

Faith and fear at sea (Matthew 14:13-21; 19A)

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A few reflections on this passage from Matthew:

- I am drawn to this image of the gathered disciples, the church, experiencing the battering waves of strong headwinds. Many faith communities face uncertainty in their finances, attendance, and even viability as the cultural waters around the church shift and churn. The response here is to call out to Jesus in our deepest need—Jesus who, though he has withdrawn, hears and responds to the call of his friends. The disciples in crisis don't turn on one another, casting blame or worse. Rather, they call out together to the one who saves.
- Even Jesus needed to dismiss the crowds, and for a time, his inner circle, to be alone and attend to his spirit. It can be hard to articulate when we need a break, even from those we love and cherish. When life seems impossibly full, I am both convicted and encouraged by an incarnate God who seeks a quiet center, making space and time to pray. This does not mean that Jesus has abandoned those he loves or their needs or that he has walked away from his commitment to them.
- Mistaking Jesus for a scary ghost out to get us feels like an all too familiar response. Many who have been hurt by faith communities or individual members of them were taught that fear is a primary mark of faith. Our weakest and most vulnerable moments can be made even worse by a fear that God is looking for a reason to abandon us to the waves. But Jesus walks toward those in fear not to punish but to love. Holding space for people's real fear of Jesus and his disciples is an act of recognition and repentance by God's people. Like Jesus, there is an opportunity to walk in love toward those who are rightly

afraid.

- Peter has doubts even when he's getting that for which he asked. He wanted to trust Jesus in an impossible thing, and he did so—but imperfectly. Jesus saves him anyway. Imperfect trust is the kind of faith we all live with. Being honest about that with ourselves, with God, and with those with whom we seek to connect is no failure. Peter is both passionate and vulnerable enough to risk what turns out to be a bad step. Jesus pulls him back.
- The confession, “Truly you are the Son of God!” operates on a number of levels here. It’s a response to Jesus saving Peter. A response to Jesus saving them all. A response to Jesus calming the storm. A response to Jesus showing up. Those in the boat may be responding in faith to Jesus’ presence from a variety of perspectives. And so it is in our communities of faith.