

Albany Presbyterian Church

August 9th 2026. Matthew 14:22-33 Jesus, Peter, the Sea

Last week I had some time on a retreat. I don't get to be on a retreat much lately, but I know how important they are, even if you are taking a day or two off.

In our story, after feeding people in the thousands—actually, five thousand men and probably more women and children—with two fish and five loaves of bread, Jesus sent the disciples off ahead of him while he dismissed the crowd. Maybe to go up on a mountainside to spend some time with God in prayer, alone.

And the disciples were on the boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a lake. Now the Sea of Galilee we know was about 21 km long and 13km wide, about 46-53 meters deep, deeper than Manukau Harbour, which is up to 50 meters deep.

I don't know how to sail; I haven't been to fish in the lake or sea. Some of you know more about this than I do, but so did the disciples; at least 4 out of 12 of Jesus' disciples knew about commercial fishing, and later Thomas and Nathanael- that makes half of the twelve- and safe to say that they were used to working in the Sea of Galilee.

But people say that you never completely relax in the sea or lake; you never do anything without careful thinking. You cannot ever predict what is going to happen. And especially the Sea of Galilee, which was surrounded by steep hills and mountains and was quite deep for a lake, was known for sudden, violent windstorms, which can make the journey across the lake extremely difficult, and what could take just an hour or two can be more than 6 hours or more to go across

And as the night deepened, the wind grew stronger, and soon the boat with the disciples was buffeted by the waves, and they struggled to get across because the wind was against them. And we don't really know how long this was going on, and if they left at night, they were battling the sea for quite some time until Jesus found them near to dawn.

We often confuse this story with another similar story.

There is another story about Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat with his disciples. It appears in Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25. In this story, the storm rose, and the boat was almost capsized. The disciples were terrified and struggled to steady the boat in the storm, while Jesus slept. And finally, when they woke him, he rebuked the storm, calmed the sea, and questioned their faith.

I wonder if the disciples remember this when it happened again that night. As far as we know, Jesus no longer rebuked the wind.

That particular night, it was Jesus who terrified them when he came to them shortly before dawn, walking on the lake. And John 6:15-21 and Mark 6:45-52 said they cried out in fear altogether. They thought he was a ghost. And perhaps not just any ghost, but the one they feared most back in those days, especially on the stormy sea: they feared a *phantasma*, some sort of demonic force or spirit that causes dark, stormy waters, the restless spirits of those who died in the sea. The Sea of Galilee itself was viewed with deep fear in those days. It symbolised chaos, darkness and the abyss of the underworld. Funny that they had to live on it and travel back and forth daily.

I suppose it is entirely possible; they did not expect anyone to come to them walking on the water in the raging sea but a night terror. We cannot fault the disciples for not recognizing Jesus in the stormy sea, in the raging water, and in the dark, when they were on extreme alert, fearing the dark, chaotic night and the violent wind.

The stormy sea in scripture represents chaos, danger and the untamed forces of nature that are completely beyond our control. It symbolises a powerful symbol for life's deep trials, spiritual fears, and the turbulent situations in life.

Some of us know what they are... and that is why we know what it means to have God intervene, to bring peace and order to our lives.

“Take courage,” Jesus said, “it is I.” “Do not be afraid.”

But in Mark 6:45-52, we are told that they were in utter amazement but did not recognise Jesus because their hearts were hardened. John 6:15-21 says that as soon as they recognised Jesus and he climbed into the boat, the boat immediately reached the shore.

It invites us to think about our own response, how we will react, when we come to know the presence of God in our tumultuous circumstances in our lives.

But this is not the end of the story, Matthew continues. Matthew says that when Peter heard Jesus identify himself, he thought to say, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.” and Jesus simply replied, “Come.” And Peter actually stepped out of the boat and walked toward Jesus on the water.

It is not entirely clear why Peter said this, why Jesus called him out of the boat, or why this story appears only in Matthew. I wonder who would be like Peter, who would be comfortable testing Jesus and his power. Peter was one of the disciples closest to Jesus, to whom Jesus said he would build his church, and who took the role of leader in the early church. Maybe it is a warning, as Alistar Brigg says: close proximity to Christ does not guarantee faith, but only the repentant and obedient heart and confidence in Jesus, the Son of God.

Because while he was walking on the water, Peter began to notice the storm and realised that he was on the water; Peter became fearful, began to doubt, and ended up falling into the water.

Then Peter called out to Jesus for help. Jesus caught him and saved him from the depths of the sea. Jesus said again, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

When they finally climbed back into the boat, the storm calmed. Recognizing Jesus, the others declared, “You are truly the Son of God.”

This story reminds us to always trust in Jesus and fix our eyes on him even when the turmoil and raging storm of life overwhelm us. And we are also reminded of the importance of faith, for when Peter doubted, even as he stepped out of the boat, he did so, doubting, doubting Jesus and the power of God. And He also doubted himself when he realised that he was walking on the turbulent water. Doubted the power of Jesus in him.

Perhaps, Peter represents all of us who walk with Jesus; those who are impulsive, quick-to-act, think-later types. He jumps into the water without fear; the fear comes later. A warning for all of us for whom self-doubt is brewing inside, caught in our own logic, trying to make sense of things beyond our understanding. We surely will drown and fall.

I won't be able to do this, because I cannot swim. I need to hold on to something or someone. A friend of mine who was afraid of flying was taught by her counsellor a technique where you touch things that are around you, your watch, your hand, your knees and so on, and name them quietly.

Seeing the disciples' fear of the dark, of the evil that might be lurking behind the stormy sea, we recognise our own fear of a time in our lives when we experienced danger, suffering and dread. And when we are in the middle of the raging sea, steeped into our troubled waters, miry grave, that we are utterly and completely dependent on the one who can ride upon the storm, who can step into the water of our predicament, not to make us comfortable but to form and transform us in the image of God, to strengthen, to guide, to protect and to empower us, in the power of Jesus Christ, our Lord, to step out in faith, and not in doubt, and then and only then we too can even walk on the water with Jesus and not be afraid. Amen.