

August 9, 2026
Proper 14A
Trinity, St. Louis
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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalms 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

In the Name of God Our Help: the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

This morning's readings confront us with what we fear the most, which is, well, fear. In 1933, during his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt reminded us that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." In our own day, especially in the runup to midterm elections, the airwaves, the internet, and our mailboxes, both snail and e-, are awash with things telling us what and whom to fear. Our world, our lives, seem to be drowning in fear. But, if only for a moment this morning, let's take a deep breath and take heart.

In Genesis, we hear the first installment of the very long story of Joseph. Yes, that Joseph. Joseph with the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (lit.=a tunic of distinction). Joseph with the jealous brothers. Joseph tossed into a well. Joseph sold into slavery. Joseph tossed into prison. Despite the fact that his father Jacob loved him more than his brothers, Joseph had a great deal to fear.

And, if that were not enough, Matthew tells us a story of terrified disciples on a storm-tossed sea.

So, you might well ask, *what is the deal?* Why keep yammering on about fear? Why do we re-tell these stories, over and over, again and again? Why? Because fear is real. Fear grabs us and burns, here. Fear paralyzes us.

We retell the stories of our frightened ancestors in faith to remind us that we are not the first folks to quake in our boots. We retell the stories to remember that, while fear has real power in our lives, the power of grace and the promises of God are even more powerful. *Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.*

The image of Jesus walking on water is so well-known to us as to be a source of "humor." There's a cartoon that shows two onlookers watching the scene from the shore. One says to the other, "You just have to know where the rocks are."

Let's look at the story. Jesus, having spent the previous day feeding the five thousand plus, is up in the hills, seeking renewal in solitude and prayer. In order to be alone, Jesus had made the disciples, *compelled* [KJV *constrained*] the disciples, to get on

the boat, to go ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A first-century audience would have understood immediately the peril of this setting – a fragile boat on the sea – as well as the utter terror of waters that run amok.

My experience with troubled waters is particular, but probably not unique. I grew up in North County, very close to the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, where flooding was a nearly annual, almost normal, occurrence. When I was a child, trips up to Alton to fetch my grandmother from the train station required crossing both rivers. In flood season, the rising, swirling, muddy waters were a source of fear to me in the moment, and of nightmares after.

Later experiences of Hurricane Isabel, Super Storm Sandy, and unnamed tornados close to home have done nothing to diminish my fearful respect of waters that misbehave.

But, back to the story. Now night has come, and the disciples' boat is battered by waves. Sudden and violent storms are common on the Sea of Galilee, and this is the second time in Matthew's gospel that the disciples find themselves in the middle of a storm. Back in chapter 8, Jesus was asleep in the boat. This time, Jesus isn't even there. He had gone up on the mountain to pray.

And then ... While struggling against the waves, they see something out on the water. On the water? What could it be? A phantom, a ghost? Whatever it is, it terrifies them – and they holler. A lot.

And then, immediately, they hear ... *Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.*

I invite you to see yourself in the story – on that wind-tossed boat, screaming in terror. Because, even though Jesus is there, telling the disciples, in the KJV to *be of good cheer. It is I. Do not fear*, the paralysis of fear has already taken hold. The iris on the camera lens closes in. You can't see. You can't hear. You can't take heart, let alone be of good cheer. You can only react. Like Peter.

I wonder if Peter is challenging Jesus, "IF you are who you say you are, prove it. Make me do what you can do." In the middle of the sea, Peter makes a foxhole prayer. And I can imagine Jesus saying, "well, OK, if that's what you want to do, sure." And Peter steps out of the boat.

And then...Peter realizes that Jesus' words of assurance and invitation did not mean that the storm was over. Peter noticed the strong wind (KJV: *saw the wind boisterous*), and floundered. Peter feared for his life...again, and for good reason...he was sinking.

And then ... Jesus did for Peter what Peter could not do for himself. This is not a story about Jesus calming the storm. This is a story about Jesus meeting Peter in the

middle of the storm; when Peter began to sink, Jesus immediately lifted Peter up, and got him back into the boat with the other disciples. Only then did the wind cease.

Peter had perfectly good reasons to be afraid; so, too, do you and I. Most obviously, there's the big picture – fear-mongering politicians and social media algorithms driving us further into silos of distrust and intolerance. Fear-driven nativism, racism, anti-Semitism, not to mention Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and every sort of phobia imaginable. The world seems to be going you know where in a you know what....

But there are also fears closer to home: the return of an illness, the instability of a fragile relationship, loneliness after a loss, wondering if this new chapter in our life will work out, the plagues of poverty and addiction that stalk our streets, relentlessly gnawing at the humanity of those God has called us to serve.

You name it, there are a lot of rising, swirling waters and boisterous winds that can make us afraid. Maybe even making the list makes us fearful. It all seems like too much to handle.

Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.

What do you hear when someone says, “don’t be afraid”? Often, it feels like whistling in the graveyard, an attempt to deny that fear exists. Or, even worse, that if we had more faith, or were “better Christians” we would be less fearful. But, despite what popular culture tells us, faith is not the opposite of fear. Faith is the ability, not to overcome our fears, but to find a way to walk through them. Faith is the gift to take the long view.

When Jesus says to Peter, “you of little faith” what might he mean? That if Peter had more faith, he’d have made it? Man up, Peter? I think not. That would be about Peter having faith in Peter. The point is to have faith in Jesus. We hear Paul remind the Romans that God is near us, on our lips and in our heart. God is always near to us, whether we notice or not, like the air we breathe. The test of faith is not to tough it out on your own. The test of faith is to reach out for God’s hand when you’re sinking.

This is precisely the point of these stories: that we are dependent upon God, and God is trustworthy. God has done, is doing, and will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The reason that we retell these stories is to remind ourselves that the grace of God is always there. There is always an “and then...” There’s always a next, a next that we can’t yet see. And the only way to get to the next is to let Jesus take your hand, our hands, when we’re sinking. We are all in the same boat with those terrified disciples.

Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.

One of the genius distillations of the gospel that 12-Step programs offer back to the world is that God is often revealed most clearly when the storms are raging around us, and we realize that we have lost control, or lost the illusion that we have ever had control, that we have run out of options. Sometimes it is only then that we can remember that God is near us, on our lips and in our heart. Sometimes it is only then that we can see that the hand of God might just be across the breakfast table, or at the other end of a text message.

John Macmurray (1891-1976), Scottish (Presbyterian-turned-Quaker) philosopher wrote something that I have found extremely helpful, especially in times of danger and fear:

“The maxim of illusory religion runs: ‘Fear not; trust in God and God will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you’: that of real religion, on the contrary, is: ‘Fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.’”

The promise at the heart of this story, and in all of Matthew’s Gospel, is that, in Jesus, God has grabbed onto us and will not let us go. God will never give up on us. God is with us and for us. God, in the end, will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

A 2011 film called *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, contained this wisdom: “Everything will be alright in the end so if it is not alright it is not the end.”¹

Take heart. It is I. Do not fear. Amen.

¹ Deborah Moggach, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.