into the radiant presence of Christ. It's a human tendency to try to hide that because, because we've been told all along, don't don't be afraid. Be strong. Stand up in the face of the storm. And when we fall, fall to those fears, we try to hide that from God and from everyone else. I call it turtling up. We pull a shell around us. That's not what God invites us to. And here's the real reality, friends. Do we think that that show actually stops God from seeing our fear and insecurities? All those things we think we need to hide? No.

God created us. God knows us, and God loves us just exactly as we are. When we bring those fears into God's presence, they don't disappear. Peter's fear didn't disappear. The disciples' fear didn't disappear, but it was transformed. It was recontextualized. It becomes a pathway for a deeper relationship with God. And the terrifying unknowns of life recede in the face of God's sovereignty, love, and his very, very real power for restoration. This ancient story offers us more than a miracle. It offers us a template for finding stability in the unraveling.

So I invite you, when your certainty unravels, avoid demonizing that doubt. Avoid falling to the fear and turn to God. Look for that outstretched hand. For it's there. God is coming toward you. If ever your little faith feels insufficient, honest vulnerability to God is a very powerful prayer.

Sometimes we don't even have the words for that prayer. I frequently turn to the words of Anne Lamont. She claims the two best prayers she knows are, "Help me, help me, help me." And "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." And I add a third option to that list, which is, "O God, O God, O God." So when your fear feels overwhelming, allow it to become raw material for a deeper trust in God's presence.

It is in these honest encounters with what scares us that we realize the incredible. Unwavering, unflinching, ever healing, ever present power of God to meet us, rescue us, and transform our terror. Into strength. May we, like those disciples in the boat, allow our unraveling to lead us not to despair, but to a profound, spirit filled declaration. of God's presence. And power. And in that declaration, may we find a deeper, steadying, abiding hope. Even in the midst of the storm that is our life. Amen.